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**James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen (2010) *Explaining institutional change: ambiguity, agency and power*, Cambridge University Press**

Within the historical institutionalism tradition there are two broad approaches on when (timing) and how (mechanisms) institutional change unfolds. On the one hand, Pierson (1994) puts emphasis on path continuity and 'positive feedback' processes that allow certain institutional arrangements to 'lock in' policy interests, explaining therefore why institutions retain their path even during times of shifting power asymmetries. For Pierson (2004) what allows institutional change to occur is the eruption of 'critical junctures' that allow previously neglected causal chains to gain strength at moments of institutional uncertainty. While not dismissing the effects of exogenous pressure, the late historical institutionalism literature highlights that change could also be provoked internally through actors' political contestation (Streeck and Thelen 2005). This edited volume contributes to this discussion and attempts to provide a theory of institutional change. It claims to do so by focusing on ambiguity, agency and power.

The volume contains a lengthy introduction, written by the two editors, which aim to introduce a theory of institutional change, and it is followed by 5 (five) case studies and a concluding chapter by Peter Hall. In the introduction, Thelen and Mahoney aim to provide a heuristic tool for explaining patterns of institutional change based on two key parameters: namely political context and institutional characteristics. In the first case, institutions once established are realised as 'distributional instruments laden with power implications' (p.8) for agents, either due to intended or unintended consequences of action. Authors highlight that institutional continuity and stability require ongoing mobilisation of political support that is endangered either due conflicts over the allocation of resources or due to the challenges that other institutional distributions create.

The other parameter focuses on compliance as a variable of institutional change. Institutions confer certain expectations to agents, who act accordingly and expect that noncompliance will result into costs. However, these norms are not solid (as sociological institutionalism literature suggests) as there is a continuous struggle over the interpretation and the enforcement of these rules. In this struggle, resource allocation provides advantages and disadvantages to actors (e.g. capacity to negotiate complex rules). Essentially the key insight here is 'that institutions contain within them the possibility of change and what *animates* change is the power-distributional implications of institutions' (p.21). Based on these two parameters and the previous literature on modes of institutional change the editors provide a typology of explaining patterns of institutional change.

The typology is based on the characteristics of the political context and the targeted institution which produce a type of dominant agent. The political system variable is reduced in two categories of strong or weak veto possibilities. The characteristics of the targeted institution are realised by low or high level of discretion in interpretation and enforcement of rules and norms. By creating a two by two (2 x 2)

table, the authors link each mode of institutional change with a specific type of agent. For example, a political context with weak veto points and an institution with low level of enforcement will advantage 'insurrectionaries' that seek to displace existing institutions while in the same political context with high level of institutional enforcement 'opportunists' are expected to convert the institution towards a different aim. In a political context with strong veto points and an institution with low level of enforcement, 'subversives' are expected to emerge and work within the system to achieve their goals. And finally within a political context with strong veto possibilities and with an institutional high level of discretion, is expected to produce 'parasitic symbionts' who support institutional continuity, for their own private gain.

This typology does not become as heuristic as the authors argue, since two of the contributors (Jacobs, Sheingate) in this volume hardly touch upon this typology. Still, each contributor highlights the importance of incremental, endogenous changes that unfold over time that is only exacerbated but not explained, by exogenous pressures. The other major common thread across all contributors are that institutions should not be realised as static but rather as dynamic and contested process that produce rules and distribute resources, which under certain circumstances can be challenged. Both editors, as well as all contributors therefore focus on the plasticity rather than the solidity of institutions (as Pierson would suggest), and argue that power distribution is of key importance for their continuity and change. In my opinion, this insight is moving institutional theory towards the right direction, but poses two key challenges that this volume does not, in my opinion adequately, address.

First, this theoretical attempt lacks any theorisation on 'power', a subtitle of this volume, either by the editors or the contributors. Without expanding this point, there different aspects of power discussed in this volume, depending on the position of each agent (compare Suharto with the 'sanitarista movement'). Second, there is no clear definition what constitutes a change. For example, if an institution (pension system) is not addressing the shifts in the socio-economic context then as Hacker (2004) argues there is an 'institutional drift'. However at the same time in this volume, the chapter by Jacobs regards as institutional change the reforms that US Social Security system had to go through in order to cope with striking changes in economic growth (stagflation) during the 1980s (lowering benefits, increasing contributions). Is there a point in naming this type of change, e.g. an 'institutional update'? And does it really provide any additional analytical insight to agents' interests and strategies? The problem in this theoretical attempt is that a certain institutional context is expected to produce or is expected to witness the emergence of these 'change-agents'. By doing so, the typology is acquiring a functionalist overview of institutional development, that focuses more on context and less so in the strategies that actors' themselves employ, their ideas, and policy alternatives. There are many cases throughout history where the time was right but actors lacked a concrete proposal to overcome the status quo. In my opinion, a focus towards opposing actors' strategies, alternative policies and more importantly the struggle

over implementing these changes and the battle of ideas (see Blyth 2003) is essential to understand agents' power struggle (see Thelen 2003). Towards this aim, the use of resources as a proxy to capture 'change-agents' ability to shape the direction of institutional change needs further clarifications (see Korpi 2001).

