

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

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***1: What can mainstream historical institutionalism (HI) give feminists?***

My work has engaged mostly with HI and sociological institutionalism (SI) approaches and I believe that they provide feminists with some very important tools. Time does not permit a full discussion of all of these but I have picked two that are currently exercising my mind in my current research.

***A: Institutional design***

An important contribution of HI makes to a feminist understanding of institutions concerns questions of institutional design. This approach rejects both the functionalism, common in 'old' institutionalism as well as rationalism, reflected in rational choice institutionalism. It does not treat institutions as emerging off-the-plan *de novo* or consider that their outcomes can somehow be 'read off' their design.

Historical Institutionalists argue that in creating 'new' institutions, the past always intervenes. Legacies are carried over into new institutions in ways that can shape the operation of these institutions, often in unpredictable ways. As a result we cannot expect that institutions will operate according to the goals of the designers. Indeed, HI reminds us that the designers themselves often have conflicting goals that no institution could ever possibly meet. Rather, it is the conflict and struggle over these goals that shape institutional outcomes.

The value of this insight for feminists is two-fold. It suggests that institutions that were designed to exclude women and gender concerns – I'm thinking here of formal

institutions such as parliaments, political party and electoral systems - can be challenged through political contestation, so as to become more inclusive. But it also suggests that we should not be surprised when the opposite is also the case: that institutions designed to advance gender equality do not achieve these goals or are captured by other interests. The case of women's policy agencies in a number of countries including Australia, Canada and New Zealand are cases in point.

*B: Institutional evolution and change*

The second valuable insight from HI that I wish to touch on relates to institutional evolution and change or what I have called *institutional dynamism*. This notion relates to the proposition that although institutions tend toward stability and 'path dependency', they are not fixed, permanent or completely stable entities (see Steinmo and Thelen 2002, 16-7; Pierson 2004). Exogenous factors such as crises or shocks, such as a natural disaster, terrorist attack or an economic recession can induce an acceptance of different or new norms have long been considered the drivers of institutional change. However, recent work is also beginning to focus on endogenous factors that come about through an incremental or evolutionary process and are often driven by 'policy entrepreneurs' (Campbell 2005, 58; Kingdon 2003). Thelen (2004) advocates this latter view suggesting that institutional evolution is a process that involves ongoing power struggles from both within and outside institutions over their form and functions.

When institutions are founded they are not universally embraced or straightforwardly "adapted to" but rather continue to be the object of ongoing conflict, as actors struggle over the form that these institutions should take and the functions they should perform (2004, 32).

As Georgina Waylen, and Fiona Mackay and Meryl Kenny's work, in a forthcoming *Critical Perspectives on Feminist Institutionalism* in the journal *Politics & Gender*, has outlined (Waylen forthcoming; Kenny and Mackay forthcoming), this shift towards a more nuanced and weaker version of path dependency that is beginning to emerge in the HI literature helps us to better understand subtle changes in the gender order over time which can in the end lead to substantial changes in the operation and possibly the outcomes of institutions.

## ***2: What can feminists give back to HI?***

There is one obvious but important contribution that feminists can make to new institutionalism in all its forms – a gender dimension.

It still astounds me how devoid NI, including its HI and SI variants, is of a gender analysis. The emphasis in SI on norms by-passes any discussion of gender even though it emphasizes the normative aspects of institutions. As I have discussed elsewhere, the concept of the logic of appropriateness that has been used in SI to understand the operation of institutions completely ignores the gender dimensions of this logic (Chappell 2006). While other taken-for-granted norms and practices – such as racist practices stemming from colonialism for instance - are questioned, power relations between men and women, and their effects are elided.

In HI there has been a renewed emphasis on the power relations within institutions, especially in Thelen's work. However, even here, specific gender power relations are ignored. For instance, in explaining the development of institutional arrangements governing labour skill formation Thelen completely ignores the masculinised nature of the union movements (and how this plays out differently in different contexts) and the influence this has on institutional outcomes. Yet without this aspect of the story, it is impossible to fully comprehend the evolution of such institutions.

By adding gender into the picture we get a much more fully developed conception of institutional design, operation and effects. Here I'll give two brief examples of feminist contributions to this area.

