

Notes from 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 2008**

**Thoughts on feminist institutionalism so far
Professor Joni Lovenduski
Birkbeck College
University of London
j.lovenduski@bbk.ac.uk**

At the time that I wrote the annual review essay 'Gendering Research in Political Science', I was impressed with where feminist political science had got to and was optimistic about where it was going. (Lovenduski 1998) Mostly that was justified but I now think I underestimated how much needed to be done to establish the discipline and how much the mainstream of political science/studies was changing and fragmenting. Probably the most important change is the preoccupation with research design signalled by the publication of KKV in 1994 (King 1994), but fragmentation itself has been an important change. One feature of fragmentation is the separation of much of feminist political science from other strands in the disciplines that make it up. While really good research was being and continues to be done, the promise of institutionalism remains elusive. If I were writing that essay today I would probably have more to say about the place of quantitative research, mixed method research and research design per se. I would be less optimistic about the potential for a feminist driven paradigm shift.

Main questions

What does institutionalism (in its various forms) offer us?

Is anybody listening? Should we care?

Whither feminist institutionalism? Do we need new questions?

What does institutionalism (in its various forms) offer us?

Broadly agree with the arguments of Louise Chappell, Fiona Mackay, Georgina Waylen *et al* in the forthcoming special issue of *Politics & Gender*, and in notes, that it offers a useful conceptual tool kit, a general approach that can contain either or both of both qualitative and quantitative research designs and can provide a useful frame for cultural studies derived approaches. Crucially its use must be systematic and explicit. Is not enough to do some description, assume it is NI and let it speak for itself.

While I support the contention that institutionalism does its best work in comparative research which has real potential for theory building, I nevertheless see a lot of value in case study work on single sites, events etc., for all the good reasons about why to do case studies that have emerged in recent literature. (see for example David Collier, John Gerring, Charles Ragin¹)

We also need to think about where we are going with our use of institutional approaches. I think we want to contribute to theory building, to get beyond the description stage to the understanding of gendered patterns and associations and their gendered effects. The gendered nature of institutions is a foundational object of our study. I can see in recent studies such as those by Fiona Mackay and Louise Chappell some real progress here, but more evidence is needed on more cases. We may also need to extend our reach beyond historical institutionalism where we are mostly concentrated to take up some aspects of sociological institutionalism - neo Durkheimian Institutionalism as it is sometimes called. I am thinking here particularly of the work of Mary Douglas – especially her essays on *How Institutions Think* which provides the wherewithal to analyse the establishment and maintenance of particular cultures and their associated patterns of cognition in social organisations. Many of us already draw on organisational sociology so this not such a huge step.(Connell 1987; Cockburn 1991; Savage 1992)

Is anybody listening? Should we care?

¹ Ragin, C. C. (1987). The Comparative Method Berkely and Los Angeles, University of California Press, King, G., Keohane, Robert O, Verba Sidney (1994). Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research. Princeton N.J., Princeton University Press, Gerring, J. (2007). Case Study Research: Principles and Practice. New York, Cambridge University Press.

The way that most research in politics ignores the work of FPS is as remarkable as it is insulting. It is made easier by the above mentioned fragmentation of the field but even so, the refusal of the main gatekeepers to let us out of the academic ghetto has been consistent for the 40 years since the WLM emerged. Of course we could argue that at least we now *have* a ghetto, and quite a lively one it is too – but without engaging the rest of the discipline we risk irrelevance, talking only to each other, asking only the questions we develop in such dialogue, but not keeping up with a broader research agenda which we also do not influence. Moreover, there is some evidence that we like our ghetto and would not wish to let anyone else influence our agenda. Just look at the references in our journals and check who we cite. An example is in the study of political representation where it is rare to find engagement with new research in the field other than our own. I have a fear that the same thing may be happening with institutionalism - while it is certainly the case that the mainstream institutionalists have not engaged with our work, nor have we contested much of theirs. While we have kept up with Pierson (Pierson 2004) (not least because he once paid attention to us (Pierson 1996)) and Thelen (Thelen 2004), where is our input into the varieties of capitalism literature? (Soskice and Hall (Hall 2001) and their many challengers and followers) What have we to say about evolutionary theory? See Steinmo and Lewis ((Lewis)) Where are our detailed investigations of public policies? ((Immergut 1992; Immergut 2007)) Interpretivism? ((Bevir 2003) There is a danger that mainstream institutionalism(s) is/are going to develop without us again while we are still trying to place ourselves in debates of the 1980s and 1990s that have long since moved on. Sometime soon we have to decide if we want to re-engage – I am convinced that we have no choice.

