

CHAPTER 2

Institutional Theory

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Although most political sociologists and political scientists nowadays either consider themselves or are deemed “institutionalists,” key differences remain among major schools of institutionalism (see reviews in Pierson and Skocpol 2002; Amenta 2005). In this chapter, we review sociological institutionalism, historical institutionalism, and political institutionalism.¹ We discuss their similarities and differences, theoretical and methodological insights, research gains, analytical problems, and prospects for the study of politics. To focus our discussion, we mainly consider research regarding the development of public policy, the terrain on which many advances in political sociology and political science have taken place and an occasional battleground for these approaches.

The basic similarity in all institutional theoretical claims is that something identified at a higher level is used to explain processes and outcomes at a lower level of analysis (Clemens and Cook 1999; Amenta 2005). Institutionalists tend to avoid both individual-level explanations and explanations situated at the same level of analysis. For these reasons, they are sometimes criticized as “structurally biased,” though this is a feature of institutional arguments that has distinctive explanatory advantages as well as disadvantages. Institutionalists typically have problems in explaining social and political change, notably in institutions themselves, and often resort to claims about exogenous and unpredictable shocks or the actions of various agents.

Yet, these three types of institutionalists tend to focus on different sorts of higher-order determinants and differ in how much they matter causally. The sociological institutionalists in the sociology of organizations (Powell and DiMaggio 1991) and those examining the influence of the “world society” (Meyer et al. 1997) focus on cultural and ideational causes. These are posited to exert influence either at the supra-societal or supra-state level for states and their policies, or at the societal level for organizations. Historical institutionalists typically focus on determinants at the macropolitical or macroeconomic level, though they rely on no particular type of institutional theory, and instead expect causation to be multiple and conjunctural and often involving time-order and path dependence (Pierson and Skocpol 2002). Historical institutionalism is an approach to political research that focuses on asking big questions, highlights the importance of institutions in explanations, and rejects functionalist explanations for why institutions emerge. Like sociological

¹ We omit rational-choice institutionalism, which is more prevalent in political science, works from different epistemological premises (see Hall and Taylor 1996; Thelen 1999; Pierson and Skocpol 2002), and is beyond the scope of this article (see Kiser and Bauldry 2005).

institutionalists, political institutionalists form a theoretical school, though one with a weaker self-identity. Political institutionalists typically situate their claims at the state or macropolitical level and argue that the process of formation of states, political systems, and political party systems strongly influence political processes and outcomes (see review in Amenta 2005).

The three institutionalisms have different origins and emphases in their strategies of research, as well as different advantages and disadvantages. Sociological institutionalism is a response in part to views of organizations, such as the resource dependence model, and interactions among states, such as world systems theory, that neglect cultural structures and processes in explanations. In the study of policy, sociological institutionalism focuses on quests for legitimation in political organizations and tends to focus on processes of policy imitation and diffusion and especially on surprising convergences in forms of institutions and policies. A standard research product is a cross-national time series or event history analysis of policy diffusion or convergence.

Historical institutionalism is in part a response to rational choice theory and behaviorism in political science. Historical institutionalism holds that institutions are not typically created for functional reasons and calls for historical research to trace the processes behind the creation and persistence of institutions and policies. Institutions are often implicated in both the explanations and what is to be explained. A standard research product is a book addressing one or a small number of countries exhibiting a deep knowledge of them and often seeking to explain divergent historical trajectories.

Political institutionalism has a similar approach to study as historical institutionalism, but predates it and constitutes the main theoretical strain within it. Political institutionalism came in response to formerly dominant pluralist and Marxist treatments of politics that provided one-dimensional views of states and other political institutions. Unlike sociological institutionalists, political institutionalists focus not on convergence in policy across countries, but on long-standing institutional differences across countries. They tend to argue that nation-level political institutions mediate the influence of domestic organized political actors and global processes.

In what follows, we address institutional theory in political analysis. We first address general issues surrounding institutional theoretical claims and then turn to sociological institutionalism, historical institutionalism, and political institutionalism. We consider their main claims and contributions, through programmatic statements and exemplars of research. We assess their achievements and promise, as well as some of their shortcomings. This review is not intended to be comprehensive, but to focus on exemplars, in order to highlight the emphases, advantages, and problems of each approach. We pay special attention to claims about the determinants of public social policy, which each school has sought to explain.

INSTITUTIONAL ARGUMENTS

Institutional arguments rely not on aggregations of individual action, or on patterned interaction games between individuals, but on “institutions that structure action” (Clemens and Cook 1999: 442). Institutions are emergent, “higher-order” factors above the individual level, constraining or constituting the interests and political participation of actors “without requiring repeated collective mobilization or authoritative intervention to achieve these regularities” (Jepperson 1991: 145). All three forms of institutionalists define institutions broadly. Political and historical institutionalists see institutions as formal or informal procedures, routines, norms, and conventions in the organizational structure of the polity or the political economy, whereas sociological institutionalists add cognitive scripts, moral templates and symbol systems

(Hall and Taylor 1996: 938, 947) that may reside at suprastate or supraorganizational levels. These scholars break down the distinction between the institutional and cultural. The influence and durability of institutions is a function of the extent to which they are inculcated in political actors at the individual or organizational level, and the extent to which they thereby tie up material resources and networks (Clemens and Cook 1999: 445).

Institutional theories as applied to politics posit two distinct forms of institutions' influence over policy and political action. Institutions can be constraining, superimposing conditions of possibility for mobilization, access, and influence. Institutions limit some forms of action and facilitate others. Arguments about institutional constraint evoke an "architectural or maze-like" imagery; to the extent that institutions are hypothesized to proceed from powerful states, such architecture becomes a "concrete, massive, autonomous" fortress (Clemens and Cook 1999: 445, 461). Theories of "political mediation" (Amenta et al. 2005) and "political opportunity" (Meyer and Minkoff 2004) are, partially, institutional constraint arguments, to the extent that they posit that political institutions limit the conditions under which organized interests mobilize and attain collective goods from the state.

Another form of institutional theorizing, more typical among sociological institutionalism, posits that institutions are constitutive, establishing the available and viable models and heuristics for political action. Arguments about the constitutive properties of institutions evoke an imagery of cultural frameworks or toolkits. Political sociological "state constructionist" or "Toquevillian" theories of mobilization and identify formation (Skocpol 1985; Wuthnow 1985; Skocpol 1992) are institutional constitutive arguments, proposing that the actions of states "help to make cognitively plausible and morally justifiable certain types of collective grievances, emotions, identities, ideologies, associational ties, and actions (but not others) in the first place" (Goodwin 2001: 39–40). Sociological institutionalist theories of the influence of "epistemic communities" on policy paradigms (Haas 1992) or of INGOs on a "world polity" (Meyer et al. 1997) or "global governance" (Miller 2007), similarly, propose that normative and cognitive institutions as embedded in networks of expertise constitute the moral and epistemological bases of policy formulation.

SOCIOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONALISM

The two main sources of sociological institutionalism as applied to politics are from organizational and world society perspectives and developed as a response to the lacunae in state-centered and world system theories in political sociology and in neorealist theories in international relations, all of which attribute policies and actions to political actors' purposive pursuit of self-interest. The critique has three main parts. First, the instrumental, individualist assumptions of interest-driven theories, sociological institutionalist scholars have noted, predict a variety of policies, actions, and functional forms among states, whereas for many policy examples states instead display isomorphism, despite differences in relevant interests (Meyer et al. 1997; Boli and Thomas 1999). Second, the ambiguity of the linkage between observed reality, political instruments, and policy goals may render impracticable a well-informed pursuit of interests (Cohen et al. 1972; DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Third, interest-driven theories may prematurely dismiss the constitutive role of culture in politics or conceptualize culture as being an artifact of political structures or economic relations (Meyer et al. 1997; Boli and Thomas 1999).

