

**Institutions as the forces stabilizing state.
Contemporary look at Arnold Gehlen's theory
of institutions**

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Abstract:

Gehlen's theory of institutions shows how thinking about the further prospect of human activities can create the base for constructing institutions. Strong and stable institutions provide social support to the activities of individuals. A man without institution is not able to arouse the motivation for action-oriented ideal. What's more man without the institutions does not know who he is. People needs mediation to understand themselves and that can be provided by the institutions. The necessity of institutions is shown by presenting the chaos that can destroyed lives when they are weakened or liquidated. Gehlen's thesis is clear – without a permanent institutions and without preserving tradition – a true and stable state order is not possible. When system developed for generations stops working, individuals begin to behave in a selfish way, follow only by personal pleasure and potential profit. Nowadays, when state became the subject of an attack by society, the question arises: is it able to become one more time a guard of social order and the embodiment of political virtues? Gehlen's theory of institutions can provide a starting

point for discussion of changes that need to be taken to restore the real possibility of political order in the country.

I. Introduction

Institutions have always been considered an integral part of any state system, often independently of specific terms that define them. Years of research have shown that the human world is not only a platform to share some common physical phenomena and reality but also a place for institutions that in a real way affect our social life (MacCormick 1998, p. 303). What's more, the researchers suggest that institutional practices allow such forms of human activity, which in the absence of institutions would be impossible to perform or at least limited (Colapietro 1990, p. 238). The state itself is most commonly referred to as the most complex and developed institution that we can meet today. State, as a set of institutions, had been analyzed since antiquity, when various "ingredients" of it were evaluated and demolished into prime factors. The final assessment of the individual elements influences the assessment of the general image of the



state itself. Institutions have been bonded with the state, conditioning each other on the way to seek the best system that would satisfy the assumptions of state governance desired by members of the community. Arnold Gehlen introduced institutions and their value in a new light. He made them not only a part of the state system but also its source. He expanded the influence of institutions on the life of every human being, moreover he rejected the possibility of breaking this bond. However, he noted, that his times undermine the importance of institutions and the state itself, and thus pose a threat to the idea of order of the state, which began to be more and more distant idea. His detailed defense of the institution and the state proved to be well founded in modern times where the phenomenon of institutional crisis is no longer just a theoretical problem but a real issue affecting the stability of the geopolitical situation in which we are currently in. Although the theory, that he developed, relates directly to the 60s and 70s of the twentieth century, a phenomenon which Gehlen describes did not disappear but even intensified itself. The problems faced by “the political man” are, like Gehlen is trying to prove, not only the effect of weakening the institutions as guarantors of security and stability of the system but mainly the result of depriving them of their natural role. Equating the private ethics with the ethics of the state becomes a nucleus of a new crisis, which every year shows its newer and newer faces.

Gehlen’s observations are so important today because they derive from anthropological considerations that are timeless and are describing the things as they are for every human, regardless of its historical affiliation. Understanding the idea of the order and the stability of

the state must therefore be preceded by an analysis of the man in general who, by his very nature, created this idea and seeks to it.

II. Man as a being marked by the lack of...

Arnold Gehlen is considered as a classic of philosophical and political anthropology and belongs to the so-called anthropological “trinity” together with Helmuth Plessner and Max Scheler (Czerniak 1998, p. X–XIX). His thought, however, differs significantly from the type of an anthropology that is closed only within the frames of philosophy. Gehlen demanded that anthropology should be treated as a separate, empirical scientific field and transferred that into combination of the assumptions about man in general with specific consequences in the real world. Creating their own theories Gehlen presented anthropology that even in its philosophical approach connects with the detailed science and rejects dogmatism by opening itself to new research results. (Gehlen 2001, p. 46). Thus, the base theory of man being marked by a lack of something, has significant consequences for human behavior in specific socio-institutional conditions.

The idea of man as a defective being from an anthropological point of view is nothing new. Gehlen himself admits that he takes the basis for his theory from the philosophy of Herder and Nietzsche, who defined man as “not established animal”. Gehlen carries out the characteristics of the human in opposition to the animal world and its specific physicality. The man is in fact “organically deprived of the natural weapons, organs for attack, defense or escape” (Gehlen 2001, p. 94). Man does not have fur, and his physical condition does not allow him to survive