Whither feminist institutionalism? Do we need new questions?

While we certainly need more empirical research, we already have a lot. There is a considerable, though very incomplete body of work on elections, voting and political parties, a substantial corpus on women's policy agencies, some primary work on the internal dynamics of international organisations, numerous studies of the welfare state and a growing body of work on aspects of national legislatures, a lot of work on the USA,

less on everywhere else. While we do not typically examine social movements as institutions, we now do know quite a lot about them. However, we lack detailed studies of public administration, cabinets, the political executive, policymaking but the mainstream agenda features an ever growing interest in these.

Is there a case now to interrogate this literature and perhaps revisit the research with a set of questions drawn from institutionalism? What would those questions be? What research should we be conducting? I can't provide answers but I have some thoughts on what we need to consider when formulating them. This is what I would like to be putting into my research designs in the future.

1. Keep gender as an independent variable. In other words don't start with gender. Our research should aim to determine how things 'are' or are thought to be and consider this in conjunction with how they are gendered. We can draw here on the idea of indirect discrimination which is very useful in the study of institutional biases. How does parliament determine committee membership? Who is advantaged and disadvantaged by these arrangements?
2. Study men – we will be the only politics researchers who know we are doing it. Most mainstream study is of beings whose sex and gender are not recognised as male and masculine. Our questions (hence our research designs) should usually contest this consider both women and men. While we all claim to pay attention to intersectionality and have got much better about looking at different groups of women, I am surprised at how seldom our research looks at men. I would almost say that framing questions about women and men should be the default option, from which any deviation must be justified. We are still asking questions about difference and should not be assuming it. This is rudimentary, but often overlooked. For example in studying reactions by politicians to parliamentary environment we should interview both women and men. How can we otherwise know if there are differences and biases?

3. Return to basics. Revisit classification and typology making, which are so important to theory building. Resuscitate and develop Connell's theories of gender regimes and apply to political institutions.
4. Pay attention to questions in the rest of political science, use it ruthlessly and attack where necessary (or irresistible.)

Bevir, M., Rod Rhodes (2003). Interpreting British Governance London, Routledge.

Cockburn, C. (1991). In the Way of Women: Men's Resistance to Sex Equality in Organisations. Basingstoke, Macmillan.

Connell, R. (1987). Gender and Power. Cambridge, Polity.

Gerring, J. (2007). Case Study Research: Principles and Practice. New York, Cambridge University Press.

Hall, P. A., D. Soskice (2001). Varieties of Capitalism. New York, Oxford University Press.

Immergut, E. (1992). The Political Construction of Interests Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Immergut, E. M. K. A., I Schulze (2007). The Handbook of West European Pensions

King, G., Keohane, Robert O, Verba Sidney (1994). Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research. Princeton N.J., Princeton University Press.

Lewis, O. a. S., Sven Taking Evolution Seriously

Lovenduski, J. (1998). "Gendering Research in Political Science. ." Annual Review of Political Science **1**: 333-56.

Pierson, P. (1996). "The Path to European Integration: A Historical Institutional Analysis." Comparative Political Studies **29**.

Pierson, P. (2004). Politics in Time, Princeton University Press.

Ragin, C. C. (1987). The Comparative Method Berkely and Los Angeles, University of California Press.

Savage, M. W., A (1992). Gender and Bureaucracy. Oxford, Blackwell.

Thelen, K. (2004). How Institutions Evolve: The Political Economy of Skills in Germany, Britain, the United States, and Japan. . Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.