

Institutions, Change and Gender – Relations: Towards a Feminist New Institutionalism?

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*Changing Constitutions, building institutions and (re)defining gender relations***

Fiona Mackay² and Petra Meier³

Introduction

The ‘institutional turn’ in contemporary political science has been heralded as the ‘latest fashion’ or the ‘next revolution’, depending on one’s point of view. However it is beyond dispute that the mainstream trajectory of political research is now institutionally-focused. As such it represents a reconnection with older scholarly traditions and preoccupations (albeit with broader definitions and a multi-theoretic tool-kit). The (re)turn to institutions is also provoked by the times in which we live. The last two decades or so have seen rapid institutional change in Europe and elsewhere: these include broad restructuring trends being undergone by many advanced democratic welfare states involving processes such as marketisation, regionalisation, decentralisation, and constitutional reform. Increasing institutional complexity and challenges to state sovereignty from above and below has led to a reconceptualisation of government to governance and experimentation with new forms of ‘rowing’ and ‘steering’ to deliver public policy objectives. Meanwhile dramatic change and institutional redesign has been witnessed in East European after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the transition of states to democracy and ongoing ‘europeanisation’ as candidate countries for membership of the EU.⁴

¹ A very Flemish word for a first draft of a text that is meant to be the basis for starting a discussion and that as such tends to bite the dust after the discussion

² University of Edinburgh, School of Social and Political Studies (POLITICS), Adam Ferguson Building, George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LL, SCOTLAND, f.s.mackay@ed.ac.uk

³ Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Vakgroep Politieke Wetenschappen, Pleinlaan 2, B-1050 Brussels, BELGIUM, pmeier@vub.ac.be

⁴ Our focus in this workshop is on Europe, North America and Australia/ New Zealand. However similar globalising pressures on institutions can be discerned in the South.

We contend that gender is a crucial dimension in the study of institutions and processes of political change. Understanding political and social institutions as gendered is central to understanding the practices, ideas, goals and outcomes of politics; the dynamics of change (and continuity); and also reveals the ways in which institutions reflect, reinforce and structure unequal gendered power relations.

In the real world, ideas of gender and demands for gender equality have, in some instances, become part of broader political discourses of democracy and modernisation. New structures and ideas of 'governance' and 'new politics' may, in turn, have an important impact on the (re)definition of gender relations. Women activists have also been agents and players in many recent and ongoing processes of institutional change and reform. Examples include the (relatively) successful campaign to insert gender concerns in broader constitutional reform processes in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in the 1990s (Mackay et al., 2002; see workshop papers by Chaney, Meehan and Kantola) and current strategies by nationally-based and trans-European feminist lobby groups to use the opportunities afforded by the ongoing (re) construction and enlargement of the European Union to redefine notions such as citizenship and representation and to press for improved rights and gender equality mechanisms (also see workshop papers by Guerrina, Galligan and Sloat, and Dona). In other cases, women's movement activists have specifically campaigned to amend existing constitutions in order to explicitly codify women's rights (for example the unsuccessful ERA in the US) or to promote parity democracy in countries such France, Portugal and Belgium (see workshop papers by Freedman, Green and Debunne). There is also a growing movement of women organising to resist broader processes of state restructuring and economic integration in the North and the South on the basis of the gendered impact of these globalisation trends on equality (see, for example, Cameron and Gönas 1999). What is clear from our workshop papers and the broader women and politics literature is that institutional politics, broadly defined, and processes of institutional change and reform have become increasingly 'entangled' with gender.

It is something of a puzzle then that issues of gender have been neglected in 'mainstream' accounts of political institutions and their performance, and processes of political change, such as the building or redefinition of institutions, devolution or constitutional reform. The broad literature of 'new institutionalism' – which centrally focuses on these issues – makes scant mention of gender as an analytic category, or women as institutionalised subjects, or

women as agents in change processes. For example, Peters (1999) extensive review of the new institutionalist field contains only two references to gender and they are both in the footnotes! In other cases, gender gets some ‘surface’ attention but is not elaborated or developed. For example, Lane and Ersson (2000), analysing a set of basic institutional arrangements at the macro level in order to establish the political, social and economic performance and outcome of institutions and in order to provide evidence for the assumption that institutions matter, do refer to gender relations. They argue for instance that if institutions are that important they can help us understand why there are differences among countries at the level of gender equality (Lane and Ersson 2000: 9-100). When it comes to their actual analysis, issues of gender equality are reduced to the measure of women’s political participation and are taken into consideration in only a limited number of chapters such as the one on human rights or presidential systems. Gender is inexplicably absent from other performance variables such income distribution and no account is given to the structural differences between the sexes (and between other social groups). This renders their analysis almost completely gender blind.