In the second chapter, Falleti explores the Brazilian health care system and attempts to explain the paradox of institutionalising a universal public health care system where private sector was prominent. Falleti argues that while the private sector fiercely blocked all attempts at the federal level, the 'sanitarista movement', predominantly a left-wing group of doctors and physicians, was able to slowly and incrementally infiltrate local administrative posts in the North and poorer regions. The political context of federalism transferred resources to local governments, and through concentrated actions, this 'subversive elite' in alliance with local governments managed to institutionalise a preventive public local health care program. The success and popularity of these local programs extended their appeal beyond the Northern regions and paved the way for a public national universal health care system. Falleti provides an interesting account of these changes but the original puzzle is actually not resolved, since the author admits that in the Northern regions there was a lack of private plans. In line with the author's argument, a comment on whether (or not) the democratisation attempts were (or not) linked with the demand for a public health care system would have been of analytical interest.

In the third chapter, Onoma explores the land documentation system in Kenya to challenge the expectation that property rights will create positive feedback effects to land owners. The author identifies that the demise of the land documentation system enacted with 'parasitic symbionts' (sic) that exchanged land documentation with no corresponding ownership titles. Despite the revealing of these fraudulent actions, major political contesters utilised this strategy to raise money for their political campaigns and also politically blackmail the electorate. The outcome of these institutional manipulations was the eventual demise of the land documentation system and a straightforward challenge to property rights. Surprisingly perhaps, Onoma does not touch upon the literacy levels of the population and the lack of any social justice mechanisms or actors' (native or colonial) to defend property rights and/or the electorate.

In the fourth chapter, Jacobs discusses the development of the US Social Security system and shows that its implementation by the Roosevelt administration was an outcome of political compromises and coalitional dynamics. The author argues that this program should be realised as a programmatic institution that 'constrains future policy options from which officeholders choose in the future' (p.99) and in this case, it was the funding mechanism of wage contributions that would place certain constraints to future officeholders. The program, despite not satisfying interest groups within the liberal left and conservative right, survived all the pressures and adjusted to the demands of shifting socio-economic conditions. The author shows that since its enactment in 1935 until the economic crisis in the 1970s

and the coming of neoliberalism in the 1980s, the program went through significant policy subject to the shifting power imbalances that weakened the electoral support for the scheme.

The fifth chapter explores the development of the authoritarian regime of Suharto in Indonesia and the mechanisms he employed to challenge the power of the army officials. Slater follows a historical narrative and shows how Suharto managed to exploit the tensions and conflicts between the army and the emerging classes to create an institutional balance of power in his favour. The author shows that since Suharto was not able to immediately dominate the strongest political organisation in Indonesia, which was controlled by army officials (ABRI), he enacted the 'civilianisation' of public life in order to create a counter-weight for the army through a new political party (Golkar). Slater realises Suharto 'civilianisation' tactics as an institutional layering that aim at the weakening of the army officials. The author argues that when Golkar dominated the political landscape, at that moment Suharto converted an army oligarchy into an autocratic regime. For the author the loss of this institutional balance of power confronted with the Asian crisis in 1997 triggered the end of the Suharto regime. Effectively societal groups (predominantly students) acted as 'subversives' (instead of insurrectionaries) and forged an alliance with the ABRI. The author convincingly argues that both internal and external pressures for change brought the collapse of Suharto's power.

The sixth chapter touches upon the rules and processes within the US Congress (1789 - 1881). Sheingate argues that once rules within the US Congress increased, so did the opportunities to re-interpret them. The author shows how House members and Speakers were able to exploit the contradiction of the rules in ways that created new precedents. Therefore Sheingate argues that struggle over the interpretation of the rules could be the actual struggle (the game itself), with some rules converted to serve different purposes than they originally aimed. The more broaden argument is that institutional complexity provides the opportunity for creativity, as long as there is the ability (or affordability) to navigate through complex laws. The example of how some actors are more privileged to get a well-trained lawyer to get you out of jail, could not be more topical.

To conclude, this volume represents a significant advancement for the theorisation of institutional change and this volume is a must-read for scholars interested in institutional analysis. Peter Hall's concluding chapter, links rational perspectives with historical institutionalism, and provides a promising research direction, worth empirically applied. Scholars interested in public policy analysis and comparative welfare system would gain from the discussion on how institutions distribute unequal resources and are the subject of constant contestation. Certainly, embedding dynamism to institutional development is a step towards a promising direction.

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