

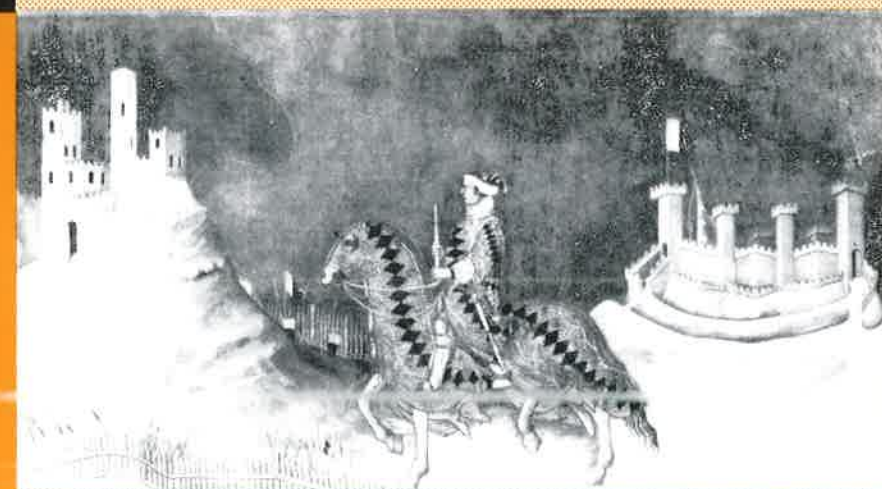
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QUADERNI DEL DIPARTIMENTO
DI ECONOMIA POLITICA

CARLO ZAPPÀ

THE INFORMATIONAL EFFICIENCY
OF ECONOMIC SYSTEMS
AND HAYEK'S PARADOX.



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Introduction*

In recent years economic literature has paid much attention to the debate over socialist calculation of the 1930s between advocates of the competitive market and advocates of a market way to socialism, notably Mises and Hayek on the one side and Lange on the other side. The renewed interest in this issue can be accounted for in two ways. The first reason is that the so-called neo-Austrian school has proposed a re-assessment of the debate by arguing that both Mises' and Hayek's arguments were substantially misunderstood, not only by their adversaries, but also by the critics in general (among others, see Vaughn 1980, Murrell 1983, Lavoie 1985, and Keizer 1993). The neo-Austrian scholars have also argued that this question cannot be confined to the field of history of economics, mainly because Hayek pointed to certain shortcomings in the neoclassical explanation of the way in which the competitive economy works, shortcomings which are still present in the core of mainstream economics (for example, see Kirzner 1992, and Vaughn 1994).

The second reason is that over the last decade the comparison between different types of economic organizations has been a central theme of contributions to economic theory and institutional economics, especially as regards the analysis of the relationship between, and respective role of, the firm and the market. The reference to the debate of the 1930s is common to many of these contributions (for example, see Pagano 1992). Indeed, mainly as a result of the approach developed by Hayek, the socialist calculation debate focused on the respective efficiency of the competitive market economy and the socialist market economy in using the information dispersed throughout the system, an issue which is now dominant in economic theory¹.

This paper concentrates almost exclusively on the second of the two reasons just mentioned. To be exact, the purpose of this paper is to study the influences that these new developments may have on the appraisal of the competitive mechanism offered by market advocates.

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¹ It is also worth mentioning that, contrary to what one might have expected, the end of the socialist era in Eastern European countries has stimulated new interest in the designing of forms of organization alternative to competitive markets (for example, see the essays in Bardhan and Roemer 1993). For a compelling restatement of the opposite position, see the last work of Hayek himself (Hayek 1988).

A clear and authoritative point on the subject has been made in a recent survey by Bowles and Gintis (1993). They emphasize that the newly developing strand of thought known as "information economics", which they call "contested exchange economics"², implies a definitive change in the notion of the market. In an economy in which there is imperfect and costly information and an incomplete array of markets, the impersonal nature of exchange which characterizes the Walrasian approach must be abandoned. To be more specific, many characteristics of the market process cannot be adequately handled in Walrasian economics because of its assumption that there are no costs associated with enforcing contracts stipulated both within the firms and in the market in general. In fact, Bowles and Gintis state, a correct analysis of the actual working of the competitive market cannot assume away phenomena such as markets which do not clear and rents which persist in equilibrium, both of which can be thought of as depending on the specific structure of information that is assumed.

This analysis is used by Bowles and Gintis for an assessment of the socialist controversy which differs markedly from those which can be found in the literature on the subject. It is worth quoting a relatively long passage of their argument: "Contested exchange economics may facilitate such comparative institutional analysis [the comparison between feasible alternative institutions], allowing a more illuminating discussion than the heated plan-versus-market debate of the 1930s. Friedrich Hayek and the conservatives in that debate and since have rightly accused Oskar Lange and the critics of capitalism of overstating the capacity of the state to intervene effectively in the economy. Contested exchange theory reveals an ironic complement to this charge. Capitalism's neoclassical defenders have themselves presumed an omnipotent state at least in one area: its powers and information allow the state to enforce contracts at no cost to the exchanging parties. Without this super-state, contested exchange replaces Walrasian exchange and the old defense of capitalism is as unconvincing as the old advocacy of central planning." (Bowles and Gintis 1993: 97-8).