in the unchanged environment. In addition, the helplessness of children immediately after birth significantly weakens the possibility of survival of people in comparison with the animal world. All of these assumptions are a reflection of scientific theories, all of which the one presented by the Swiss zoologist Adolf Portmann seems closest to Gehlen's thought. The researcher became famous for the so-called "Innate human primitivism theory" which creates a vision of man as a being that is not finished and should spend more time in the womb to develop its organs that are source of its limitations (Honneth, Joas, 1988, p. 52). However, for Gehlen this inherent human "defect" is actually the advantage, thanks to which our position is significantly different from other creatures in the world. First of all, it can be seen that there is no place of "presence of man" in the world. Despite physical deficiencies, people can inhabit all areas available to them beating their limitations. Therefore Gehlen shows his fundamental thesis. Our deficiencies involves us and motivates us to act so we could win and also are keeping us away of the wild environment that is a threat. Despite the unfavorable initial conditions people as cultural beings adapt the world to each other. Culture for Gehlen is not a luxury or just an excess but a matter of being, because these are all techniques and means of survival which man uses to supplement their natural shortcomings. The constant struggle for survival is therefore essential, and the survival instinct takes an unexpected shape. (Thies, 2000, p. 36). Instincts, in which man is fitted, leads him in a different direction than it happens in case of animals. Man holds increased opportunities for creative action that are corresponding with decreased ability to follow the "animal

instincts" (Scott, 2010, p. 15). Because of its deficiencies, people not only try to adapt to the surrounding conditions but above all they are trying to change them. Gehlen's famous slogan – "Back to culture!", representing the opposition to the Rousseau's postulate – "Back to nature" is nothing more than a rejection of the idea of natural man, who would not need culture to survive. Author *Der Mensch: Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt* says that man is biologically compelled to mastery over nature (Gehlen 2001, p. 81).

The problem with which nature confronts human is not limited only to the physical conditions in the environment. Animal, equipped with adequate physical resources and specific survival instincts knows in which direction his life has to follow. It can be noticed that animals, being dependent from the environment, are restricting themselves to a cyclic mode of life. Innate instincts indicate exactly the path which particular animal should follow. However, as was previously mentioned, man is poor in behavior dictated by the strong instinctive interactions. His instincts are not able to direct him to the correct path of life. In connection with this man, with his potency to act, is exposed to a flood of stimuli and opportunities. Detailed reflection on every single choice would very soon block more complex opportunities. Thus Gehlen introduces his theory of institutions that are intended to serve as a "relief" and guide man in such a way so he could be released from the direct experience of every aspect of life in the world.

III. Institutional function of relieving

In a letter to Theodor Adorno in 1964, Gehlen writes that the category of "relieving" (*Entlastung*) can be used as a syno-

nym for human existence (Thies, 2000, p. 105). Relieving in a small scale, at the level of individual patterns of behavior, makes us not to have wonder or worry about matters concerning the foundation of our existence. Relief in a large scale is our whole cultural heritage through which we can orient ourselves and entrust directions of our activity. Institutions implements the demand of relieving through the introduction of rules and giving a direction to our lives. They become cultural patterns of behavior and a signpost by narrowing the choices and giving in exchange further development (Gehlen, 1989, p. 45). It can be stated that institutions compensate deficiencies by which man is marked.

Gehlen highlights the importance of institutions in human life by showing the weaknesses of human nature. This is a critical look, revealing the negative qualities of man treated as a 'being' in general. For the author of *Moral und Hypermoral* people tend to be unstable and prone to primal chaotic actions. They are led by the uncertainty of being, and hence they are directed by an aggression and loss of sense of security. A flood of possibilities does not help either. Without strong animal instincts man needs a guidepost that would help him to direct his energy towards development, not chaos. Openness of a man to the world has both positive and negative side. Options for action set us at risk of falling into chaos, but at the same time we have the ability to stabilize ourselves. It is realized through institutions which are not excess, but the basis of human existence. Gehlen, while defining institutions as cultural patterns of behavior, thinks about whole body of rules, customs or specific legal forms. The institution of marriage plays just as important role as institution of state, even though it is

on a completely different level and with other aims.

"(...) All forms of human co-existence and cooperation, in which dominion or contact with what is transcendental is crystallized – have their own shape and meaning, they become institutions that acquire some kind of arbitrary power over the units." (Gehlen, 2001, p. 114)

Institutions do not only distract us from thinking about every time action and its consequences but also allow us to focus on the future. Animal, locked in a cyclical mode of life, cannot think so far into the future as people. Moreover, man is a being that have possibility to imagining, he sees the hidden potential in things, which in the future may transform into something completely different. Hence man, relieved from problems of survival in nature, can focus on releasing their own personal features. Gehlen describes it as *personality*, which one can become only with the support of strong institutions (Gehlen 2001, p. 115).

