

# Preface

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Over two days in May 2009 an unusual event took place in an ancient Venetian palace. Thirty researchers from nine different countries and three different generations intensively discussed as wide a theme as ‘the changing boundaries between economy and society in Europe’. The topics of the presentations were, at first sight, disparate: from housework to university organization, from regional economies to trade unions. In today’s ultra-specialised, technocratic academic environments experts on such topics tend to work in separate departments and to attend separate conferences, or at least separate streams within the conferences. Yet in Venice the discussions on the wide-ranging topics were particularly intense and open: regardless of different specialisms and origins, the participants understood each other perfectly; despite lively debate and differences of opinion, they really spoke the same language; and they felt affinities with the entire range of subjects.

The occasion for this meeting was to celebrate Colin Crouch’s career in the year of his 65th birthday. The participants had in common the experience of having worked alongside him, whether as doctoral students, research assistants or as colleagues, between the 1970s and the 2000s, whether in the UK, in Florence or somewhere else in Europe. This shared experience is an initial explanation of the strong integration of the debates at the Venice meeting: the influence of common readings, of interlinked projects, or of shared doctoral supervision, all elements of Crouch’s teaching that proved to be pedagogically outstanding over a period of three decades.

Yet the intellectual integration of the meeting went beyond ‘elective’ and ‘socialization’ factors. Combining economics with political science and sociology is not an easy task. Intimate knowledge of developments in the wide variety of European countries, East and West, is not acquired just by socializing. What had made the integration of the meeting possible was the meticulous development, over decades, of a broader area of study with its own intellectual rigour. Intriguingly, the participants themselves, brain-storming over a long coffee in the palace’s canal-side garden, struggled to put the right label on this area of study: ‘economic sociology’ was a fair approximation, ‘socio-economics’ as well, but these were both too

vague and at the same time not comprehensive enough. But that did not matter because the participants were concerned with contents more than with labels; with in-depth discussion more than with catchwords.

The integrated study of economy and society, over the years, has allowed us to overcome the limits of mono-causal explanations (whether market, politics or class-based) and to highlight linkages between different institutions and previous studies by different people: family, associations, government, corporations. One of the examples Crouch likes is that you can't understand the long job tenure in the Italian labour market without the role of severance pay, but you can't understand severance pay without its role in the Italian financial and real estate markets, which themselves cannot be understood without the role of the family, including parents buying houses for their children, which itself cannot be understood without looking at the labour market, and so on.

It would be a theoretical contradiction to ascribe this area of research, interested in complex linkages, networks and hierarchies, to a single person. Yet, at the more 'approximate' level of actual academic debates, the contribution by Colin Crouch cannot be overestimated. It is not a contribution that may be called a theory or a school of thought, as it is more pluralist than that. Crouch's work is not in the style of the *maîtres-penseurs*. It is based on a broader methodological approach that combines historical sensitivity to unique causal links with social sciences theory. Other theorists have also highlighted the interdependence and complementarity between institutions, but Crouch has also studied how these institutions change, and avoided any determinism in doing so. For instance, when trying to comprehend the variety of industrial relations in Europe (*Industrial Relations and European State Traditions*, 1993), Crouch employed rational-choice concepts and political science typologies, but also engaged in a fine-grained historical reconstruction that led him back to the Middle Ages.

The wide scope of multidisciplinary knowledge that such an approach requires reminds us, rather than of contemporary *grand philosophes* or management gurus, of the Renaissance man (but Crouch would rename him Renaissance woman), a qualification which is in many ways exemplified by his ten years of polyhedral work at the EUI in Florence. These were also the years in which he wrote, among others, *Social Change in Western Europe*, a book covering developments in labour markets, family, religion, ethnicity, politics, industrial relations and welfare state, across the whole of Western Europe over a period of 50 years. The theoretical and methodological breadth combines with the geographic one: Crouch's avoidance of methodological nationalism, while remaining interested in the nation, may explain why students and colleagues from so many different countries

have been influenced by him. His role in the broader scientific community has been inspirational across disciplines and has been particularly visible in the growth of the Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics.

Finally, Crouch's work has clear policy and political implications without, however, falling into the straitjacket of a program or an ideology. That is visible from his role as president of the Student Union of the London School of Economics in 1968, to his most recent book, *The Strange Non-Death of Neo-Liberalism* (2011), his latest example of application of knowledge to the current crisis, going beyond the common simplistic accounts of 'neo-liberalism'. At the time of the Venice meeting, Crouch had just finished a critical assessment of the privatization plans for the British Royal Mail. Renaissance men do not distinguish between pure and applied sciences.

This book is the outcome of that meeting in Venice, which took place under the Mediterranean sun, but also in the shadow of the global economic crisis. We opted for a book written exclusively by Crouch's former PhD students and research assistants to underline his contribution to the education of two subsequent generations of broadly oriented social scientists who continue to work in his spirit. Besides the authors of the chapters, the comments from other participants were significant inspiration: Franca Alacevich, Arne Baumann, Andrea Hermann, Ann-Louise Holten, Dawn Lyon, Ulrike Mühlberger, Jackie O'Reilly, Ida Regalia, Philippe Schmitter, Catherine Spieser, Simona Talani, Alessia Vatta and Elke Viebrock. The organizational and financial contributions of the University of Warwick made the meeting physically possible. Yet the greatest contribution and inspiration is from Colin Crouch himself, and the book is dedicated to him.

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