It is not only that issues of gender have been neglected in the ‘mainstream’ literature on institutions and on institutional change but also relevant feminist research and scholarship. Feminist research has been extensively concerned with institutions of state and society, the way gender ‘plays out’ within institutions, the role of political institutions in the constitution and reconstitution of gender relations, and the differential impact of much social and economic policy on the lives of women and men.⁵ What Mazur (2002) dubs applied feminist

⁵ A body of empirical and analytical work exists concerned with women and political institutions/elites in Europe (see, for example, Haavio-Mannila et al. 1985; Lovenduski 1986; Randall, 1987; Lovenduski and Norris, 1993; Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Karvonen and Selle, 1995; Leijenaar and Mahon, 1992), the US (see, for example, Carroll, 1985; Dodson and Carroll, 1991; Dodson, 2001; Thomas, 1994) and elsewhere (see, for example, Tremblay, 2000). It relates to work that frames the dynamic between feminist activists and political institutions within the context of political opportunity structures (Brown, 1998a, 1998b; Galligan, 1998; Perrigo, 1995; Stetson and Mazur, 1995; Stetson, 2001; Mazur, 2001) and provides further empirical evidence of the differing inhibiting and enabling factors in case study countries. There is a plethora of debates in feminist literature on recruitment (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995), representation (Phillips, 1995; Young, 2000, Squires, 2000; Mackay, 2001) and ‘category politics’ (Bacchi, 1996); and to the growing literature on gender and devolution (Brown, 1998; Breitenbach and Mackay, 2001; Brown et al., 2002; Woodward and Meier, 1998, Chaney, 2002), on gender and supra-national construction (Vogel-Polsky, 1997; Vogel-Polsky, 2001), on gender and constitutional change, including parity democracy (Gaspard, 2001; Meier, 2002a; Meier, 2002b; Rossilli, 2000; Ruiz, 2000; Sgier, 2001). Other

empiricism is institutional in focus and provides case studies of gendered structures and feminist agency around state. Institutional design is seen as an important variable in accounting for variability of success of feminist policy (including legal system, territorial distribution of power, executive-legislative relations, interest groups organisation, state-society relations). Whilst such work has often concentrated on formal political institutions, such as electoral systems, legislatures, bureaucracies and so on it has also highlighted the informal ways in which sexism is 'institutionalised' within such structures and the spaces for 'discursive struggles' within institutions over the meanings of gender and gender equality. Feminist theorists have problematised notions of interests and the role of institutions (political and social) in their shaping.⁶ Scholars have disaggregated the welfare state into policy sectors and institutions such as benefit and pensions systems in order to study their gendered dynamics across time and place (see for example, O'Connor, Shaver and Orloff, 1999). Multi-level governance and the implications of relocations of state power on gender relations and feminist agency provide the focus for yet another research strand (see for example, Banaszak et al., 2003).

Our preliminary review of the new institutionalist literature found few references to feminist political science, despite some common preoccupations. It should be noted also that, although institutionalist in focus, most feminist political science does not position itself explicitly in the new institutionalist research camp nor does it use the vocabulary and frameworks of new institutionalism. For example, a recent review of feminist empirical theory and method by Vicky Randall (2002) raised issues of gender and (political) institutions and gender and organisations but did not explicitly locate work within new institutionalism. Several observations can therefore be made:

- Feminist political science has and is to a large extent research with an institutional touch;
- in that respect it has much in common with the rest of political science where attention is centred on issues of institutions and of institutionalism;

relevant literatures for new institutionalism would include the large and dynamic literature on gender and welfare states by European and North American feminist scholars.