Responsible for policy and political structural isomorphism in sociological institutionalist explanations, then, are cultural institutions common to political actors: cognitive or normative constructs that define the conceivable and appropriate forms of political organization,

policy goals, and policy instruments for attaining those goals (Hall and Taylor 1996: 947–948). The institution of interest is transnational political culture, not nation-specific configurations of political organizations. As Strang and Chang (1993: 237) observe, “This perhaps makes “institutionalism” a misnomer; the institutions of concern are the codified cultural constructions, not the organizations that mirror them.” Sociological institutional theories address policy innovation only insofar as they explain waves of conformity to newly emerging cultural institutions, or address the conditions under which extant institutions constitute the production of new policy forms. They conceptualize the process of policy adoption as being a matter of emulation and diffusion, emphasizing system-level and relational-level causes that are exogenous to actors.

Political applications of these theories have been developed and tested using empirical cases of transnational policy convergence such as education standards (Meyer et al. 1977, 1992), environmental treaties (Meyer et al. 1997; Frank 1999), and citizen rights (Ramirez et al. 1997), as well as empirical cases of national macroeconomic policy stability (Dobbin 1993; cf. Hall 1993) and subnational waves of policy convergence (Soule and Zylan 1997; Soule and Earl 2001; Ingram and Rao 2004).

Sociological institutionalists form a tightly self-identified school of thinking, with many scholars being graduates from the Stanford Department of Sociology and taught or influenced by John Meyer or his students. Although much of the work concerns questions addressed by political sociologists, these scholars are more likely to be found in American Sociological Association sections on culture, education, and organizations, occupations and work. Despite their concern with political processes and outcomes in all countries regardless of level of economic development or democratization, these scholars are not closely associated with the ASA section on the political economy of the world system, in part because of this section’s close affinity to Marxian-derived world systems theory. In response, some of these scholars are forming a section on global and transnational sociology.

Sociological institutional explanations vary in the mechanisms to which they attribute political stability and the organizational structures through which these mechanisms exert causal influence. Mechanisms constitute the microfoundations of sociological institutionalist theorizing and the hypothesized primary motivators of human activity. In one view, norms, rituals, models, and conventions establish what is appropriate (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Meyer et al. 1997; Meyer 2000). From this viewpoint, state actors are motivated by status concerns, particularly in world society theories. Seeking legitimacy among their peer states, they adopt and maintain the characteristics and forms of a parent, global polity (Meyer et al. 1997) or of those of peers they perceive as being more legitimate (DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 151–152; Ramirez et al. 1997; Weyland 2005: 274–278; Dobbin et al. 2007: 450–454).

Alternately, cognitive schemas, scripts, and paradigms establish what is conceivable. In this view, actors are motivated by substantive policy concerns but the linkage between available means and desired ends is inherently ambiguous, and actors select available means based on an imperfect, bounded or “garbage can,” rationality (Cohen et al. 1972; Kingdon 1995). Consequently, they address policy either by working from a shared available stock of professional expertise (DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 152–153; Dobbin 1993; Hall 1993; Hecllo 1974; King and Hansen 1999) or by emulating peers – other polities or organizations in civil society – they perceive as being more successful (DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 151–152; Miller and Holl 2005: 199–200). The latter emulation may derive from competitive motivations (Dobbin et al. 2007: 457–460) or be part of a bounded, heuristic learning process (Weyland 2005: 281–288), though such mechanisms may be difficult to disaggregate (e.g., Burt 1987: 1,291).

Third, political actors might be epistemologically dependent upon other actors – either pools of expert or managerial personnel or innovating, early adopting peers – to develop and

demonstrate the cognitive or normative feasibility of policy rationales and prescriptions. Having delegated technical authority to expert bodies, actors create policy by enacting the recommendations of scientific or technical “epistemic communities” (Haas 1992) or by defaulting to the standards and regulations of “global governance” (Dingwerth and Pattberg 2006; Miller 2007).

In sociological institutionalist theory, organizational structures constitute the hypothesized infrastructures through which normative, cognitive, and dependence mechanisms exert their influence. In some explanations, the penetration of the state by nongovernmental organizations causes state political stability. If legitimacy-minded, states may conform to a “world culture” as a function of the extent to which culture-carrying international NGOs have an organizational presence (Frank 1999; Frank et al. 2000a). If motivated instead by bounded rationality, states may adopt and implement policy standards as a function of the pervasiveness of professional associations and academic or private policy-producing organizations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 152–153; Dobbin 1993; Hall 1993). If epistemologically dependent on experts or other innovators, states may defer to the judgments of salient “epistemic communities” (Haas 1992) or “global governors” (Dingwerth and Pattberg 2006; Miller 2007).

In other explanations, the state’s networks of communication and monitoring are the main mediating structures. States may be vulnerable to legitimacy “peer pressure” from neighboring states or states in the same region (Ramirez et al. 1997). States seeking substantive solutions may be constrained by the number of viable alternative models that are available (DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 151–152) and may be influenced more by peers that are more available (Strang 1991; Strang and Tuma 1993; Strang and Soule 1998: 272–276) or salient (Soule and Zylan 1997; Soule and Earl 2001).

Coercive explanations for policy stability, while not normative or cognitive institutions per se, have received brief mention in the literature. More powerful actors such as international bodies or development agencies (or, for subnational units, the nation-state) may impose policy expectations on less powerful units; they may also promote certain procedures such as legal frameworks or budget schedules to induce less powerful actors to interact with them (DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 150–151; Weyland 2005: 271–274; Dobbin et al. 2007: 454–457). Transnational regulatory convergence due to the pervasive imposition of incentives and threats from multinational corporations (Bennett 1991: 227–229) or by hypothesized “races to the bottom” (Drezner 2007: 14–17) proceed from organizational structure propositions grounded in state penetration or state networks, respectively.

World society theories primarily rely on a combination of legitimacy mechanisms with penetration structures, though the broad propositions of the approach’s paradigmatic statements often deploy other combinations of mechanisms and structures as well. Theories examining the spread of policy ideas through professions and expert policy forums combine bounded rationality mechanisms with organizational penetration. “Epistemic communities” and “global governance” combine bounded rationality with epistemic dependence. Theories of policy diffusion through bounded, heuristic learning and competition with peer states combine bounded rationality with network structures of communication and monitoring.

The standard sociological institutionalist research project is a quantitative modeling of waves of policy convergence over an extended time across a population of political units, typically nation-states or subnational units such as U.S. states, using time series or event history analyses. Exogenous institutionalization causes are measured by levels of transnational participation, such as through treaties, conventions, or the number of international nongovernmental organizations. Endogenous demand factors or political factors are measured to test alternative, noninstitutional hypotheses. Demand data such as economic or demographic information are often straightforward and available, but measures of domestic political forces

such as mobilization pressures, being difficult to readily collect transnationally and rarely preassembled in the data sets of international NGOs, are often measured by abstract proxies such as democratic conditions or organizational strength or, sometimes, dismissed a priori (e.g., Frank et al. 2000a: 101; Buttel 2000: 118–119; Frank et al. 2000b: 123–124).