Institutions, although created by man, become independent from him, almost automatically guiding his life. Thus, they are far more objective, disassociating themselves from personal significance of things like family or raising children. This objectivity is, however, possible only when human unrestrained ability to act is limited, which is often a criticism raised in relation to Gehlen's theory. For the thinker, stability of cultural forms of behavior does not mean the end of all changes. The modifications are even advisable because time itself is changing the face of man. Within the designated boundaries, man can improve and enrich himself, as long as it does not damage the primary purpose of institutions. Institutionalization means increasing productivity and appropri-

ate channeling human energy. Gehlen equates it with rituals and artifacts that let our social attitudes and behaviors to become distinctly creative (Delitz 2011, p. 71). The Thinker categorically rejects a world devoid of institutions, stating that under the structure of institutions, there is no other noble nature, but “pressures, aggression and survival” (Gehlen, 1989, p. 46). Customs, law and morality bind all members of the group and for the individual became a significant support and the stabilization for the inner life. Gehlen is well aware that the institutions impose a certain order, about which we, as individuals, do not decide. However, the certainty and reliability that they are offering, is worth sacrifice. Only in conditions of stability and order, entity can afford true creativity. The man cherishes his interiority better when dealing with stable institutions. The outer sphere – standards and patterns of conduct, translates directly into the inner sphere – the adoption of these standards and build personality on them.

Gehlen also shows the importance of institutions by describing the situation of the collapse of these patterns of behavior. Thinker opposes institutions to chaos of human nature, which is defined as pernicious when it is out of control. Gehlen presents an anthropological category of the excess of impulses, which features a man in a theoretical state of nature. If we weaken or liquidate the regulations that control our lives, man begins to feel confused. Chaos, similar to the concept of Hobbes’s state of nature, is natural for Gehlen. Just by doing nothing entropy can win in our daily lives. Whereas any ways of organizing and controlling require effort. This is why we can so quickly notice any effects of the weakening and collapse of norms that surround us. Many times in

the history of the world men witnessed the consequences of destruction of the existing order. Revolutions, the great crises and the collapse of state regimes are just some of the examples that lists the author of *Der Mensch*. The first effect of such events is of course a sense of loss of security and confidence. It is a psychological effect, but it goes from the individual to the group level. This causes confusion, especially at the moral and spiritual level. Gehlen calls these unexpected internal destabilization as “primitiveness” (Gehlen 2001, p. 116). It is caused by a difficulty to take a specific decision in a state of crisis. The result is therefore: uncertainty, fear and irritability that prevent any creative activity. Gehlen is a philosopher of order and gives to permanence and experience the highest value (Delitz 2011, p. 128). The sharpness of his criticism of the changes that occur in a rapid and uncontrolled way is not surprising. Gehlen distinguishes the long-term change, which is regarded by him as development from change that is overturning the existing relations between humans. This type of change is for him disastrous (Gehlen, 1989, p. 46).

The collapse or weakening of institutions leads to yet another interesting consequences. Gehlen anthropologically rejected the possibility of existing a natural man, that is not rooted in the culture and that could exist without institutions. So when some institutions are collapsing, people automatically replace them with others. However, it should be noted that these forms are rather caricatures than the institutions themselves. This is because this forms are not having the most important features, that for Gehlen are core of institutions: durability and universality of application. These temporary substitutes distort the idea of real institution. For example, religion

and standing behind her church in times of crisis can turn into a sect which, although guided by certain rules, in fact feeds on instincts of fear and loneliness caused by a sense of uncertainty in crisis. People unable to find stability, creates dozens of alternative forms of institutions that correspond to their private feelings. For the author of *Urmensch und Spätkultur* they do not stabilize human life, and thus, do not give human the proper course of action.

The anthropological vision of Gehlen's man, as the animal that is not fully established, is closely linked with the necessity of existence of strong and stable institutions in human life. Man is equipped with a power of action, but he must be given direction and pattern. Actions need to be controlled, what is exercised by institutions, called by thinker: managerial systems (Gehlen, 2004, p. 45). Institutions and state have become the guarantor of security and development. They relieve us from making too many decisions at each time, so that we can focus on creating our own personality. These activities are important not only at the individual level but above all at a group level, because they held together the whole society by giving it an aim. The weakening or collapse of institutions is not only strategic but also anthropological problem, because it undermines the basis of the existence of man as a social being. Durability, widespread applicability and stability for Gehlen are not synonyms for stagnation but development. By these anthropological assumptions philosopher introduces us to the analysis of the present times and shows what actions, according to his hypothesis are reflected in the real world. Despite of the differences in time, the foundations of the theory of institutions remain unchanged. Because of that Ge-

hlen's ideas can be well understand in relation to modern times. How certifies Professor Karl-Siegbert Rehberg: "(Gehlen – ed. S.H.) wanted to defend attitudes which, although not remain intact in the course of epochal change, however, they have a "substantial core" (Rehberg, 1995, p. 74). Therefore, the current view on Gehlen's theory of institutions may reveal the source of the modern governmental state.