If one takes for granted the re-assessment of the socialist calculation debate proposed by the neo-Austrians, as we are going to do in what follows, the previous statement may be considered nothing if not paradoxical. On the one hand, we are told that the reason why we should consider the claims by market socialists irrelevant is the fact, emphasized by Hayek, that the market is relatively more efficient than other mechanisms in communicating and discovering information. On the other hand, we are told that a more thorough analysis of the market's relative efficiency in disseminating information implies that the standard Walrasian approach is inadequate to accommodate a number of important phenomena present

² As far as the purpose of this paper is concerned, the differences in emphasis that different authors wish to stress when referring to "information economics", "organization theory" or "contested exchange economics" in their analyses of these developments are irrelevant here. For a discussion of these differences, see Stiglitz and Williamson's comments on Bowles and Gintis's paper (Stiglitz 1993a and Williamson 1993). But see also footnote 6.

in the competitive capitalist economy, while Hayek is considered, at most, a wise representative of the Walrasian side. Hence a paradox eventually emerges. One of the most influential advocates of the competitive markets did not understand that his arguments against market socialism are likewise compelling even if used against the competitive market. We will refer to this paradox as "Hayek's paradox".

The focus of this paper is to show that the paradox emerges only if one assumes, like even most of the neo-Austrians do, that Hayek had no interest in the analysis of personal relationships among market participants. But on this point this paper argues that Hayek's notion of knowledge is useful not only for the analysis of decentralized mechanisms of allocation, such as the competitive market, but also for the analysis of how contracts are designed, both in the market and in organizations. To be exact, I will maintain that Hayek's theory of the way in which information is diffused and used in competitive markets does not necessarily imply that the market mechanism is an impersonal mechanism of allocation of resources, and thus allow a tentative analysis of both the co-ordination and incentive problems. The argument is divided into two parts. First, I will illustrate the reasons which contradict Bowles and Gintis's assumption that Hayek's theory of the market can be considered as a variation within the Walrasian approach. Second, and more briefly, I will discuss the logical consequences of my proposed assessment as regards Hayek's claim about the superiority of the competitive mechanism over centralized mechanisms of allocation.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section briefly reviews the points stressed by "information economics" in its analysis of the shortcomings of the Walrasian model, and examines the main features of the post-Walrasian developments. The second section focuses on Hayek's interpretation of the market mechanism, by making reference to the main issues which emerge from the socialist calculation debate. It is argued that Hayek's notion of knowledge can be applied to an analysis of the functions performed by competitive markets which is compatible with post-Walrasian developments. The third section examines a relatively neglected difference between the assessment of Hayek's thought given by the neo-Austrian school and certain insights present in the works of Hayek himself. It points out that by taking into account this difference the apparent contradictions of the paradox can be resolved. In the final section there are some concluding remarks on the present-day relevance of Hayek's advocacy of capitalism.

1. The message coming from "information economics"

The current mainstream critiques of Walrasian economics focus on the variety of problems which can arise in economic systems when information is costly and asymmetrically distributed among agents, a fact which has been substantially disregarded in the analysis that follows the general equilibrium approach of the Arrow-Debreu model (as noted, among others, by Arrow 1967).

Following the assessment recently offered by Bowles and Gintis, the most prominent argument among the new developments of microeconomic theory is that the self-interest behavior underlying neoclassical theory is "truncated" because in the representation of market exchange many (if not all) of the difficulties involved in enforcing the actual process of exchange are assumed away. They point out that, as a matter of fact, the structure of decision making plays no role in the traditional solving of maximization problems. In fact, the activity of optimization in situations of asymmetric information must entail aspects of economic behavior such as how to transmit information truthfully, how hard to work, and whether the benefits exceed the cost of defaulting on a deal, none of which constitute subject for analysis in Walrasian economics³ (Bowles and Gintis 1993: 83-85). It is worth noting that the standard assumption of individual agents who are fully rational optimizers is maintained, a fact which probably explains why these developments became so pervasive in economic theory. But now it is every aspect of the possibly sophisticated behavior of individual agents (described by Williamson (1985: 50-53) as opportunism), which is taken into account.

In the main, Bowles and Gintis deal with three features of the Walrasian model: first, the anonymity of the market; second, the uncontested nature of claims; and third, the absence of substantive hierarchy in economic relationships. While the critical remarks concerning the first two features are generally supported by all the representatives of information economics, those concerning the absence of substantive hierarchy in economic relationships are more controversial, since their acceptance may have relevant political implications⁴. Moreover, for the purpose of this paper I need only to examine Bowles and Gintis's claim that the first two features of the Walrasian model apply to Hayek's theory as well. Hence, I will leave the third point out of discussion.

It is commonly maintained that, as far as the representation of exchange relationships is concerned, the Walrasian approach is practically empty. In the Walrasian model, given that the parties to a transaction agree on the property rights relevant to them – a point made by Coase (1960) – it does not really matter who exchanges with whom. For a main feature of the competitive market as seen from a Walrasian perspective is the anonymity of exchange relationships in the market. Neither is there any need to enforce the contracts to be signed, because the auctioneer apparently solves this problem at zero costs. Post-Walrasian economics, on the other hand, has shown that when the parties to a transaction do not share the

³ As it is usual in current economic theory, the term "Walrasian economics" refers to the result of the process which has given birth to a formal representation of Smith's notion of invisible hand, along the lines put forward by Walras and encapsulated in the general equilibrium model of Arrow-Debreu. Hence, there is no direct reference to the real meaning of Walras's pure economic theory in the context of the history of economic thought.