While tests of alternative endogenous hypotheses may suffer from a lack of data, tests of alternative convergence hypotheses are usually absent. Sociological institutionalist studies, like policy diffusion studies in general, to date have rarely considered multiple theories of policy convergence: evidence of diffusion is usually taken to be evidence that the single theorized institutional cause is at work (Finnemore 1996: 339; Dobbin et al. 2007). In-depth case study follow-ups that would more definitively trace policy convergence to the influence of pervasive norms and schemas – and address critics whose case knowledge contradicts broad statistical associations – are typically absent (Finnemore 1996: 339–340; Drezner 2007: 20–22).

Sociological institutional explanations seem to work best in situations in which a political actor needs institution-provided guidance – either legitimacy or a working schema – and sees no cost in adopting the forms and characteristics of other states or organizations. Although some sociological institutionalists consider relational mediators to be contributors to conformity, sociological institutionalism is *ceteris paribus* as far as endogenous causes and *alternative forms of dependence* are concerned (e.g., competitive).

The interaction of exogenous convergence mechanisms with endogenous factors, however, remains undertheorized. Sociological institutionalist explanations of transnational stability do not address how state-level institutions and path dependencies might work against incentives to conform to global standards, or how a predominance of reasonably powerful, instrumentally motivated states might minimize the influence of norm-diffusing INGOs (Drezner 2007: 19), or how domestic political factors might independently influence states to adopt similar policies (Bennett 1991: 223, 231). The influence of policy norms and paradigms relative to political calculations and constituency preferences remains an open theoretical question (Yee 1996; Campbell 2002). Sociological institutionalist explanations must not only establish not only that dominant norms and schemas exist, but also that they are in fact internally coherent enough to inspire straightforward policy prescriptions; understating internal contradictions risks prematurely minimizing the influence of domestic politics, whose debates often revolve around normative concerns that sociological institutionalist explanations posit to be settled and whose influence may be most likely where tensions among dominant norms or schemas are unresolved (Finnemore 1996: 341–342; Buttel 2000: 119; cf. Campbell 1998: 384–385).

Sociological institutional arguments, like other types of institutional arguments, largely do not address the conditions under which institutions change, beyond black-box expectations of “exogenous shocks” that may disrupt or render less salient norms, schemas, and their embedded resources (e.g., Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999). Institutional theorizing of emulation and diffusion takes as given the prior establishment of a newly dominant institution. Policy innovation is not divergent change in these explanations so much as a unidirectional wave of adaptation to a new paradigm. Disaggregating the ideational and resource mechanisms of institutional reproduction may be one way of more precisely theorizing the conditions under which institutions destabilize (Clemens and Cook 1999: 442–443); another way may be studies of failed or abortive waves of conformity (Strang and Soule 1998: 285–286).

Similarly, the origins of new dominant ideas, forms, and characteristics currently remain less prominent in institutional theorizing than the isomorphism and system-level stability they may produce. Alternative norms and schemas are abundant, and identifying the conditions under which particular alternatives become the foundation of replacement institutions and waves of conformity remains a subject of exploratory inquiry. The skill and connectedness of

“policy entrepreneurs” (Mintrom 1997; Mintrom and Vergari 1998) or “focusing events” or “focusing projects” (Kingdon 1995: 94–100; Lowry 2006) may be a factor, as may the success promoters may have in connecting proposed models to currently institutionalized policies, incentives, and interests (Clemens and Cook 1999: 457–459). The distribution of such policy entrepreneurial capacity may itself be a function of the dependence of advocacy and policy production on the norms, schemas, and embedded resources of other societal institutional arrangements such as class (Domhoff 1996) or transnational economic agreements (Dobbin et al. 2007: 454–457). Historical instances abound in dominant norms and schemas simply being imposed on modern states by their conquerors (Finnemore 1996: 340–341). The origins of new norms and schemas raise questions of power that currently have little salience in sociological institutional accounts (Hall and Taylor 1996). Toward this end, studies of the expert organizations, networks, and forums that produce and evaluate policy interpretations may be useful (Hall and Taylor 1996: 950; Miller 2007).

More generally, sociological institutionalism focuses on explaining stability around a dominant, consistent complex of norms or schemas, and so the rest of politics – instability around competing, contested sets of norms and schemas – lies largely outside the purview of institutional theorizing (Hall and Taylor 1996: 954). So, too, do transitory conditions during which heretofore dominant norms and schemas are no longer hegemonic (e.g., the necessity of welfare state protections, the self-sufficiency of economic development prescriptions, industrial growth without regard for climate change) but replacement institutions to solve the problem of inadequacy have not yet been formulated. An institution-based theorizing of politics must be able to account for the conditions under which institutional stability gives way to another institution, competing institutions, or no dominant institution at all.

An additional issue is that it is often difficult to sort out the explanatory benefits of sociological institutionalism as compared to political institutionalism in a given research project. In their bid to explain similarity and stasis, institutional arguments sometimes may indicate overdetermination. Initial debates about power in political sociology suggested that political institutional determinants of power were reinforced by cultural ones (Lukes 1974). The recursive effects of constraining and constitutive processes may make for a richer historical, sense-making accounts, but “the mouse may be well-socialized and in a maze” (Clemens and Cook 1999: 446), and thus it is difficult to tell which is more constraining. Sociological institutional explanations for policy stability also overlap with historical institutionalist accounts of “policy lock-in” or “path dependence” (Clemens and Cook 1999: 456–459). Institutionalized policy paradigms, and the networks of organizations and agencies that monitor and implement them, may both constrain the opportunities for interest participation and constitute the incentives for interest mobilization. Such “policy feedback cycles” or institutional “thickening” or “coupling,” to the extent that they result in a recursive reinforcement of policy paradigms and civil society, are hypothesized to limit the prospects of a policy field for reform or retrenchment.

HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONALISM

Historical institutionalism differs from sociological institutionalism in its lack of endorsement of a specific theoretical program and as a school of thought has only a moderately high level of self-identity (Hall and Taylor 1996; Pierson and Skocpol 2002; cf. Immergut 1998). According to its proponents, historical institutionalism is distinctive mainly in its approach to political inquiry. It focuses on big questions that may be of interest to both academics and the thinking public. It seeks explanations that are configurational and implicate a conjunction of

institutions, processes, and events. Its explanations are also contextual, shaped by institutional factors and often bound to particular places in times. Although historical institutionalism does not rely on any specific school of theorizing, it does rely on a style of theoretical argument sometimes known as historicist causation (Stinchcombe 1968). Its proponents see institutions as setting off processes of path dependence in which new institutions or policies reshape political possibilities, making some far more likely and ruling out others or making them highly unlikely. The most common institutions discussed are those at the state or country level, notably the polity or the political economy (Hall and Taylor 1996). Although historical institutionalism demands historical sophistication, expects scholars to attend to the mechanisms of explanations, and tends to avoid deductive theorizing, it does not otherwise set boundaries on theoretical thinking or the methods to appraise causal claims.

Despite working from mainly Weberian and Marxian theoretical schemes, historical institutionalists do not form a theoretical school and that means that its practitioners do not always identify themselves as historical institutionalists. Indeed, some work deemed to be historical institutionalist by its proponents is based on sociological institutionalism (Dobbin 1994; Clemens 1997). Historical institutionalism is less significant as an identity in sociology than in political science, where historical institutionalists seek to differentiate themselves from behaviorists (Immergut 1998) and, more importantly, from rational choice scholars who also deploy the term institutionalism (Hall and Taylor 1996). Historical institutionalists are often located in the subdisciplines of comparative politics and within American politics in American political development (Orren and Skowronek 2002).