⁶ See the classic debates involving Shapiro (1981), Diamond and Hartsock (1981) and Jonasdottir (1988), and later poststructuralist problematizations of political interests by Pringle and Watson (1992)

- it can even be said that the institutional approach has been mainstreamed, in the sense of being an approach that is found across all areas and niches of the field of political science;
- however, there has been little cross-fertilisation or even dialogue. New institutionalists and feminist political scientists have been talking past one another. On the one hand, new institutionalists appear unaware of (or reluctant to engage with) issues of gender and relevant developments in feminist political science. On the other, feminist scholars appear unaware of (or reluctant to explicitly position themselves within) new institutionalist approaches or to draw upon much of its ‘mainstream’ literature.⁷

This begs the question of why there has been so little cross-fertilisation between mainstream political science and feminist political science regarding research with an institutional focus to date? Might this be a further example of what Lovenduski (1998) has called the ‘inhospitability’ of political science to feminist concerns; another instance of the mainstream that purports to review the field but ‘is silent on issues of women, gender, sex and women’s and feminist movements’? (Beckwith, 2000: p.457). Interesting (and depressingly familiar) as these questions might be, they are not the main issue for this workshop. Instead we wish to consider what mutual benefit there might be in some ‘intellectual borrowing’ between new institutionalism and feminist political science in the exploration of the central theme of our workshop: the relationship between three concepts, namely institutions, change and gender.

We argue that there are important inter-relations between these concepts both in theory and in the daily life people experience. Institutions have an important impact on gender and on gender relations and the same goes for changes at these levels, but insights in gender can also have an important impact on both institutions and on changes within institutions. Second, until now these links between institutions, change and gender have not sufficiently been explored at a scientific level and are worthy of closer scrutiny. Third, such an exploration will provide new insights in the fields of institutional theory, theoretical accounts of change and gender relations. Finally, we hope that these insights will provide tools that can make institutions and processes of change promote more balanced gender relations.

⁷ There are, as always exceptions, such as the research undertaken the last few years by RNGS (Research Network Gender and State), where new institutionalism is discussed in the establishment of the research plan

In the rest of this ‘sneuveldnota’ we set out a brief review of the main features of new institutionalism, some of its key varieties and central concerns and ideas, and some of its weaknesses and flaws. We then raise (rather than attempt to answer) some questions to spark off discussions. We ask to what extent new institutionalism is currently gender-biased or gender-blind? What scope is there to gender key concepts? Does new institutionalism hold promise for feminist analysis and what, if anything, would a feminist analysis add to new institutionalism? Is new institutionalism an enabling framework – or an intellectual strait-jacket that would be unable to cope with the gendered dynamics of institutions: the flows and ‘escapes of power’ (as described by Holli et al in their workshop paper), the complex issues of representation, patterns of inclusion and exclusion and distributional imbalances.

New Institutionalism: one or many?

The basic premise of new institutionalism is that institutions do ‘matter’ and that ‘the organisation of political life makes a difference’ (March and Olsen, 1984:p.747). Institutions are understood in a broader sense than traditional institutionalism, so in addition to formal political structures and organisations, institutions comprise rules, informal structures, norms, beliefs and values, routines and conventions, and ideas about institutions. According to this approach, it is the study of institutions (formal and informal) and collective organisation that provides scholars with the greatest analytic leverage. As such it represents a counter to the individualistic-focus of behaviouralism (Peters, 1999). A large and somewhat confusing and contradictory body of literature has built up since the 1980s around this central assumption, broadly shared. The confusion stems from the plethora of varieties of approaches inside the big tent that is ‘new institutionalism’. In his review, *Institutional Theory in Political Science*, Peters (1999) distinguishes amongst no less than seven different versions of institutionalism: *normative, rational choice, historical, sociological, empirical, international and network-based*. Hall and Taylor (1996, 1998) propose three main types: *historical institutional, rational choice institutional* and *sociological*. It can be argued that two main logics structure the field; on the one hand the logic of *culture*, relating to *value* or *norm-based* approaches and, on the other, the logic of *calculus*, relating to *rational choice* approaches. Variants can be characterised as clustered around the two (competing) logics or plotted along a continuum (Hall and Taylor 1996, Lowndes 2002, Offe 1996). This distinction is useful in navigating

(Stetson and Mazur 2000, RINGS 2002). It is also the case that some workshop participants explicitly refer to this body of literature.

the field, it also is helpful once we turn to consider gender issues since it indicates clearly where and how certain versions of new institutionalism fail when it comes to a gender or feminist perspective.

Below we briefly outline the main features of the two types of new institutionalism: rational choice and sociological or normative. We also sketch out the characteristics of historical institutionalism. Although, in some accounts, historical institutionalism is subsumed within the broad value-based approach (represented here by the sociological/normative variant), others argue it is, or has the potential to be, a distinctive position in its own right (Taylor and Hall 1996, Hay and Wincott 1998).