⁴ For example, commenting on Bowles and Gintis's emphasis on the exercise of power in organizations, Stiglitz states that "there are good economic reasons, beyond the exercise of 'power' ... for the existence of hierarchical relationships" (Stiglitz 1993a: 111).

same information a typical principal-agent problem emerges. In situations of asymmetric information the actions of individual agents are not easily observable. The principal wishes the agent to undertake the appropriate action, but he cannot properly monitor the agent's behavior, so that promises by the agent to undertake the appropriate action do not suffice, if they are not supported by a credible commitment to perform that action. As a consequence, the contract to be signed cannot be the usual contingent contract of the Arrow-Debreu model; instead the agent must be offered the appropriate incentives. Similarly, when there are differently skilled agents, the contract to be drawn must induce those agents to reveal their own skill (Stiglitz 1989). Incentives become a crucial problem to be studied. In other words, because monitoring and enforcing contractual relationships is costly, the problem is how to find the optimal incentives in situations such as those involving moral hazard and adverse selection (Lazear 1989). Thus, instead of assuming away the problem of the enforcement of contracts, the strategies which implement its endogenous solution now constitute a crucial subject for analysis⁵.

Out of a number of important insights into the nature of the variety of economic relationships which emerge in markets with asymmetrically informed agents, Bowles and Gintis derive one fundamental message. This is that, seen from a general perspective, the function of competitive markets is not only allocative, but also disciplinary, in that they provide a system of enforcement of claims by the parties to the transaction. The benefits out of a deal now depend either on the actions or on the quality of the other party, so that interaction upon individuals entails truly strategic behavior. This fact necessarily modifies the very notion of competitive market⁶. For example, the obvious outcome of repeated transactions is long-term commitments. But, to be sure of the continuation of an act of exchange, agents usually find it convenient to offer the other party a rent, a payment in excess of the other party's next best alternative. These rents, which are called enforcement rents, may persist in equilibrium, as has been demonstrated by analyses of the labor market and the credit market (Stiglitz 1987). As a consequence, competitive markets do not clear in equilibrium, and they no longer satisfy the usual allocative efficiency property (Bowles and Gintis 1993: 88-89). The enforcement problem requires a re-examination of the entire structure of contractual relationships. In particular, the costs related to the making and the enforcement of contracts now become relevant, because they affect the set of feasible market outcomes.

⁵ It is worth recalling, however, that the typical contract between asymmetrically informed parties which is studied in the principal-agent literature is still to be considered a kind of complete contract. This is because it unambiguously specifies each party's obligations in each conceivable contingency (Hart and Holmstrom 1987) – even if the contingencies are now defined in a way which differs from that of the Arrow-Debreu model, since they may depend on the action of the agents themselves.

⁶ Note that while the representatives of "information economics" and "contested exchange economics" share this remarkable viewpoint, Williamson prefers to emphasize the role of organizations in solving the problem generated by asymmetric information.

To sum up, the Walrasian view of the competitive market is characterized by two related features, that is the anonymity of exchange relationships and the exogenous enforcement of contracts, which dramatically contradict the actual process of exchange in competitive markets. The main message coming from the new developments of microeconomic theory, then, is the following: "the standard Walrasian arguments in favor of a capitalist economy are not compelling, even given the conventional assumptions about convexities and absence of externalities" (Bowles and Gintis 1993: 97). In other words, when there is private information, fully efficient outcomes are not guaranteed by the mechanism of decentralized allocation devised in the Walrasian approach. More generally, a correct explanation of essential aspects of the process of exchange is simply missing. Hence the superiority of the market mechanism of co-ordination of economic activity over centralized mechanisms remains to be proved.

As a further illustration of the importance of the results reached by these post-Walrasian developments, let us specifically examine how they handle the question of the comparison between alternative institutional settings. A two step procedure is proposed. The first step is to stress that the problem of comparing different mechanisms of resource allocation cannot be worked out, and to consider feasible institutions instead of hypothetical ideals. In other words, one should focus on the workings of the alternative mechanisms when ideal circumstances such as complete markets and perfect information do not hold. In the literature we are making reference to, Hayek is credited with pointing this clearly out during the socialist calculation debate (see Farrell 1987: 116, Milgrom and Roberts 1992, ch. 3, and Bowles and Gintis 1993: 97-8). Because informational problems are pervasive in economic life, the comparison must concern how different economic systems work when private information exists. In Hayek's view, a correct analysis of the competitive process shows that, as a matter of fact, the Walrasian auctioneer has the same role as the planner of a centralized economy, that is the role of collecting all the information in order to determine equilibrium prices. Hence the Walrasian fiction cannot be used to discriminate between the two systems (Hayek 1945). As we shall see in the following section, the way in which Hayek developed his argument accounts for the neo-Austrian assessment of the socialist calculation – which stresses that, in criticizing market socialists, Hayek clarified his critical remarks on the general equilibrium approach as well.

The second step of the comparison is to contrast the respective efficiency of different institutions in dealing with the problem of the use and diffusion of dispersed information. The outcome of the discussion so far is that the existence of dispersed information gives rise to a number of problems even in competitive markets. Markets may turn out to be highly inefficient as regards both allocative efficiency (Stiglitz 1993b) and organizational efficiency (Williamson 1985). Moreover, as a corollary of this outcome, one can envisage examples in which the welfare comparison between a decentralized mechanism of allocation (markets plus private negotiation) and a simple mechanism of centralized allocation (an

inefficient bureaucrat) is ambiguous (Farrell 1987, and Illing 1992). Therefore post-Walrasian economics argues that, after posing the problem in the correct way, Hayek failed to understand the possibly indeterminate nature of its solution. Hayek's claim for the superiority of decentralized over centralized mechanisms, it is argued, cannot be supported by following this line of argument.