In sociology, scholars identified or identifying as historical institutionalists typically have some connection to the ASA section on comparative and historical sociology, a group of scholars united largely by methodological approach. Historical institutionalists rely on both “calculus” and “cultural” approaches to action (Hall and Taylor 1996), similar to Weber’s classical ideal and material interests. Many historical institutionalists previously referred to themselves as “state-centered” scholars, notably Skocpol (1985), and many historical institutionalists have retained this theoretical emphasis, but have dropped the label in part because of their view that answers to big questions tend to be multicausal and in part from a wider concern for political institutions other than states. Their configurational explanations typically involve the interactions of more than one institution, and different aspects of these institutions, as well as different slow moving processes, and possibly short-term and contingent factors (Pierson and Skocpol 2002).

The conjunctural and configurational theorizing of historical institutionalists typically involves the interaction of central political institutions, but is usually eclectic, and because of their concern to address a particular question, historical institutionalist analyses may include causes from different theoretical camps. As Hall and Taylor (1996) note, historical institutionalists give pride of place in explanations to political institutions and institutions in the political economy, but allow that these institutions may be treated and understood from both calculus and cultural perspectives, as in the manner of either rational-choice and sociological institutionalists. Others in the historical institutionalist camp suggest that slow moving processes, involving such sociological processes as demographic or literacy shifts, may be important to particular explanations (Pierson 2003).

Historical institutionalist questions are motivated by puzzles often with both comparative and theoretical aspects to them. Although not all historical institutionalists engage in strictly comparative work, in the sense of analyzing and explaining political developments across more than one country (Ragin 1987), their questions often have comparative motivations and implications. For instance, in asking about the failure of national health insurance or late start

of other public social programs in the United States, an historical institutionalist scholar is usually at least implicitly comparing these failures to successes elsewhere in similarly situated countries. The puzzles addressed by scholars also typically have some theoretical components to them. That is to say, the big question is partly constructed from the failure of well-known theoretical accounts to answer them satisfactorily. For instance, left-wing partisan contexts have been one of the key determinants of the adoption of new social spending programs and differences in overall spending efforts. Thus the failure to adopt national health care in the United States in a partisan political context favorable to adopting social security may be seen as a puzzle that confounds standard theories (Hacker 2002). Similarly, efforts to retrench social policy may fail despite the fact that right-wing parties rule (Pierson 1996).

Historical institutionalism seeks to be historical in few different senses of the word. One involves the fact that historical institutionalists focus on big questions and issues of wide interest, but situate them within specific places and times. Some of these questions implicate fairly general phenomena, such as why revolutions occur (Goldstone 2003), whereas others are more specific and often concern issues central to debates in historiography, such as why the United States has no national health care program (Hacker 1998; Quadagno 2005). What is more, historical institutionalist explanations are often broadly contextual, similarly bound by time and space; even historical scholars studying general phenomena like revolutions usually limit their focus to specific times and places. In these instances aspects of the historical context are set as “proper name” (Przeworski and Teune 1970) boundaries surrounding the causal claims, though scope conditions are typically understood analytically (George and Bennett 2005). For instance, scholars may define contexts by way of specific places and periods, such as “the United States between the wars,” or, more generally, such as “rich democratic societies during the period of the rise of welfare states.”

Historical institutionalists are historical also in becoming increasingly sensitive to time order in explanations and to the possibilities of more extensive path dependence (Abbott 1992; Griffin 1992; Pierson 2000; Mahoney and Schenshul 2006). In narrative causal accounts, as opposed to standard variable-based discussions, the timing or “when” something happens in a sequence of events is often key to its influence in processes of major change (Griffin 1992; Sewell 2006). Path dependence is a specific way that time matters. Some key decision or action at a critical juncture or choice point brings about institutions with mechanisms that provide increasing returns to action and self-reinforcing processes (Mahoney 2000; Pierson 2000). To use the social policy example again, once new policies are adopted and new institutions are established around them, such as bureaucracies enforcing the policies and corporations adapting employee benefit programs around them, politics changes (Skocpol 1992) in ways that tend to favor the new policies and disfavor previously plausible alternatives.

Like sociological institutionalists, historical institutionalists relying on path dependent arguments mainly theorize about the ways in which institutions prevent change. In the most extreme versions of path-dependent arguments, ones that produce historical “lock-in” or “self-reproducing sequences” (Mahoney and Schenshul 2006), after a specific set of events some political alternatives are removed from the realm of possibility, and reversing course may be exceedingly difficult. Policies may be “locked in” (Pierson 1996) as political actors and the public reorient their lives significantly around the policy and there are increasing returns surrounding the policy. Thus historical institutionalist arguments relying on path dependent modes of theorizing also tend to focus on the persistence of political processes and outcomes. The possibility of path dependence, or the mechanisms of increasing returns for institutions, means that causes of the rise of these institutions will have a different influence, possibly none at all, once the institutions are established (Pierson 2000; Mahoney 2000). To take a couple

of prominent examples, Skocpol (1992) argues that the structure of U.S. political institutions and the existence of premodern military pensions made it impossible for the United States to adopt comprehensive social policy on the European model despite sometimes similar economic and political pressures to do so. Similarly, Pierson (1996) argues that well-established social programs in the United States and Britain deflected attempts by right-wing regimes to destroy them, whereas others were more easily retrenched.

Unlike sociological institutionalists, however, historical institutionalists rarely emphasize convergence in political processes and outcomes and instead often argue that country-level political or political economic institutions bring enduring differences across countries and over time. For historical institutionalists explaining the differences in large patterns usually involves showing that some structural and systemic political conditions or circumstances hindered a major development in one place and either aided or allowed the development in another, with enduring consequences. The comparisons usually made are contrasts, often comparisons between successful and failed revolutions (Goldstone 2003), successful and failed transitions to democracy (Mahoney 2003), and policy innovations and failures (Amenta 2003). In the more extreme path dependent arguments, as in the case of examining different political/economic welfare capitalist regimes, initial decisions to adopt liberal, conservative, or social democratic regimes (Esping-Andersen 1990) shapes all future possibilities for social politics (Hicks 1999; Swank 2001).

In their more extreme forms, involving historical lock-ins and self-reproducing sequences, path dependent arguments typically rely on the identification of a critical juncture in which the key decisions were made to set the path (Mahoney and Schensul 2006). In this way, historical institutionalists address the issue of institutional change. Historical institutionalist analyses often seek to identify both the critical juncture and the set of causes that determined the path chosen. Hypotheses about critical junctures are closely tied to conjunctural causal analyses in which several conditions may need to occur simultaneously for a major institutional shift. This approach to explanation has an elective affinity to theoretical eclecticism.

Although historical institutionalism's theoretical eclecticism leaves roles open for the influence of ideas and other cultural sorts of arguments in its explanations, these scholars do not devote consistent attention to the role of ideas, whether as causal contributors to the content of policies or to rallying public support for policies. Policy legacies and path dependence may explain the broad contours of the policy forms, but do not address more fine-grained, change-oriented questions about why particular reforms or retrenchments took the forms that they did, or why authorities or publics took up particular concerns or shifted in sentiments (Beland 2005: 13). To address the former question, Beland (2005) draws on the policy streams approach of Kingdon (1995) and "policy learning" theories from political science (Heclo 1974; Hall 1993; Campbell 1998; King and Hansen 1999). The content of new policies is heavily dependent upon the organizational structures of policy production – the national policy domain of state bureaucracies, interest groups, think tanks, academic research institutions, and perhaps social movements that monitor an issue area (cf. Laumann and Knoke 1987; Ricci 1993; Smith 1991), as well as perhaps participating transnational nongovernmental organizations (cf. Boli and Thomas 1997, Ney 2000). The configuration of a national policy domain is itself partly the product of path dependence, congruent with historical institutionalist approaches, and national policy domains in general are constrained by the configuration of national political structures, congruent with political institutionalist approaches (Beland 2005: 8–9, 14).

