

Notes on Roundtable: 'Feminism and Institutionalism: promising synthesis or another case of "master's tools"?'

**1st European Conference on Politics and Gender
Queen's University Belfast
21-23 January 2009**

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We were given 3 questions to think about:

- The contribution of New Institutionalist (NI) approaches to feminist scholarship on political institutions
- The contribution of feminist work to NI understandings of structure and agency
- Is there a feminist institutionalism, and if so what is it, and how can it be operationalised?

I was not sure how to pitch my responses to these questions for this roundtable – whether we would be preaching to the converted with no audience (and given that all the members of the roundtable have already read my piece in *Politics and Gender*) so I did not know whether I needed to rehearse the arguments in there or branch out on the assumption that everyone is already aware of them. In the end I decided to do a bit of both (I was also influenced by reading the comments of the other members of panel).

I am making 3 main arguments:

- 1) I am making a pitch for the usefulness of Historical Institutionalism (HI) to feminist political scientists like myself.
- 2) But I have mixed feelings about whether there is/can/should be a feminist institutionalism and what its role should be.
- 3) I am very interested in the arguments of people like Joni who is posing some provocative questions such as: what is our contribution./relationship to the mainstream and how can we get the mainstream to take our ideas on board?

Points 2 and 3 are very interconnected – my ideas for point 2 are really prompted by thinking about point 3.

- 1) The usefulness of HI to feminist political scientists

This is the subject of my forthcoming piece in *Politics and Gender* – I am not going to say much here as many of arguments in that have also been made very eloquently by Louise Chappell as part of this roundtable. I believe that HI can be a useful TOOL particularly for a feminist comparative politics. But it will not be useful for everyone or every task. And as a set of tools HI needs to be adapted for our own purposes.

HI provides a problem-driven approach that can help us to answer first order questions. So for example questions that pertain to lessening gender inequality, such as how and why does institutional change come about can help us to answer questions such as how and why positive gender change can come about.

Why HI?

It often focuses on real world puzzles – identifying causal mechanisms through structured comparison and historical process tracing. I would argue for a loose version of HI, which can deal with questions of institutional creation, reproduction and change. This kind of approach can help us to explain how particular gender regimes arose, give us insights into how they can be renegotiated and help is to find way round the structure/agency debate.

I have tried to operationalise an HI approach and use HI tools in my own work on transitions to democracy.

I began with a real world puzzle: why do the outcomes of some transitions to democracy seem more positive in gender terms than others? And how do we explain these outcomes?

I used a smallish n of eight third wave transitions from state socialism and authoritarianism and examined causal sequences over a period of twenty to thirty years, seeing the actual transition as a critical juncture. I feel that HI, so one form of institutionalism, does provide a useful set of ideas to help us as feminist political scientists to help us think about the kinds of questions and issues I have outlined.

This brings me to the bigger question – does this mean we want to create a **feminist institutionalism** – rather than simply using some mainstream tools to answer questions that can help us to lessen gender inequality.

2) Perhaps the comments that I am going to make now indicate that maybe I am becoming more agnostic about feminist institutionalism (But that I am also trying to be provocative!).

I think that we need to think very carefully about the differences between a feminist institutionalism and a gendered institutionalism? The implications of everything I have been saying so far is that they are quite different methodologically etc.

But I think we still elide between them without thinking – they are obviously related but also separate – we need to be clear about the differences in our own heads.

Do we want to set up our own separate ‘institutionalism’ which, given the connotations surrounding feminism, means that it will be ENTIRELY ignored by mainstream?

Or do we want to ensure that gender concerns are incorporated more fully into mainstream scholarship?

These arguments mirror some of those put forward in favour of a gendered comparative politics versus a comparative politics of gender – I see a

comparative politics of gender as relevant to some things and as definitely incorporating a feminist agenda - namely that the point of scholarship to understand how we can lessen gender inequality. But a gendered comparative politics is much more connected to mainstream comparative politics.

So is a feminist institutionalism to be a project on its own or will it be only a small part or subset of the overall project of gendered institutionalism?

3) The answers to these questions have big implications for answers to Joni's questions about what it is that we are doing and why? Do we like our ghetto? This reminds me of some of the debates of Latin American feminists of 1980s around autonomy or integration. Or do we have to have autonomy and integration? My view is yes to the latter. But maybe we have to do integration differently to autonomy? If we engage with mainstream about institutionalism does it have to be on different terms to a Feminist Institutionalism? Does it have to be Gendered Institutionalism? My gut feeling is yes – the mainstream is not going to be interested in a feminist agenda – we might think they should be – but they are not. I think that I am quite happy with this notion of a parallel track of two related but different projects and I don't see it as a sell-out or an unacceptable compromise either politically or intellectually.