It is worth concluding this section by stressing a crucial aspect which has emerged. The starting point of the heterogeneous research program called information economics is that co-ordination problems cannot be solved without removing the Walrasian fiction of complete markets and the auctioneer. Once this perspective is adopted, the complex interrelation between co-ordination problems and incentive problems becomes the main subject for analysis, and even the attempt to rely only on organizations to solve problems which the market handles inefficiently turns out to be unsatisfying. In this approach, even the notion of the market itself must be revised, in order to understand the role of incentive and incomplete contracts, not only within organizations but also outside them. That the market is a co-ordination mechanism – and prices its key element – remains a cornerstone of economic reasoning. What recent advances in microeconomic theory aim to question is whether this is the only function performed by the market – and whether prices are the only means to achieve co-ordination. The socialist calculation debate of the 1930s forced economists to confront this issue for the first time in the history of economics, and we now turn our attention towards that debate.

2. Hayek's theory of the market mechanism

Hayek's theory of the market mechanism was consolidated during the debate with the advocates of a market way to socialism. As is well known, the contemporaneous emergence of his strictures against market socialism and of his theoretical insights on the market mechanism are mainly encapsulated in the three essays on the socialist calculation debate (Hayek 1935a; 1935b; 1940) and the three essays on the problem of knowledge in competitive markets (Hayek 1937; 1945; 1948).

An examination of these works reveals at least two major contributions to the debate. The first is essentially methodological: as I have remarked above, a new standard for welfare comparisons was promoted by Hayek for valuing the comparative efficiency of economic systems in terms of informational efficiency, that is in terms of how much information is aggregated and transmitted throughout the system (Hayek 1935a: 147f.; 1945: 79). The second is Hayek's own suggestion to implement this methodological assertion: he argued that, if it wants to be empirically relevant, economic theory must address the problem of the diffusion of knowledge, and went on to offer his own view of the way in which markets use information, which resulted in an alternative to the standard general equilibrium approach (Hayek 1937: 48-55; 1948: 104-6).

During the debate Hayek emphasized that the fact that the competitive mechanism is more efficient than other mechanisms of allocation does not depend on the fulfillment of certain normative standards (such as the Pareto-optimality of equilibrium allocations), but rather on its ability to create the appropriate incentives for individual agents to utilize, acquire and even discover the knowledge dispersed in the system – that is on the market ability in solving the knowledge problem⁷. Competitive markets guarantee more informational efficiency than centralized markets because they are more capable of dealing with knowledge which "never exists in concentrated or integrated form but solely as the dispersed bits of incomplete and frequently contradictory knowledge which all the separate individuals possess" (Hayek 1945: 77). Hence, the essence of the competitive mechanism consists in delegating decisions to "the man on the spot", who knows more about a specific problem, and can thus take the appropriate decision. In order to clarify this point, Hayek emphasized that while contemporary economic theory would deal mostly with scientific, or technological, knowledge, he considered that the main question to answer was how to deal with personal, fragmented knowledge (Hayek 1945: 79-81).

Once the question of knowledge is posed in this way, two implications for the relevance of the notion of equilibrium emerge. On the one hand, the co-ordination of decentralized economic activity in an intertemporal setting can be achieved almost only by chance, for the conditions for intertemporal equilibrium are too strict to be satisfied (Hayek 1937: 41-5). On the other hand, the fragmented character of knowledge, which is dispersed throughout the system, implies that much knowledge cannot be dealt with as if it was given *ex ante*. In fact, much knowledge is generated and used during the process of adjustment to equilibrium, thus reducing the interpretative usefulness of every specific equilibrium construct. In his later essays, Hayek clarified that market equilibrium is to be interpreted as a spontaneous order of the economic system, or a catallaxy. In a spontaneous order, the co-ordination of individual plans does not merely depend on the price system, but also on a number of abstract rules, such as custom and laws, which are the result of the evolution of the economic system. Furthermore, the role of alternative mechanisms of co-ordination such as contractual and organizational agreement is explicitly recognized (see Hayek 1973: ch. 2; 1976: ch. 10, and, for a comment, Moss 1994).

But the question of the superiority of the market mechanism over centralization is precisely stated by Hayek well before. The way to understand why the competitive market makes a better use of the knowledge dispersed throughout the economy, and thus better solves the problem of knowledge, is to compare the

⁷ The knowledge problem is defined by Hayek (1945: 77-8) as follows: "The economic problem of a society is thus not merely a problem of how to allocate 'given' resources – if 'given' is taken to mean given to a single mind which deliberately solves the problem set by these 'data'. It is rather a problem of how to secure the best use of resources known to any of the members of society, for ends whose relative importance only these individuals know".

relative efficiency of out-of-equilibrium adjustments in the two systems. To be more specific, it is only when the problem of reaction to continuous changes in knowledge is confronted, that it is possible to assess the comparative informational efficiency of the two systems (Hayek 1940: 187-8). Hayek's idea is that, in this connection, only competitive markets are structured to solve the knowledge problem. Under conditions of dispersed knowledge, it is only during the market process that the relevant knowledge is discovered and made available by the action of decentralized agents. In a distinct application of the Austrian methodological subjectivism, Hayek contended that much of agents' valuation of their own knowledge, and of the understanding of its role in production processes, cannot be asked by a central planner, but is bound to be used and revealed during the playing out of market activity (Hayek 1945: 85) ⁸.