Normative or sociological institutionalism: political institutions are formal and informal collections of inter related norms, rules and routines, understandings and frames of meaning that define ‘appropriate’ action and roles and acceptable behaviour of their members. They comprise normative, symbolic, cognitive and regulatory aspects and are widely known, accepted and regarded as legitimate. Institutions ‘simplify political life by ensuring that ‘some things are taken for granted in deciding other things’ (March and Olsen, 1987: p. 17) Behaviour can be understood through the *logic of appropriateness* instead of (or as well as) the *logic of consequentiality*. Individuals are embedded within social and institutional relationships and ties, in short- they belong. Their choices and actions are not only constrained but also shaped by institutional norms and values. They participate in institutions on the basis of commitment and acceptance of norms of the institution. (Lowndes 2002, Peters 1999)

Rational Choice institutionalism: institutions are essentially systems of rules, incentives and sanctions agreed upon by groups of individuals in order to provide the conditions (and information) where problems of collective action can be overcome and the gains from co-operation can be maximised. Institutions do not bear norms or values nor does history play a significant role. The rational response to social or economic necessity, institutions last only as long as they serve their purpose in terms of costs-benefits to participants. They are the result of human agency but then act as a constraint on individual actors, however this constraint sets parameters for action rather than shapes preferences. Actors are presumed to seek to maximise their utilities within institutional constraints. Institutions provide only a short-term constraint on individual behaviour. (Peters 1999, Lowndes, 2002. See also Shepsle, 1989)

Historical institutionalism: Institutions are formal or informal structures, rules, routines and norms which are embedded in the organisation of political life. Key concepts include: *path dependency* – the idea that choices made early in the life of an institution, system or a policy (historical legacies) will routinely determine subsequent choices unless ‘sufficiently strong political force’ counteracts this (Peters, 1999:p.19); *Standard operating procedures* - in common with normative institutionalism’s notion of routinised and appropriate behaviour, standard operating procedures (Hall 1986) refer to institutionalised repertoires of responses which explain much institutional behaviour rather than purposive action. SOPs can explain institutional inertia and dysfunction. Another understanding in common with normative institutionalism is that institutions are not neutral but embody values, norms and power inequalities, privileging some groups and ideas over others resulting in unequal access to resources (Lowndes, 2002:p.91). Finally, historical institutionalism contends that ideas play a central role in institutions as ‘building blocks of action’ as well as constraints on choices (Hall and Taylor, 1998:p.962. Also see Steinmo, Thelen and Longstreth 1992, Hall and Taylor, 1996, Peters, 1999).

The core features of new institutionalism

The intention of this paper is not to explore in detail of the various new institutionalist approaches. The issue we are interested in is the extent to which these are fruitful for feminist political science and what a feminist or gender approach would add in terms of insights.

Whilst we are somewhat sceptical of the claims of its more excitable champions, we recognize it is not just a passing fashion. It is an approach connecting with older traditions in political science while bringing in a series of interesting conceptual tools.

Whilst there are many disagreements in the field, a number of common core features can be discerned within new institutionalist approaches.

- *Institutions matter and matter more than anything else:* Accounts begin with institutions rather than actors and are concerned with the role institutions play in shaping behaviour and in shaping the outcomes of political processes (Peters, 1999:p.141) As such, all the approaches are ‘structuralist’ to one degree or another in

that they all seek to reveal how institutions shape social and political life (Hall and Taylor, 1998: p.959).

- *Institutions are broadly defined:* although there is no common agreement across the approaches, they are not viewed as the same as (or just) political organisations. Disaggregated rather than holistic or system-level definitions predominate and institutions are seen to comprise some or all of the following: informal conventions as well as formal institutional rules, sets of practices and routines, as expressions of norms and ideas. Institutions are ‘stable, valued, recurring patterns of behaviour’ (Goodin, 1996:21). They produce greater regularity and predictability in political behaviour.
- *Institutions are historical creations of human agency* whether intentional or unintentional. According to historical and normative institutionalists, they are the outcome of past political strategies, political conflict and of choice (Thelan and Steinmo 1992: p.10). Once created, institutions can be difficult to change and are an important structuring context within which political action occurs.
- *Institutions constrain actors:* however there are disagreements about the primary mechanisms by which constraint is operated. Cultural approaches emphasise the role of organised paths of socially constructed norms and values and socially prescribed behaviours whilst calculus approaches emphasise rules and incentive structures.
- *Institutions are not neutral:* new institutionalists (particularly historical institutionalists and normative institutionalists) take a ‘value critical’ stance. They attempt to make explicit the submerged values embedded in seemingly neutral institutions and mechanisms: ‘the structure of governance – the inclusion or exclusion of different actors and the selection of instruments – is not value neutral but embedded in and sustains political values’ (Pierre 1999:p.390)

Issues of institutional change and institutional design are key themes of our workshop, we therefore turn to briefly summarise how new institutionalism accounts for the emergence of institutions and institutional change before moving on to outline some points raised in the literature about institutional design.