Beland (2005: 14–15), like Bennett (1991: 223) and Finnemore (1996: 339–340), proposes that research engage in careful tracing of the causal influence of policy paradigms and

of the diffusion of proposals from policy-producing organizations to decision-making authorities. This suggested integration of norms and schemas, drawing from policy learning theories, presumes relatively autonomous, calculative authorities with agency to adjudicate policy decisions – but operating within the bounds of available and feasible analyses and proposals as generated by policy domain actors. At the same time, this integration calls explicit attention to the role of ideas in successfully passing policy changes through the legislative process in a democratic polity. Elected officials and policy-producing advocates must frame policy innovations in such a way as to draw sufficient public support, or to avoid public resistance, and research should consider the success or failure of entrepreneurial framing efforts as a factor in policy change (Campbell 1998; Beland 2005; cf. Clemens and Cook 1999: 457–459). Such framing efforts may require that propositions proceed from causal stories that link causes and effects, as mediated by such institutions as science and law (Stone 1989), or incorporate clear statements of problem, solution, and political action, as mediated by prevailing cultural stocks of normative and causal accounts (Snow and Benford 1988). In contrast, historical institutionalist explanations may leave the process of “selling” innovations to publics vaguely described, whereas sociological institutionalist and policy learning theories discount domestic political and public opinion constraints, positing technocratic, insulated authorities who render policy judgments on the basis of bounded reasoning and norm compliance.

Historical institutionalism is not tied to any one method of analysis, and some of the work specified by historical institutionalists as exemplars combine a wide variety of methodological techniques (Pierson and Skocpol 2002). Some have noted the similarity between the types of theoretical argumentation of historical institutionalists, which is often configurational and multicausal, with the Boolean analytical techniques and algorithms advanced by Ragin (1987, 2000) concerning the analyses of sets. However, historical institutionalists only rarely deploy the types of data sets required to carry out such analyses and often do not have the data-analytical inclination or training to do so (Amenta 2009). If the modal sociological institutionalist analysis is a quantitative journal article, the standard historical institutionalist scholarly product is an historical monograph addressing political developments over time and often across countries. These works generally strategically deploy comparisons or trace historical processes to cast empirical doubt on other possible explanations and to provide further support for their own. This mode of analysis calls attention to large-scale contexts and processes, which often go unnoticed in approaches to data analysis that focus on events surrounding the specific changes under study and do not look at the big picture. It also requires detailed historical knowledge of individual countries and time periods. As its proponents note, historical institutionalism promotes social scientific research on questions and issues that would otherwise be ignored. Historical institutionalist investigations can be undertaken in the absence of the possibility of generating the sorts of data sets typically statistically manipulated in high-profile scholarly articles. Scholars working on issues such as revolutions (Goldstone 2003), democratization (Mahoney 2003), and social policy (Amenta 2003) often will react to one another’s findings and seek to appraise the theories and claims of previous scholars.

This approach has drawn criticism from rational-choice scholars, including sociologists criticizing comparative and historical sociology (Kiser and Hechter 1998). One recurrent claim is that historical institutionalists and comparative and historical sociologists deploy too few cases or empirical instances to make causal claims stick (Lieberson 1992; Goldthorpe 1999). The standard strategy in the most comparative historical designs is to try to address and hold constant as many possible relevant causal factors, known as a “most similar systems” design (Przeworski and Teune 1970). For historical institutionalists, this might mean

comparing country cases or historical sequences that were otherwise similar, but differing on key causal elements. The usual strategy is to break down large country cases into various over-time or within-country comparisons (Amenta 2009). Similarly, arguments have been made that these scholars “select on the dependent variable,” limiting the value of explanations (King et al. 1994). However, examining positive cases is a valid research strategy for explaining unusual occurrences of importance (Ragin 2008; Amenta 2009).

Within the historical institutionalist camp, there is disagreement about how central the role of path dependency might be. The strong version (lock-in and self-reinforcing patterns) suggests that path dependent processes are rare and important, whereas the weak version (contingency matters) suggests that path dependence is ubiquitous, though possibly less influential (Mahoney and Schensul 2006). The strong and rare version seems to have the most support among historical institutionalists, though even among this group there are disagreements. Notably, the idea of “layering” (Thelen 2003) suggests that a series of small and incremental changes, rather than a brief disjuncture in a critical period, may lead to a reinforcing pattern. This idea has been claimed to best describe the development of U.S. social security (Beland 2007), a program that is at the center of many policy debates.

Difficulties in path-dependent theorizing that go beyond internal disputes about the way that history matters, however. Claims about path dependence are typically counterfactual in most analyses. It seems possible that the reason that a given path is not reversed is not that it cannot be reversed, but because there is no concerted attempt to reverse it. The only way to determine an institution’s or policy’s strength would be to subject it to almost constant and varied challenges, which in practice rarely happens. To return to the case of social security, in its formative years it was challenged significantly only occasionally and thus, it is unclear when it was locked in (Amenta 2006, Beland 2007). Also, invoking path dependence may ignore the ways that institutions shape the possibilities for later political contestation. There are many potential processes that may be involved in path dependence.

Historical institutionalists are not often content to explain a large part of the variance in their cases, as quantitative investigators are content to do, but often want to explain all of it (see Ragin 1987). This task usually involves some theorizing at the meso level of political organization, often involving with the interaction of politically active groups with state bureaucrats and other actors, or some combination of theorizing at the macro and meso levels. The causal argumentation sometimes gets quite detailed at the organizational level. In the bid to explain all the variance, sometimes elements from other theoretical perspectives are added, and sometimes strictly contingent elements are brought into account. Historicist explanations are often considered to have accidental causes (Stinchcombe 1968).

Other problems result from the fact that historical institutionalists are a coalition of scholars employing like-minded approaches rather than advancing a specific type of theory. Historical institutionalists will delve into issues and questions for which it is not possible to generate the sort of data sets required for standard multivariate analyses and thus, much of what is known about some subjects is provided by historical social scientists (Pierson and Skocpol 2002). Yet this process seems likely to result in intellectual cumulation only under unusual circumstances (Mahoney 2003), such as individual scholars pursuing a series of related investigations under the guidance of the same advisor. Probably, the best situation for making intellectual progress is to have larger-N studies in dialogue with small-N historical studies, with opposing theoretical camps making differing empirical claims. Historical research can appraise the mechanisms in these claims and find variance in larger statistical patterns. If there is contention among theories about these patterns, historical analyses can clarify and adjudicate among them (see Amenta 2003; Kiser and Pfaff this volume).

Another problem to be addressed is that historical institutionalists, for all their metatheoretical and historical sophistication, do not frequently bid to theorize beyond the cases and time periods of interest and do not set analytical scope conditions around claims. Similarly, their configurational causal claims are not always sorted for prominence or portability. Generally speaking, the form of the argument in historical institutional analyses is that certain combinations of variables or conditions have specific effects within a given overarching context; it seems worth attempting to speculate theoretically about these relationships beyond the cases and time periods analyzed. This theorizing would mean thinking through the impact of the contexts and whether the combination of variables or conditions would be likely to have implications in many situations or few, and what they might be.