We are then led to the main question: what does it mean to pose the problem of fragmented knowledge in this way? The main theoretical argument used by Hayek against centralized economies is that knowledge is not only dispersed, but also specialized and inarticulate – that is, mostly difficult to communicate (Lavoie 1986). In Hayek's view, it is this characteristic of knowledge that is relevant for economic activity, and which makes the competitive mechanism more efficient than other possible procedures of exchange. Indeed, even if one could design the appropriate incentives for individual agents to reveal which knowledge they privately possess⁹, important aspects of personal knowledge would not be transferable to a central planner. In fact, these bits of knowledge could only be used by the individual agents themselves. To support his viewpoint, Hayek mentioned Polanyi in maintaining that the 'knowledge how' to do something refers mainly to skills, or are embodied in customs and rules of behaviour, and can thus be considered tacit, or inarticulate (Hayek 1967: 43-5).

There are two different ways to understand the assumption that personal knowledge is tacit. First, tacit may mean that knowledge is unreportable to others, since it is difficult, or impossible, to represent by following formal rules. Secondly, tacit may also mean that the knowledge is actually unknown to its owner, and that he gains awareness of his previous ignorance only during the market process. In their analysis of the market process, the neo-Austrians mainly stressed the second interpretation of tacit knowledge, and disregarded the implications of the first one (see O'Driscoll and Rizzo 1985: 102-107, and Kirzner 1992: 159-61).

⁸ As a consequence, Hayek's argument cannot be considered as a claim for the second best efficiency of market outcomes, when the first best is precluded by informational asymmetries, as implicitly suggested by Bowles and Gintis.

⁹ The theme of incentives is crucial in all the discussions of the market socialists issues. Neo-Austrian authors has argued that, in Hayek's theory, the profit motive is a necessary element for efficient behavior by the agents. In what follows, I will not make use of this argument. The theory of incentive-compatible contracts can be, in principle, applied to every economic organization. Furthermore this argument is controversial if it is considered as an argument concerning personal motivation in itself (see Hayek 1940: 190). On this point see also the discussion in Bardhan and Roemer (1993: 7-9).

On the other hand, if one concentrates on the first interpretation, and asks how an individual agent can get a return on this kind of knowledge, some interesting implications of Hayek's viewpoint emerge. The most obvious implication is that only the agent who possesses the specific knowledge can use his informational advantage in the competitive process, for instance by bidding up the price of certain resources he knows he can use more profitably than they are currently being used. This aspect of the problem constitutes the fundamental critique of the mechanism of determination of shadow prices by the planner which was proposed by Lange¹⁰. But this kind of knowledge is also essential as regards the way transactions are designed. Only when markets spontaneously give birth to reliable institutions, such as appropriate contractual forms and customary business procedures, can individual agents profit from this kind of knowledge. Indeed, as the Arrow-Debreu model clarified, contracts contingent on aspects of economic activity which cannot be publicly observed – or verified – *ex post*, such as those envisaged by Hayek's notion of knowledge, do not exist by definition in the Walrasian approach. Hence, a formal analysis of the institutional context is essential to characterize the way in which the market mechanism works, particularly as far as the rules for exchanges to take place are concerned.

My point here is that Hayek was well aware of these implications of his notion of knowledge, and dealt with this issue on many occasions. In his 1940 essay on socialist calculation, for instance, Hayek maintained that the competitive economy is characterized by organizational structures and incentive schemes which guarantee managerial responsibility, such as the mechanism provided by take-overs in the market for corporate control, or which encourage the loyalty and hard work of the workers, such as the threat of job loss (Hayek 1940: 199-203)¹¹. More important, in his 1948 essay on competition, where the main concern was the analysis of the critical assumptions on which the notion of perfect competition was based, Hayek introduced the question of "what institutional arrangements are necessary in order that the unknown person who have knowledge specially suited to a particular task are most likely to be attracted to that task". In pointing to competition as the dynamic process through which the knowledge which is fictitiously supposed in command of individual agents can be actually put at their disposal, he found it "especially remarkable ... the explicit and complete exclusion from the theory of perfect competition of all personal relationships existing between

¹⁰ In order to perform their role of efficient conveyors of dispersed information, prices must vary immediately after a previously unperceived opportunity is noticed by an entrepreneur. Hence, even if the motivational issue is not taken into account, that is even if it is assumed that socialist managers have the same personal incentives which drive private entrepreneurs, they cannot absolve the role of private entrepreneurs in making the price mechanism effective, since prices are fixed by the central authority. On this point, see in particular Lavoie (1985: 95-102) and Pagano (1992: 64-5).

¹¹ Hayek's references to the issue of incentives in competitive markets have been commented on by Vaughn (1980), Moss (1994) and Streissler (1994), among others.

the parties" to a transaction (Hayek 1948: 96-7)¹². A third significant example is given by Hayek's analysis of the role of organizations in competitive markets, when he stated that "to some extent every organization must rely also on rules and not only on specific command" for the same reason which holds for a spontaneous order, that is "that by guiding the actions of individuals by rules rather than specific commands it is possible to make use of knowledge which nobody possesses as a whole" (Hayek 1973: 48-9).