IV. The consequences of modernity

Gehlen was especially interested in a new type of cultural phenomena as he titled one of the chapters in his book *Anthropologische und sozialpsychologische Untersuchungen*. He saw in them a source of changes that have occurred in the world in connection with the perception by man himself and the surrounding reality. Irrespective of what status institutions are gaining in a given society, they are constantly accompanied by a metamorphosis due to the fact that both people and culture are evolving under the influence of human activities. In addition to changes limited to the inner circle of a given society, we could observe and find in historical descriptions, the groundbreaking revolutions that have significantly influenced the lifestyles of generations who came to live within them. For example the Neolithic revolution transformed lifestyle of people from a nomadic to a settled mode, which then developed into agriculture. Gehlen in his works focuses on the revolution closest to our times – industrial and then technological revolution, that today, like never before, reflects the impact on our perception of everyday life. The new technical culture gave man an infinite multitude of possibilities at the same time isolating us from the direct

experience of life. For Gehlen's the problem of "alienation from everyday life" is the biggest issue of societies where quick information is the first need (Rehberg, 1995, p. 81). In the field of art and science there has been a radical intellectualization and specialization. There are newer and newer areas where every researcher must find a proper niche in the form of specialization to limit knowledge or expertise that is available only to qualified people. "Technology has penetrated us to the blood" (Gehlen 2001) writes Gehlen, noting the rapid increase in the importance of mathematical and statistical methods in the sciences, not necessarily technical. Another effect of this revolution is spread of experimental thinking, according to the principle: the goal can be always found, since there are already means. Moreover, all these changes are characterized for Gehlen by universal collapse of objectivity. Science, technology and also philosophy became so abstract that the average listener is not able to relate their results to the reality around him. That what is elitist and incomprehensible started to be considered as better than what is popular. It's hard to resist the impression that these words written by Gehlen in the 60. of the twentieth century, now, as never describe the most common attitude in the so-called western culture. This are not, however, limited only to private feelings of individuals. The center of focus translates from individuals, through societies until the entire state systems. The new rules, which have become the foundations of people's lives, affect not only the perception of ourselves, but are also influencing the current position of the institution and the state. The problem of a new subjectivity and a new morality described by Gehlen moves directly to the issue of perception of state ethics.

Rapid changes, which affected man in the modern world, lead, as previously mentioned, to the explosion of subjectivity. It is not, however, about the usual meaning of the term, but about an attitude in which the entity raises its own internal experience to the rank of universal validity (Gehlen 2001, p. 118). Gehlen accurately observes that, in the case of sensitive or contentious situations, strong institutions play the role of peacemaker, which relieves people from personal commitment to every problem. Therefore, during institutional crisis, people are starting to primarily put their own feelings at the first place and are focusing themselves on an endless discussion that although emotional, it does not lead to concrete solutions. Researcher introduces an anthropological thesis that modern times have changed the structure of human consciousness. The consequences are visible in the attitudes presented by humans in relation to the rules. They have been flattened and a corset of standards has been significantly loosened. What are the consequences for everyday life? Gehlen defines the attitude of his contemporaries as emotional exhibitionism. Our instincts, emotions and feelings are spilling out. The new, enhanced human ego cannot stand criticism. "Moral Hypertrophy" (Gehlen, 1989, p. 52) – it is a term in which Gehlen describes contemporary society. It means giving the highest rank to the behavior of each individual without thinking about the consequences and the actual value of this type of action. Contemporary media are an excellent example of making people of questionable moral attitude famous and admired persons. This can be likened to the phenomenon of "puerilism" described by Johan Huizinga, author of *Homo Ludens*, who described the community whose behav-

ior is more immature than its intellectual state. The features of puerilism can be: not accepting criticism, overreaction to praise or reprimand and reducing major life events to play, to avoid admission to awareness their real consequences (Huzinga, 1872, p. 153–155). But the biggest problem for Gehlen is that man is moving away from the seriousness of life and above all from responsibility for his actions. The loaded psyche, without the assistance of institutions, is focusing on itself and on emotions. People begin to live the emotions not only theirs, but also those from second hand, with which they can identify themselves. Modern TV shows, tabloids, and TV news allow this like never before.