The first relates to institutional design. Without wanting to pre-empt our panel tomorrow I just want to point out here how the gendered concept of *nested newness* adds to an understanding of the genesis of institutions. In her work on the Scottish Parliament, Fiona Mackay provides an excellent example of the importance of institutional legacies in 'new' institutions and the difference this makes to gender equity activists. While she

argues feminist engagement with these institutions has contributed to a more 'feminised' politics in Scotland, there have been many aspects of 'politics as usual' in the operation of the Parliament including 'gendered party political cultures and traditional patterns of gender relations' which are a hang over from Westminster (2004, 113; 2006). Mackay uses the term 'nested newness' to capture the way in which new institutions exist in relation to others whose legacies and continuities with the past have a gender dimension and operate in such a way as to profoundly effect its operation.

Feminists have also demonstrated the need to take gender into account in understanding the operation of institutions. In a seminal essay ten years ago, Joni Lovenduski (1998) pointed out that institutions have distinctively gendered cultures and are involved in processes of producing and reproducing gender. Her essay also pointed out that no single institution does this in the same way. In her view: 'the successful application of the concept of gender to the investigation of political institutions must acknowledge not only the complexity of gender but also the nature of the particular institution and the kinds of masculinities and femininities that are performed' (1998, 348). The argument that gender plays out differently in different institutions is a crucial one, because such variation shapes behaviour inside institutions, institutional outcomes, as well as opportunities for institutional engagement.

### ***3: Challenges of engaging with the mainstream***

Obviously, as this brief discussion makes evident, I believe that certain variants of NI and feminism are, complementary and compatible. In doing so, I don't want to dismiss what feminists have already achieved on their own in regards to understanding political institutions in terms of the co-constitutive nature between structure and agency and the power relationships which operate through them (for a discussion see Kenny and Mackay forthcoming). However, I do think NI, especially HI and some aspects of SI give us a way of avoiding the overly pessimistic OR optimistic conclusions in regard to the outcomes of gender processes within institutions that have tended to dominate the gender and politics literature. The marriage of new institutionalism and gender analysis reminds

us that the relationship between institutions and gender is a dynamic one that moves back and forward over time.

I think it is worthwhile pursuing the development of a feminist institutionalism that draws on insights from new institutionalism and infuses these with a thorough gendered analysis. In doing so I would stress that this does require a particular methodological approach for feminists which includes:

- 1) Adopting a comparative approach to politics. In order to understand institutional outcomes it is imperative that we look across a range of cases – similar institutions in different settings and different institutions in similar settings – to identify how gender operates within institutions. Moreover, we need to look not only at formal institutions but informal ones as well.
- 2) It also means taking seriously the temporal dimension. As Pierson and others have pointed out, time is a critical component for understanding questions of institutional operation and outcomes. As Nancy Burns' puts it: 'gender is easier to see over space and time, after the researcher does the work of adding up the many often-small wrongs through which gender inequalities are manifest' (2005, 140). An analysis over time also makes it possible to see the dynamic nature of the relationship between gender and institutions in terms of feminist engagement and equality outcomes.

Undertaking comparative research across institutions, politics and across time is no easy task, but examples of such important work is emerging including by Georgina in her 2007 award winning book *Engendering Transitions* and in some of the RINGS work in which Joni has played a key role.

It has been disappointing that so far there has only been a one-way conversation between feminists and NI. (A staggering recent example is Rod Rhodes et al's 2006 *The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions*). It is clear that engaging the mainstream will not occur on its own. It's time for a more direct and strategic approach that draws in some key mainstream scholars into a dialogue about what each approach can give to the other.

Publishing in mainstream journals is also important to extend the discussion, although no guarantee of a greater impact.

The sub-field is a vibrant and growing one, as attested by the creation of the Feminist Institutionalism International Network, the recent successful ECPR workshop on feminism and institutionalism and the publications stemming from this. There is a lot of exciting comparative research being undertaken by or feminist institutionalists. If mainstream scholars do take account of these developments in their work they will gain new and important insights into institutions at the same time as create a more theoretically and methodologically robust new institutionalism.

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