In my view, Hayek's remarks are not secondary statements about the need for appropriate profit incentives, the obvious complexity of market transactions and the existence of organizations. On the contrary, they serve to clarify Hayek's particular conception of how the market system works. At least two fundamental aspects of this conception must be stressed. The first one is the significance of the institutional context within which transactions take place. A great number of studies on Hayek's theory of social institutions have pointed to this issue and stressed that this is a typical Austrian statement (see Vanberg 1986, Caldwell 1988, and Vaughn 1990). In spite of this, Hayek's quest for a more thorough understanding of the function performed by competitive markets has been substantially interpreted as a secondary component of the much broader problem of the development of institutions. But, following our line of argument instead, Hayek's point emerges as a consequence of his awareness that co-ordination does not merely require an effective price system, it also requires customary rules to deal with complex transactions.

The second fundamental point is the following: the fact that in competitive markets complex transactions take place¹³, is the direct consequence of the kind of knowledge in which Hayek was interested. Accordingly, the idea that the market mechanism copes with the problem of transactions in an efficient manner relies on the market ability to spontaneously generate the appropriate incentives within contractual relationships. This may also explain why, in examining how competitive systems could deal with personal knowledge, Hayek realized that even competitive prices could not completely aggregate the knowledge dispersed throughout the system. His appreciation of the market order then shifted from the precise notion of equilibrium – which no longer implies Pareto-optimality, or informational efficiency – to the more qualitative construct of spontaneous order – by means of which other conditions for market efficiency could be better pointed out.

¹² Hayek's point here is strikingly modern and, one might say, similar to certain post-Walrasian statements: "In actual life the fact that our inadequate knowledge of the available commodities or services is made up for by our experience with the persons and firms supplying them – that competition is in a large measure competition for reputation or good will – is one of the most important facts which enables us to solve our daily problems" (Hayek 1948: 97).

¹³ The term complex transactions is used in current economic theory to distinguish transactions which may involve both monitoring costs about performances and sanctioning costs whenever performances do not conform to the contract, from transactions based on the Arrow-Debreu contingent contract.

We are then led to the following interpretation of Hayek's theory. Hayek's analysis of how co-ordination can be achieved by means of the market mechanism cannot be appreciated completely if the competitive market is interpreted only as a method of co-ordination through competition – that is a dynamic procedure through which the actions of individuals get co-ordinated both by means of the profit motive, which mobilizes the dispersed knowledge and generates new knowledge, and the price system, which disseminates it. In addition, the institutional framework in which co-ordination can be achieved should also be studied. As I have already noted, this second aspect cannot be addressed within the limits imposed by a Walrasian perspective. And, in contrast to much of conventional thinking, one of the fundamental reasons which was stressed by Hayek himself is that the market mechanism is not an impersonal mechanism, driven only by market prices¹⁴. To be sure, I do not want to argue that Hayek explicitly aimed at challenging the "exogenous enforcement axiom", which is peculiar to Walrasian economics, but that his theory was suited for an analysis of those aspects of exchange which are excluded from analysis by that axiom, and can be usefully taken as a basis for stimulating developments.

3. Hayek, the neo-Austrian school and the post-Walrasian developments

The diffusion of Hayek's theory of the market mechanism may be attributed more to the neo-Austrian school than to Hayek himself. Indeed neo-Austrians scholars contributed not only to developing Hayek's theory, but also to identifying many aspects of the theory which were present from the outset, but not properly understood. For example, in the historiography of the socialist calculation debate it is commonly argued that the logic put forward by Hayek during the debate might be misunderstood as neoclassical, mainly because Hayek's own identity as a non-neoclassical economist was not yet defined (see Kirzner 1992: ch. 6).

The neo-Austrian assessment of Hayek's theory has given birth to a "paradigm"¹⁵, which is distinct from the current neoclassical paradigm. In their developments, neo-Austrian scholars have favored a market process perspective, that is an analysis of the competitive mechanism which stresses out-of-equilibrium behaviour and disequilibrium dynamics, instead of equilibrium relationships. As I have already remarked, the knowledge problem is mainly seen as connected to the

¹⁴ It is worth pointing out that it does not matter here if "state co-ordination" or "process co-ordination" is involved, in contrast to the emphasis put on this issue by the neo-Austrians (in particular, see Kirzner 1992: ch. 8). The institutions which favor the co-ordination of economic activity may well be thought of as spontaneously evolved (Hayek 1967: ch. 6), but the need for a direct analysis of contractual relationships is independent of the analysis of their genesis.

¹⁵ Needless to say, while in this paper I am emphasizing the Hayekian roots of the Austrian approach, one might focus on the contribution of other founders, such as Menger and Mises, as well (for example, see Lachman 1976, and Vaughn 1990).

dynamic evolution of economic systems. Even the neo-Austrians' sharply critical attitude towards the usefulness of an equilibrium construct is supported by the claim that no knowledge problem exists in Walrasian equilibrium. More generally, the neo-Austrian approach maintains that an equilibrium perspective is not useful in dealing with the knowledge problem (Thomsen 1992: ch. 3).

The neo-Austrian approach is, in fact, grounded on the critical remarks against the Walrasian model. But these remarks do not say anything about the problem raised by Bowles and Gintis as representatives of information economics. Following Bowles and Gintis's approach, the inappropriateness of the Walrasian model does not necessarily depend on its essentially static nature, but on its inability to explain the variety of contractual relationships that asymmetric information necessarily implies – even if they are examined in a static environment. To be exact, Bowles and Gintis recognize Hayek's interest in the question of the endogenous evolution of preferences and norms, which they considered to be the other main element of economic theory that has been eschewed by Walrasian economics. But they contend that the more relevant question of the endogenous enforcement of market claims was not dealt with by Hayek. Hence their interpretation is that Hayek and his followers have been silent on this subject, and their theory of the market is "entirely Walrasian" (Bowles and Gintis 1993: 99).