How are institutions formed and how do they change?

According to Goodin (1996), institutions arise through accident, evolution and by conscious design. Even if institutions are created as a result of conscious design for a specific function (as rational choicers would assume), other approaches stress the unintended consequences and inability to control the process of institutionalisation as norms and values, routines and rules become embedded.

Once created, there is disagreement as to the degree of stability and mutability. Historical institutionalists are better at explaining continuity than accounting for change. Institutions are inherently stable but these equilibria are ‘punctuated’ by ‘critical junctures’ or ‘critical real world events that destabilise institutions provoking a period of change before new equilibria are established. Ideas can play a crucial role in provoking radical institutional change.

Normative and sociological institutionalists stress successive rounds of incremental modifications made in response to the unintended consequences of original design and responses to internal and external pressures. Current practices are built upon layers of previous practices and values in a process of ‘sedimentation’ (Tolbert and Zuckerman 1996 cited by Peters 1999:p.104). The dynamic of change is always present in institutions through ‘value drift’, through the presence of alternative logics of appropriateness and moral discourses which command some legitimacy, and in some cases through the recruitment of ‘non-standard’ members into institutions which can cause disruption and non conformity (March and Olsen, 1987, Peters 1999). Interestingly, it is when discussing the disruptive effect of non-standard recruits that Peters makes his only mention of women (as recruits into the US military and as non conformist Congresswomen). Change – incremental and more radical – is provoked by disjunctures between espoused values and actual practices within an institution or significant differences between institutionalised values and behaviours and societal norms.

Rational choicers largely hold the view that equilibrium is achieved through rules and institutions change when you change the rules and incentives.

Opportunities and Obstacles for intentional institutional design

A number of scholars including Goodin (1996), Offe (1996) Rothstein (1996, 1998) explore how institutions can be designed to promote desired values. Design needs to incorporate technical rules and normative values, symbols and cognitive frames.

Historical and normative/sociological institutionalists stress the difficulties and often unintended consequences of institutional design. Goodin (1996) speaks of the ‘myth’ of the intentional designer or the ‘optimal design’ and instead sees the process of institutional design as the aggregate of localised attempts at partial design that cut one across another. The reform process involves the de-institutionalisation of old rules, values and symbols and the institutionalisation of new ones, in a process of embedding. The process is inherently destabilising simultaneously offering opportunities and constraints to political actors as ‘old settlements’ are undermined and the space opens up for contests over competing values in a context structured by power differentials (Lowndes and Wilson 2001:p, 643). Constraints include material legacies, ‘habits of hearts’ and ‘frames of mind’ and existing patterns of power distribution (Elster et al., 1998, Goodin 1996) and ‘compatibility’ with interconnecting or ‘nested’ institutions (Lowndes and Wilson 2001).

Whereas rational choice institutionalism has relatively little to say about how existing institutions came about they pay lots of attention to subsequent rounds of design and how to use rules to achieve desired outcomes. Institutional mechanisms such as rules, sanctions and rewards can be designed in order to manipulate human behaviour. Although the underlying behaviour and preferences of individuals will remain unchanged, their strategic behaviour will as they respond to their institutional environment in rational and predictable ways. Compliance is regulatory and calculative rather than moral and normative. For this approach, institutional design provides a blank canvas – in contrast to other perspectives, which stress the role of historical legacies and internalized values, norms and understandings.

‘Good’ institutions are designed and defined in different ways with both empirical and normative elements. Goodin suggests that good institutional design has four generalizable features: it is revisable, robust, publicly defensible and enables variation and experimentation (1996:p.39)

The interest of new institutionalist approaches for feminist political science

Do new institutional approaches add anything to current thinking in feminist political science about gender and the state and political institutions? Is anything to be gained by retrofitting work or framing new work specifically within the new institutionalist framework?