POLITICAL INSTITUTIONALISM

Political institutional theorizing is the most prevalent mode of theorizing among historical institutionalists. Scholars have generally employed the Tocquevillian argument about states in an explanatory way and have added further argumentation concerning the construction of other large-scale political institutions, including political party systems (Skocpol 1985). In the hands of some theorists, the arguments became more structural and systemic, with long-standing political institutions influencing all groups and having major influence over outcomes of interest. In the hands of others, political institutionalism has become more historical and focused on historical processes, and focuses theoretical attention on the interaction of actors at a medium-systemic, interorganizational, or meso level. These actors are seen as working within institutional constraints, as well as with constraints on resources and other means of action, and attempting to influence state policy. Changes in state policies in turn set processes in motion that influence the interests and strategies of actors that will determine whether programs will feed back in a way that strengthens the program or undermines it or leaves it open to changes at a later time. The main theoretical framework is that macrolevel political institutions shape politics and political actors, who act under constraints that may influence their impact on states and policies, refashioning political institutions in the process, and so on.

These scholars have institutional homes and allegiances in some ways similar to those of the historical institutionalists. In political science, most are in the areas of comparative politics and the American politics subfield American political development, and the APSA section on Politics and History. In sociology, political institutionalists can be found mainly in the ASA sections of Political Sociology and Collective Behavior/Social Movements. Most of the political institutional political scientists study social policy (Amenta et al. 2001). Most of the sociologists study revolutions (Goldstone 2003), the political consequences of social movements (Amenta and Caren 2004; Jenkins and Form 2005), or the impact of political opportunity structures on movements (Kriesi 2004; Meyer and Minkoff 2004).

In the post-World War II period, many comparative sociologists and political scientists, notably Reinhard Bendix, Barrington Moore, Samuel Huntington, Seymour Martin Lipset, Stein Rokkan, Juan Linz, Shmuel Eisenstadt, and Charles Tilly, paid close attention to state processes and provided analyses that might be deemed nowadays as state-centered, but often viewed and referred to states through the conceptual tools of dominant perspectives, such as social systems concepts pioneered by Talcott Parsons (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), or views of “modernization” (Huntington 1968). Tilly (1975) notably addressed “state-building” and asked why “national states” came to predominate in Europe rather than other state-like and protostate political organizations, arguing that state-led processes of war-making led to the

expansion of states and victory the form. Skocpol (1979) argued that states, understood in the Weberian way, were crucial in explaining revolutions.

In U.S. social science, however, self-consciously statist and state-centered analyses were developed mainly in the late 1970s and 1980s, largely in reaction to other conceptual constructions and theoretical arguments. A focal point of this shift in attention was the volume by Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol (1985), *Bringing the State Back In*. Skocpol's introduction was a kind of statist manifesto, combining and harnessing current ideas to a theoretical and research program and call to academic action that placed states at the center of political analysis. Skocpol criticized pluralist and Marxist perspectives as treating states chiefly as arenas, neutral or slanted, in which political conflicts took place. Pluralists tended to see this arena as largely neutral, one in which all manner of interest groups and citizens could participate and contend, but with some advantages being held by elected officials. Marxists tended to see the arena as one in which classes battled, with a tremendous home-field advantage for capitalists, or, alternatively, as the "capitalist state" serving the function of reproducing and legitimating capitalism, suggesting they had little variation after the rise of capitalism and little importance before then.

Skocpol's (1985) call was for scholars to embrace a Weberian understanding of states – as sets of political organizations that exerted control over territory and people and engaged in legislative, executive, military, and policing activities (see review in Amenta 2005). States hold a monopoly on legitimate violence and seek to maintain order, extracting resources from their populations and often seeking territorial expansion. States were sets of organizations but with unique political functions, missions, responsibilities, and roles, structuring relationships between political authority and citizens or subjects and social relations among different groups of citizens or subjects and interacting with other states. States engaged in lines of action known as state policy. Historically states have been structured in ways other than the today's prominent nation-state, have operated in economic contexts other than industrial capitalist ones, and have been only variably subject to democratic forces.

State-centered scholars, however, went beyond the conceptual shift about the subject matter to claim that states were crucial causal forces in politics as well. The widest break with other theoretical perspectives concerned the causal influence of state institutions on political life – what Skocpol (1985) calls a "Tocquevillian" conception of states or what Goodwin (2001) calls a "state-constructionist" conception. State institutions might be configured in different ways for any number of reasons, including historical accidents of geography, results of wars, constitutional conventions, or uneven processes of political, economic, bureaucratic, and intellectual development. But whatever the reason for their adoption or genesis, these political arrangements would have fundamental influence on political patterns and processes over new issues that might emerge, particularly those concerning industrial capitalism. This line of argument was in line with criticisms of standard views of political power (Lukes 1974), suggesting that political institutions would influence the political battles that were likely to take place as well as the groups that might win political battles.

Arguments about the causal role of state political institutions also implied a more fundamental difference with other theories of politics, in that state political institutions were posited to have key impacts on the political identities, interests, preferences and strategies of groups (see review in Amenta 2005). Political identities, organization, and action were not things that could be read off market or other relationships, but were influenced by political contexts. Even if political identities were largely similar for a category of people across different places, political institutional arrangements might encourage some lines of political action and organization by this group across polities or time and discourage others and thus shape political group formation.

In short, the political institutional theory rejected arguments that landowners or workers or experts or ethnic minorities would take similar forms and make similar demands in all capitalist societies; instead their political identities and organization would depend on political institutional situations.

Many macrolevel political institutional conditions might shape broad patterns of domestic politics. Overall authority in state political institutions might be centralized or decentralized. The legislative, executive, judicial, policing and other governmental functions within given political authorities might be located within sets of organizations or spread among different ones, each with their own autonomy and operating procedures. Politics might differ greatly in type, depending on the degree to which state rulers had “despotic power,” to use Mann’s (1986) distinction, or power “over” others (Lukes 1974). State political institutions were subject to different levels and paces of democratization and political rights among subjects and citizens. Once democratized politics were subject to different and consequential electoral rules governing the selection of political officials. States executive organizations were also subject to different levels and paces of bureaucratization and professionalization. Each of these processes might fundamentally influence political life.

The other main line of argumentation, second in ultimate importance, was that states mattered as actors. State actors were understood organizationally, largely in a resource-dependence way. As organizations, different parts of states might have greater or lesser degrees of autonomy and different capacities. The autonomy of states or parts thereof was defined as their ability to define independent lines of action. State capacities were defined as the ability to carry out lines of action, along the lines of Mann’s (1986) “infrastructural power” (Skocpol 1985). The ideas of state autonomy and capacity brought into the discussion the “power to” do something, without neglecting “power over,” on which political scientists and sociologists had focused (Lukes 1974). These differences in state autonomy and capacity in executive bureaucracies were argued as being important in explaining the political outcomes across times and places.

The initial state-centered theoretical program has evolved into a political-institutional one over the last decade or so (see Amenta 2005). Scholars have generally employed the Tocquevillian argument about states in an explanatory way and have added further argumentation concerning the construction of other large-scale political institutions, including political party systems. In the hands of some theorists, the arguments became more structural and systemic, with long-standing political institutions influencing all groups and having major influence over outcomes of interest. In the hands of others, political institutionalism has become more historical and focused on historical processes. Here, scholars continue to argue that political institutions fundamentally influence political life, but focus theoretical attention on the interaction of actors at a medium-systemic, interorganizational, or meso level. These actors are seen as working within institutional constraints, as well as with constraints on resources and other means of action, and attempt to influence state policy. Changes in state policies in turn set processes in motion that influence the interests and strategies of actors that will determine whether programs will feed back in a way that strengthens the program or undermines it or leaves it open to changes at a later time. The main theoretical framework is that macrolevel political institutions shape politics and political actors, who act under constraints that may influence their impact on states and policies, refashioning political institutions in the process, and so on.