Our assessment of Hayek's theory of the market mechanism has pointed out that the notion of knowledge that Hayek introduced in economic theory can be useful for a perceptive analysis of the question raised by Bowles and Gintis. This point is surely in contrast to what the neo-Austrian developments might induce one to think. We do not of course intend to deny that the neo-Austrian interpretation is the most obvious outcome of Hayek's theory. Hayek himself supported this interpretation many times, as his insistence on competition as a discovery procedure and on the informational role of the price system indicates. But we have tried to show that other possible implications of Hayek's notion of knowledge have not been fully drawn, as the way in which he modelled the knowledge problem suggests.

To be more specific, it may be useful to briefly consider the way in which the organizational issue has been dealt with in the neo-Austrian literature. The most widespread attitude is to consider the role of the entrepreneur in isolation. His search for previously unperceived opportunities is considered as the *primum movens* of the market process. But there is no reference to any organizational or contractual structure that the entrepreneur might have used to implement the decisions arising from his informational advantage (Kirzner 1992: ch. 1). On the other hand, instead of deepening Hayek's insights on the subject, those authors who are aware of the necessity of a more accurate analysis of the role of firms and organizations in general, prefer to make reference to Nelson and Winter's evolutionary theory of the firm, which they substantially consider as consistent with the Austrian viewpoint (in particular see O'Driscoll and Rizzo 1985: ch. 5, and

Thomsen 1992: 108-115)¹⁶. It can be concluded, then, that the neo-Austrian school has not yet offered a coherent analysis of the relationships between the market and the firm¹⁷.

The cause of the neo-Austrian disregard for this issue, and of Bowles and Gintis's interpretation, might be found in Hayek's insistence on the efficiency of the price system in mobilizing the information dispersed among the agents. If it is considered in isolation, the famous 1945 claim that "we must look at the price system as ... a mechanism for communicating information", whose most significant quality is "the economy of knowledge with which it operates, or how little the individual participants need to know in order to be able to take the right action" (Hayek 1945: 86), can easily be misinterpreted. As it has been noted on many occasions, in Hayek's theory the price system provides the link between decentralized actions and aggregate outcomes. In order to achieve co-ordination individual agents cannot act only on the basis of their personal knowledge, they also need prices as surrogates for the knowledge possessed by other agents, and dispersed in the system. It might seem that the "marvel" of the price mechanism – by means of which "in abbreviated form, by a kind of symbol, only the most essential information is passed on and passed only to those concerned (Hayek 1945: 86) – could dispense with any further analysis of the knowledge problem (as recently re-affirmed, for example, by Desai (1993: 46-7)). But Hayek's emphasis on the informational role of prices does not imply that prices perform the function of efficient aggregators of information, neither that their role takes place in an institution-less environment.

Interestingly, it is the misinterpretation of Hayek's 1945 claim which explains the reason why neo-Austrian scholars have spent much time in arguing that Grossman's contribution to the economics of information cannot be considered in the spirit of Hayek, contrary to the explicit reference made by Grossman to Hayek's contribution (Grossman 1989: 1, 32-3). The neo-Austrians correctly argue that Grossman's formal representation of the role of prices as signals of existing asymmetries in information – which, in Grossman's general equilibrium model,

¹⁶ This holds notwithstanding certain clear acknowledgments of the relevance of the question. O'Driscoll and Rizzo, in particular, stress that "it is strictly impossible to imagine a 'price system' devoid of contracts and property rights". They also contend that further research is necessary to give content to the Hayekian suggestion that "competitive markets will generally rely on institutions and practices to generate information assumed in neoclassical analysis to be given by price signals only" (O'Driscoll and Rizzo 1985: 106, 236). But, at my knowledge, no tentative answer has been offered since their acknowledgements. A notable exception is Langlois (1988).

¹⁷ In the Chicago tradition of economics Hayek's theory of the market and Coase's theory of the firm are often considered as complementary arguments to an all-comprehensive explanation of the way in which a competitive economy works (for example, see Buchanan 1981). But, as Cordato (1992: 215-7) correctly stated, Hayek's insights on the role of knowledge can also be used to criticize Coase's approach, mainly because it cannot be assumed that the information which is necessary for a judge to implement the efficient solution of the bargaining problems addressed by Coase is known *ex ante*.

efficiently perform the function of completely disseminating the information throughout the economy – do not correctly represent Hayek's claim, since it cannot capture the discovery function of the price system, which is essential in Hayek's theory (for example, see Thomsen 1992)¹⁸.