At first sight, many of the elements of new institutionalism are of relevance to feminist political science. There are common preoccupations with the **inter relationship** between individuals and groups of actors and institutions broadly defined, and the **interplay** between ‘nests’ of institutions within particular spheres or across spheres. For example, feminism has long understood the interconnection between social or ‘private’ institutions such as the family and political and state institutions in constituting and reconstituting gender inequalities. Both new institutionalism and feminist political science are concerned with empirical questions about the **functioning** or dysfunctioning of political institutions, although as noted earlier, criteria selected to measure performance may differ considerably. The reasons for **institutional continuity** and the **difficulty of institutional reform and redesign** are further common interests. Although barely mentioned in the mainstream literature, feminist demands for the engendering of political and bureaucratic institutions have provided rich material in the study of institutional resistance and the limits of reform, the flows of power and the patterning of inclusion and exclusion. The **value-critical** approach of new institutionalism is a long-established feature of feminist political science as are the insights that seemingly neutral institutions and practices are embedded in submerged norms and values which privilege some groups over others. For example feminist research has exposed the gendered conceptions of citizenship underlying the constitutions and basic laws of most modern industrialised democracies. The recent French parity debate and other debates on changing constitutions and electoral legislation reflect the concerns of feminists to unravel such hidden values and norms. As in new institutionalism there is an understanding of the interplay between **formal rules and informal norms and practices**. We see this explored in work on the uneven progress of gender quotas and other mechanisms within political parties and political systems. Research on the implementation of equal opportunities policies and gender mainstreaming has also shown the way in which ‘old rules’ embedded in gender norms may predominate over ‘new rules’ promoting gender equality. Feminists have harnessed these insights by **framing** feminist demands within dominant institutional and political discourses. Finally, feminist political science is crucially concerned with the (bounded) **agency** of women working in, through and against state and political institutions to effect social and political change.

We argue that while new institutionalism does not necessarily provide new insights, it does offer some useful conceptual tools that could be used to more systematically explore the dimensions and dynamics of gendered resistance, gendered distribution of power and resources, organisational change and political outcomes. These might include:

- The role of standard operating procedures in explaining institutional response
- Understandings of (institutions as) rules of the game
- The implications of nested institutions and rules
- The interaction between political actors and institutional constraints.
- Logics of appropriateness – dominant and alternative logics which exist within institutional settings.
- Path-dependency
- The role of values and norms
- Stories of dynamism and change- how can these insights be harnessed?
- The insight that political organisations can be disaggregated into institutions comprising formal and informal dimensions
- The ways in which symbols and cognitive scripts might be reframed to incorporate new values and meanings
- Calculus-based models based on systems of incentives and sanctions
- The messy and difficult reality of institutional design – and the unintended consequences

Some problems and uncertainties.

It is also the case that ‘mainstream’ new institutionalism has a number of potential shortfalls which may limit its use for feminist political research. A major problem is the role of power in new institutionalism. Although institutions are seen as the products of past conflict and contestation of ‘social forces’ and to structure ‘patterns of distributional advantage’ and disadvantage (Knight 1992 cited by Lowndes and Wilson 2001: p.643), power is a rather slippery concept in the literature. Power and the dynamics of power are underplayed and, although in some accounts social stratification is conceptualised as an institution, little serious attention appears to be played to major social divisions such as gender, class and race. In feminist political science, power is a central feature; societal gender relations are conceived as

being imbalanced power relations to the detriment of women. Much institutional feminist research focuses on the way institutions shape, reflect and reinforce unequal power relations between women and men; and on the way in which social and political institutions are themselves shaped by social divisions. The transformation of institutions is seen as a key strategy for achieving a more equal balance in these power relations. We have already noted the lack of connection between new institutionalism and feminism but it is also not clear whether / how new institutionalism engages with broader macro-level state theory which is centrally concerned with issues of power. Neither is clear whether new institutionalism has considered the implications of post-structuralist – broadly Foucauldian - conceptions of power as dispersed and constructed through discourse.