Structural, macrosystemic political institutional explanations, like sociological institutionalist accounts, attribute political organization and policy consequences to parsimonious distillations of top-down processes. Goodwin’s (2001) theory of Third World revolutions, for

example, seeks to explain variation both in the occurrence of revolutionary mobilization and in revolutionaries' success or failure in overthrowing regimes. Goodwin's answer is that revolutions tended to mobilize in response to especially closed authoritarian regimes, those that did not even offer limited opportunities for political inclusion. A successful revolutionary coup was also most likely under particular institutional conditions: direct rule by a patrimonial or colonial regime, under which constrained capitalists and landowners had incentive to ally themselves with revolutionaries and under which militaries were least competent to defeat rebellions. Similarly, Steinmo's (1993) explanation for differences in tax policies in the United States, Britain, and Sweden attributed policy forms and stability to the structure of the state's legislative institutions: the distribution of political authority, in combination with the incentives and strategies it imposes on political actors, accounted for broad patterns of taxation. These arguments are not deterministic, in that they argue broad patterns and susceptibilities and allow for agency by authorities and political actors rather than attempt to explain all cases with purely structural causes. In their focus on political institutional structures, however, they do leave undertheorized possible causal influence from domestic political organizations.

Historical, mesoorganizational political institutional explanations, in contrast, attribute political organization and policy consequences to interactions between top-down political institutions and bottom-up mobilization. Skocpol (1992) in this way, offered an explanation for why the United States, unlike other states, developed a veterans' benefits program during the late nineteenth century and a benefits program for women during the early twentieth century rather than establish broader social insurance for male workers. Political institutions in Skocpol's account, as with more structural, systemic theories, are paramount: the comparatively early democratization and comparatively late bureaucratization of the United States resulted in incentives for political parties and elected officials to innovate policies around patronage rather than, as in other states, from elaborated prescriptive programs. Skocpol also argued, though, that political institutions also structured political organization and strategies, which in turn influenced policy paths. Early democratization in the United States similarly incentivized mobilization on behalf of the politically excluded rather than workers, who did not have to collectively organize to gain the vote, but instead among women seeking suffrage and social supports. Mobilized groups with the greatest leverage in the U.S. electoral system in Skocpol's account are "widespread federated interests" advocating on behalf of constituencies spanning many legislative districts, such as women and veterans. Policy development as a partial consequence of mobilization, in turn, imposes an evolution of incentives for elected officials and political actors, producing changes in the population and strategies of authorities and organizations.

Similar connections between political institutions and mesolevel political actors are made in the literature on the political consequences of social movements. Notably, "political mediation" arguments (Piven and Cloward 1977; Lipset and Marks 2000; Amenta 2006) hold that the collective action of challengers is mediated through political institutions. In a democratic political system, mobilized challengers' action is more likely to produce results when institutional political actors see benefit in aiding the group the challenger represents (Almeida and Stearns 1998). To secure new benefits, challengers will typically need help or complementary action from like-minded state actors and thus need to engage in collective action that changes the calculations of institutional political actors, such as elected officials and state bureaucrats, and need to adopt organizational forms and strategic action that fit political circumstances. Lipset and Marks (2000) argue that the failure of socialist movements in the United States resulted from a combination of difficult systemic political conditions for the establishment of new parties and inappropriate strategies. Other scholars argue that particular strategies work

best in the U.S. political context (Bernstein 2001; Szymanski 2003). Recent work has sought to make and test claims about the influence of different strategies in different political contexts (Kriesi et al. 1995; Cress and Snow 2000; Ingram and Rao 2004; Linders 2004; Soule and Olzak 2004; McCammon et al. 2008).

Political institutional theorizing, like historical institutionalist work, is derived from small- and medium-N studies of delimited places and times. This has been a largely inductive, theory-building rather than theory-testing, approach. Consequently, the nascent political institutional project is at a risk of both theoretical inconsistency, to the extent that researchers identify differing institutional arrangements of interest, as well as of mutual incomparability, to the extent that researchers remain reticent to develop their findings' applicability to populations of cases beyond those from which they derived their explanations, or to set analytical scope conditions on theoretical claims.

Scholars undertaking structural and systemic explanations have argued that particular characteristics of a state's political system influence political processes, but different studies have focused on different system characteristics. For instance, Skocpol (1992) emphasizes the democratization and federalism of the polity, whereas Steinmo (1993) studies the division of authority in national legislative bodies. Numerous avenues of argument may be possible for similar types of political unit, but, even if generalized to address larger categories of cases, a proliferation of middle-range theories to explain different phenomena with different institutional causes as researchers take on disparate puzzles or stake out idiosyncratic bailiwicks is not conducive in the long term to a productive research program (Amenta 2003: 114–117).

Political institutional research projects also rarely advance arguments intended to be applicable to cases beyond those examined and explained in a monograph. Steinmo (1993), for example, does not follow his comparison of his three cases with broader conceptualizations or expectations across similar cases, nor does Skocpol (1992) develop her broad institutional arguments about the United States for appraisal against other polities. Occasional studies do examine populations of cases, notably Goodwin's (2001) analysis of Third World revolutions and Ertman's (1997) assessment of European nation-state formation, but such efforts have tended to proceed simply from the researcher's knowledge of many cases rather than explicit attempts to generalize theoretical propositions beyond the well-understood stock. To develop a more coherent body of theoretical propositions, with greater possibilities for cumulation, scholars should set forth what their cases are cases of (Ragin and Becker 1992) and work through the implications of their case-specific arguments to develop middle-range arguments for similar polities and circumstances.

To move from research framework to better developed theory, integrative efforts must accompany small-N historical social science. An attainable refinement for political institutional theorizing would be for scholars to develop explanations for salient categories of countries rather than scant handfuls of country cases, such as for democracies, capitalist democracies, liberal welfare states, or Third World countries. Subsequent scholars, thus working with middle-range theories proper rather than merely a legacy of narrow exemplars, would be better-equipped to use and build upon past work to extend arguments to other cases or improve upon predictions. Wickham-Crowley (1992), in this manner, elaborated a theory of revolutions in Latin America, as did Goodwin (2001) for revolutions in Third World countries and Pierson (1994) for welfare state retrenchment in late twentieth century capitalist democracies. A similar approach could employ time periods or processes, developing arguments applicable across multiple eras with comparable relevant characteristics, or across processes (e.g., welfare state expansion vs. retrenchment, Amenta 2003) rather than illuminating only a single era.

The development of such middle-range political institutional theories, following the recommendations of Przeworski and Teune (1970), could be facilitated in one way by theorizing in terms of Boolean combinations of independent variables (Ragin 1987, 2000). First, the researcher would develop structural-systemic hypotheses about which types of political institutions are likely to cause particular configurations of state agencies and political organization. Second, from this basis the researcher would develop feedback hypotheses positing which consequence paths are likely to result from which combinations of political institution, political organization, and activity. Amenta (1998) takes such an approach toward explaining the development of U.S. social policy compared to Britain: while case specific, the resultant claims are sufficiently broad to be relevant for other cases.