On the other hand, neo-Austrians themselves have failed in offering a convincing analysis of those other aspects which emerge from Hayek's analysis of knowledge which we have pointed out, such as the need for appropriate contractual forms, which apparently contradicts Hayek's claim in favor of the price mechanism. To be exact, the neo-Austrians are still used to discuss the role of prices in the market by comparing Hayek's argument with the usual "perfect competition argument" of mainstream economics, instead of considering the more elaborate idea of competition which emerges out of the post-Walrasian developments (for example, see Kirzner 1992: ch. 1). But, as we have just noticed in the previous section, the need for decentralized action and the role attributed to prices do not necessarily imply that agents do not conform to an institutional setting, neither that methods of centralization of the procedure of decisions, such as the firms, must be eschewed from the analysis. In interpreting Hayek there are at least two major reasons to take a different view. First, the relevance of the institutional setting to a correct understanding of the way in which the price system works is clearly stated by Hayek, as remarked also by neo-Austrians. Second, Hayek's notion of knowledge implies that the usual method of contingent Arrow-Debreu contracts cannot be used to implement exchanges based on differences in information, and demonstrates the need for a more direct analysis of those contractual relationships under which agents can take advantage of informational differences¹⁹.

To sum up, the claim that Hayek considered the market as an impersonal mechanism of allocation, and was providing simply a kind of dynamic extension of the Walrasian model, is quite unfounded. On the other hand, most neo-Austrians have practically endorsed this interpretation, since they have not provided a satisfying treatment of the role of contracts in competitive markets – thus giving support to Bowles and Gintis's thesis.

¹⁸ The rationale of the neo-Austrian's critique is the following. In emphasizing the role of prices as signals of existing differences in knowledge, and neglecting that of discovery devices for new knowledge, Grossman assumes an equilibrium perspective. Hence his interpretation cannot account for Hayek's insistence on the disequilibrium dynamics of competition. Furthermore Grossman shows that prices in competitive markets perform the function of efficiently aggregating all the information dispersed throughout the system, thus giving birth to a new optimal standard, while Hayek is explicit in denying any optimal properties of the price mechanism. This interpretative hypothesis has been commented on many times in the neo-Austrian literature (in particular, see O'Driscoll and Rizzo 1985: 102, Kirzner 1992: ch. 8, and Thomsen 1992: 44-7).

¹⁹ Zappia (1995) is an attempt to show that certain aspects of Hayek's notion of knowledge can be analyzed by following the approach of modern contract theory. He maintains that the questions raised by incomplete markets in the Walrasian model can also be examined from a Hayekian perspective, and that, in taking that perspective, certain shortcomings of modern contract theory can be highlighted. On this point, see also Dardi (1990: 62-4).

Conclusion

This analysis has started from the consideration that it appears paradoxical to use Hayek's critical remarks against market socialists to criticize the market mechanism as well. We have argued that Hayek's theory of the market mechanism, which has been interpreted as a way to solve the so-called knowledge problem, calls for deepening understanding of the institutional setting in which as much information as possible is mobilized and diffused by means of the price system. Hence, contrary to Bowles and Gintis's viewpoint, Hayek's theory is definitely not Walrasian – not only because it originated the market process perspective emphasized by the neo-Austrian school, but also because the particular notion of knowledge on which it is based explicitly requires the arrangement of appropriate contractual forms for an actual process of market exchange to take place.

After dealing with the interpretative question regarding Hayek's role in the improvement over the Walrasian approach, the main theoretical question remains open. What is the rationale behind the claimed superiority of the competitive market over centralized mechanism of allocations?

Bowles and Gintis's point is striking: if no optimal property can be attributed to the achievable outcomes of the competitive economy, then there is no theoretical basis for arguing that mechanisms of centralized allocation cannot replicate, or even improve, those outcomes. A new generation of market socialists supports this radical viewpoint by stressing that such a view of capitalist economies, which sees markets acting in the context of non-market institutions, such as large firms and long term contracts, leaves room for the study of other non-market institutions, arguably compatible with the competitive mechanism but more egalitarian in nature (Roemer 1994: 3-6). Hayek's preference for the competitive economy, on the other hand, is not based on a Walrasian theory of the market, neither on the optimal properties of a new equilibrium construct which can account for informational differences. His argument is that the market mechanism is suited for agents to take advantage from inarticulate knowledge, while the socialist economy cannot by its very nature. Needless to say, he offered a vision more than an analytical solution.

From a practical point of view, the question is probably bound to remain open until the solutions actually adopted in the Eastern European countries have been consistently implemented. Nevertheless, from the discussion so far some theoretical implications can be drawn in a Hayekian fashion. First, the institutional setting of the capitalist economy must be seen as the result of a spontaneous evolution which has determined the rules under which exchanges take place, as the theory of spontaneous order emphasizes (Sudgen 1989). To imagine that the transition from a planned economy to a market economy is simple and fast is not sensible, even if the question is seen from the side of conscious market advocates. If this is the case, Hayek would probably accept the point stressed by many in the literature on the economies in transition, that the practicability of a sudden shift towards a market economy is doubtful, since many institutional arrangements

cannot be devised from outside. Second, the solution of the knowledge problem imagined by Hayek is strictly dependent on clearly defined, and enforceable, property rights on the basis of which decentralized actions can take place. This point is still to be consistently addressed even by the new advocates of market socialism (as noted in Lavoie 1990). As we have seen, the question posed by tacit knowledge is that the owner of a specific bit of knowledge must be involved in its utilization, because this is the only way to bring it to the fore. The superiority of the market mechanism lies then in the fact that decentralization is a necessary condition for an efficient use of dispersed knowledge. If this is the case, the question to be addressed by new defenders of mechanisms of allocation alternative to the competitive market is how to satisfy this necessary condition with an array of property rights which differs from a spontaneously evolved array. And though even certain notable proposals have recently been offered (in particular, see Bardhan and Roemer 1993), a satisfying solution does not yet seem to have been arrived at.

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