All these attitudes, being a result of a new culture and a new approach to the institutions, are also affecting directly the state and its stability and position in society. Humane ethos, which Gehlen identify with the ethos of a family is deemed to be dominant also in the political sphere. The primacy of family ethics means making an ethic of personal life (ethics of beliefs) equal to political ethics (Kimla 2005, p. 52). Family ethics is characterized by indifference towards the affairs of the state, it is focused on search for security and above all prosperity. Typically political virtues: patriotism, service, responsibility and duty are pushed aside. Gehlen do not assess the validity of any of the presented attitudes but shows the rightful place of each of them. State, described by Hobbes as mighty Leviathan, cannot suddenly be converted to a private contractor of personal desires. Without their own purposes the state is not able to fulfill the expectations of ensuring security, stability and the protection of its members. Hypertrophy of morality changes human attitudes not only at the level of private

feelings, but also at the state level. When the state weakens, the individual institutions also are weakened. Humanitarian ethics abhors power, for political ethics power is a necessary means of action. Gehlen repeats after Irene Coltman: “You have to have power to be able to act, especially in the moral sphere. You have to be powerful to do good and strong to provide care” (Gehlen, 1989, p. 51). Strong institutions and a strong state are not for Gehlen tantamount to dictatorship or limitation of freedom. True freedom man gains thanks to a stable institutional environment. Instability of human attitudes, shocking by slogans of humanitarian ethics without thinking about the consequences this are, for the author of *Moral und Hypermoral* greatest threats to the modern world, which as it turned out, have proven themselves in the future. The increase in demanding attitudes towards state is as clear as growing dissatisfaction with the inability to meet state responsibilities regarding defense and security. Uncertainty about the future of family, crises of academic institutions, reluctance towards government is connected with the progressive degradation of the institution in a form of strong and stable cultural patterns of behavior. Gehlen, in his defense of the institutions, combines both anthropological assumptions and the characteristics of his times. Thanks to his description of human behavior, theory of institutions is not only an analysis of a given moment in time, but also a warning for the future, that will not change itself without changing the approach.

V. Conclusion

Arnold Gehlen as a classic of philosophical and political anthropology defended the approach that anthropology should

become mainly empirical science, rooted in scientific facts. Thanks to this when presenting his theory of institutions, Gehlen proposed the thesis that resulted from direct observations and research on human behavior. To better understand the consequences of modern times, thinker began research on the man as a being marked by the lack of something. The whole theory of institutions was based on this assumption. It started from abstract presumptions about human nature to transform itself into a theory that describes the relationship between the state and the society in modernity. Action (*Handlung*) and relief (*Entlastung*): these two concepts became the basis to justify the need for the existence of strong institutions also in modern times, where a man was detached from the reality that once was characterized by constant physical work and struggle for survival. Only thanks to the stable framework set by the institutions, people can develop themselves and create their own personality. Rules for Gehlen are not a limitation of freedom but the opportunity to develop. Because of this we can better understand the authors negative attitude to new cultural phenomena that prevent man from achieving stability in life. Contemporary culture has brought a flood of new information, attitudes and proposals that weakened the institutions that previously were guarding the order. Man in his uncertainty was pushed in the inner subjectivity, which began to spread also on the state level, at the same time undermining the claims of state to have power to rule.

Of course, Gehlen's thought is dominated by his own experience and the great changes that took place in twentieth century in Germany. Some of the phenomena that he described were primarily a reflection of his own feelings

regarding the collapse of the old traditions and rules. It does not change the fact that his theory of institutions was based on anthropological assumptions regarding man as a *being*, and only then transferred to the contemporary times. This allowed to capture the characteristics of the phenomena that have always accompanied and will accompany a man as essentially cultural and political entity. It is also confirmed by observations of contemporary events and crises that whenever the institutional order is demolished it entails consequences for everyone in society. Due to the difference in time, Gehlen's theory cannot of course be uncritically accepted without changes as the theory corresponding to the present times. However, the accuracy of the description of certain phenomena forces us to reflect and to become acquainted with the idea of developing this theory in contemporary anthropological field of science. Gehlen's political anthropology not only examines human beings in theory, but above all presents the consequences of certain attitudes in everyday life.

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