CONCLUSION

Institutional arguments are not about aggregations of individual action, but higher-order factors above the individual level that influence political processes and outcomes and tend to produce regular patterns or stasis. Of the three varieties reviewed, sociological institutionalism is a species of organizational theory and essentially a cultural theory. It treats states and other organized political actors largely like other organizations, providing a broad cultural theoretical perspective on organizations and thus politics; the theory focuses on the diffusion of ideas and other cultural forms, as organizations search for legitimacy. This way of examining political behavior and processes typically seeks to explain similarities among institutional forms and policies and typically refers to issues surrounding the development of public policy as the “diffusion” of forms and policies, often through the mediating influence of organizations that are international in scope. Standard research in this vein includes quantitative articles deploying event history or time series analyses of the diffusion of a policy form or innovation.

By contrast, historical institutionalism is a way of engaging in social science unconnected to a particular theoretical project. Instead, historical institutionalists focus on posing macropolitical empirical puzzles and deploy comparative and historical analytical and other varied research strategies to address them. Although institutions are at the center of historical institutionalist explanations, institutional structures of different sorts appear in these explanations. However, historical institutionalism has metatheoretical strictures on the nature of causation. Causation is presumed to be multiple, conjunctural, and reliant on time order. The standard product of a historical institutional investigation is a historical and often comparative monograph examining one or a small number of country cases. Historical institutionalists are mainly situated in political science and although they formed mainly in opposition to rational choice scholarship in political science, they constitute a less self-conscious academic grouping than the sociological institutionalists. That is due to the fact that historical institutionalists are more in agreement on approach and method than on theoretical stance. Although no preference is given to any specific institutional theory, historical institutionalists tend to see political institutions as being distinctive and influential and far more than sociological institutionalists are concerned with issues of power. Although many historical institutionalists rely on political institutional theorizing, the overlap between camps is far from complete. Historical institutionalists may instead rely on economic or social institutions in their theoretical argumentation.

Political institutionalism has not been as frequently discussed or identified as a school of institutionalism, but has been prominent since the 1980s, beginning its life as “state-centered”

theory. Like the new institutionalism in organizations, political institutionalism is a type of theorizing, one that addresses power explicitly and emphasizes the causal role of political institutions on political outcomes and processes. Scholars working from this perspective initially relied on state structures and actors in their explanations in reaction to Marxist and pluralist accounts of politics that tended to view the state as an area and attributed causal roles in politics to organized groups and capitalists and workers. The political institutionalists that followed tended to focus more on the systemic and structural aspects of states and political party systems and the manner of their organization in constructing causal arguments, notably that these political institutions shape the political identities, interests, and strategies of politically mobilized groups.

As research programs, sociological, historical, and political institutionalism face theoretical challenges deriving from their contrasting positions on theorizing and research. Historical and political institutionalist theorizing to date has proceeded with an excess of reticence, rarely venturing outside small-N studies' bounds of place and time to develop more general explanations applicable or transportable to populations of cases across wider eras. For some political developments and eras of particular interest, such as comparative welfare state formation, small communities of specialists have engaged with one another to refine historically delineated theories, but for more idiosyncratic puzzles scholars share mostly just a common toolkit of methods and approaches. Although historical and political institutionalist scholarship provides much of our existing knowledge about political processes and outcomes occurring in times and places in the past, it is often a body of disparate, in-depth historical case studies, examining narrow bands of space and time, providing explanations, but rarely theorizing beyond the boundaries of the cases at hand.

Sociological institutionalist theorizing, in contrast, has proceeded with perhaps an excess of boldness, proposing overarching, encompassing explanations while rarely venturing into in-depth historiographic studies of cases. Scholars can draw from a range of illustrative policy examples, such as education standards and environmental treaties, but use cases mostly just as examples or as interchangeable testing grounds for specific propositions rather than addressing combinations of factors that could mediate or counter systemic processes. Sociological institutionalist scholarship is historiographically slight, comprising large-n quantitative analyses covering broad ranges of space and time. Practitioners refer back to a few, seminal paradigmatic statements positing a few discrete mechanisms intended to be applicable across many units and policy forms. Theoretical reformulations and refinements are few.

Historical and political institutionalisms have developed along a different theoretical track than sociological institutionalism partially because the two sets of institutionalisms also tend to address different empirical grounds in both subject of study and case selection. Historical and political institutionalists predominantly address political developments and policies that are consequential in terms of resources and fundamental power arrangements; these issues inevitably attract the attention of the most powerful decision-making structures of a state and its most influential internal political actors. Sociological institutionalist studies, in contrast, are predominantly explanations for policies of less game-changing import, for which delegation to an increasingly globally interconnected civil society is unlikely to result in major reallocations of state resources or group interests. Similarly, the need for legitimacy is typically greater in more newly minted states at power deficits with societies at a low level of resources and thus may account for the usefulness of sociological institutionalist analyses across all cases. Positing and evaluating various empirical boundaries to these camps may be useful in charting frontiers for theoretically reticent historical and

political institutionalist scholarship to explore, while at the same time grounding the sweeping propositions of sociological institutionalism within a more defensible range of circumstances. Additionally, with a sense of the boundaries comes the expectation of the study of more exciting, theory-advancing, boundary-spanning cases to see just how far the claims of each tradition may go.

Institutionalist approaches would also benefit from a cross-fertilization of research methods. Sociological institutionalist research that undertakes an in-depth analysis of primary source documents, demonstrating and tracing the constitutive influence of global civil society organizations on state-level conceptualizations of policy goals and means, would shore up the claims for which statistical analyses of secondary data have been only partly convincing. Historical and political institutionalist research that applies more rigorous statistical tests to more precisely formulated explanatory claims, analyzing more ambitious sets of data, would shore up explanations whose particularistic scope has consigned them to a frequently marginal status in sociological and political theorizing and research.

Moreover, sociological institutionalism's emphasis on cultural explanations, whether cognitive or normative, is not inherently incompatible with the current trajectories of historical and political institutionalist work, nor does this emphasis necessarily require a paradigmatically unique theoretical apparatus. Historical and political institutionalist scholars interested in continuing to explore and assess post-Marxian conceptualizations of political rationality (Adams et al. 2005: 36–37) might take cues from sociological institutionalism. One way would be to disaggregate cognitively bounded or legitimacy-constituted path dependence from the ways policy decisions and governmental structures render some subsequent policy options far more feasible than others, as well as from the material incentives to constituencies and advocacy organizations that are imposed by prior policies' allocations of collective goods. Sociological institutionalist scholars interested in explaining transnational convergences, similarly, might take a cue from historical and political institutionalism and more explicitly examine how prior global political reconfigurations and economic structures render certain world policies far more palatable to nation-states than others, and render certain kinds of organizational carriers far more tolerable to nation-states than others.

Practitioners in these fields could take cues from one another to venture into a more epistemologically defensible middle ground, one informed both by case histories that exemplify broader sets and by mechanism-minded theories that have analytical scope conditions and falsifiable propositions. Institutional scholar of all stripes face the shared challenge of allowing themselves to be wrong. For any political puzzle a historical or political institutionalist scholar may postulate *some* kind of solution, but the solution can be either unique to its cases or illustrative of wider structural processes. For any example of occasionally punctuated isomorphic stability, a sociological institutionalist scholar may postulate *some* kind of shared cultural paradigm, but the paradigm can be either sustainable only at the level of broad-brush statistical analyses or specified and bounded well enough to survive contact with history. What makes a research program durable does not necessarily generate cumulative knowledge. The challenge is to step boldly into an uncertain future.

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