A second set of difficulties arises around consideration of **structure and agency**. As noted earlier, new institutionalism is broadly structuralist in its focus on the role of institutions as the most important factor in shaping political life and in structuring the resources and opportunities of political actors. However, in a point related to the discussion of power above, it is not apparent that new institutionalism explores how power differentials are constituted and reconstituted, or how they relate to broader socio-economic divisions. So its focus on structure is at the level of institutions and may miss the bigger picture. Furthermore it is not clear what role agency plays. Whereas all the accounts to some extent stress an interplay between institutions and institutional actors, it is not always apparent how much weight is assigned to agency (Hay and Wincott, 1998). Whereas feminism as a theory of social action needs a conceptual framework that can envisage women as institutional subjects able to exercise some agency within and around institutions and ideas. In a similar vein, Hay and Wincott suggest a need to work towards a framework of understanding a dynamic relationship between ‘institutional architects, institutionalised subjects and institutional environment’ (1998:p.955) where agency is understood to involve strategic, creative and intuitive action as well as calculating self-interest.

Gender bias and gender blindness

When considering whether to ‘borrow’ from other approaches, we must first consider whether gender-blind tools, frameworks and concepts can be modified or whether they are, in fact gender-biased, that is constructed around androcentric assumptions.

Calculus-based approaches present the most difficulties. We would contend that these are gender-biased in that they are based upon highly gendered assumptions about human beings, their behaviour, the force driving them and relations among them, lacking any recognition of the structural imbalances characterising gender relations in all societies. These calculus-based approaches are also based upon highly gendered – and masculinist – assumptions about institutions and their interaction with individuals, again lacking a recognition of structural power imbalances. The rational choice approach of new institutionalism actually lacks to a large extent conceptual openings allowing for the recognition and explanation of (gendered) structural power imbalances between social groups. Its conceptual tools contain a high degree of gender bias, which makes them of little interest and use for feminist research.

Normative or culture-based approaches to institutions are of more interest for feminist research, even though most of this research can be considered to be gender blind. It is gender blind to the extent that it does not consider gender issues or feminist research. However, its conceptual tools are as such not gender biased. The most interesting aspect of normative institutionalism is its focus on norms and values and their role in shaping society and human behaviour. Norms and values are of great importance to a feminist understanding of society. They help us conceptualise and understand the imbalanced structure of gender relations. However, feminist research is especially concerned about normative and value-based assumptions on gender constructions as such. Actually, the conceptualisation of institutions in normative institutionalism allows conceiving gender constructions such as gender roles in themselves as institutions. We could argue that feminist research does conceive gender constructions as institutions and that it is these institutions that are the central focus of their research and analysis. In this respect, ‘mainstream’ normative institutionalism might be amenable to gendering because it would mean that gender constructions would be recognised and taken into account as an important institution. In this respect, a higher degree of cross-fertilisation between ‘mainstream’ normative institutionalism and feminist institutionalist research might not only be possible but also enriching for both approaches.

We contend that much of the new institutionalist literature is gender blind – is it has not taken women or gender relations into account and is marbled through with gendered assumptions. However it may be amenable to the introduction of a gender perspective. This would appear to be the case with those approaches broadly placed within the ‘culture’ approach.

Institutions, Change and Gender – Relations

On the whole, we could conclude that some elements of the ‘mainstream’ new institutionalist literature provide useful conceptual tools for feminist political science, but that they situate themselves more in the camp of the normative approaches than in those of the calculus-based ones. The next question then is what feminist insights would add to ‘mainstream’ new institutionalism. We are not sure that feminist research might add something to rational choice approaches given the fact that their basic assumptions seem to be unbridgeable. Although a gender perspective perhaps does give insight into rational choice as a playing out of hegemonic masculinity.

As already noted, there are more connections with normative new institutionalist approaches. There a number of broad areas where the feminist approach could enrich new institutionalist theory: first its brings understandings of gender constructions as institutions which interact with other institutions to shape and constrain behaviour and political outcomes; second it reveals the gendered nature of political institutions and the role of gender in structuring ‘patterns of distributional advantage’; third, it makes power a central analytic focus and brings a gendered dimension to the literature; and fourth it has the potential to make a contribution through its focus on change, on institutional change in the broad sense of the term.

Rothstein (1996) argues that understanding the implications of institutional change can be considered as being one of the most fundamental challenges for political science. The issue of change is effectively one of the major questions addressed in new institutionalism although new institutionalism is considered to be less convincing in explaining the genesis and transformation of institutions than their impact (Peters 1999). However, understanding the mechanisms behind institutional changes and how to change and ‘redesign’ institutions is one of the driving forces of feminist political research. Feminist research is not merely interested in how institutions function and influence society for the mere sake of their impact. A feminist research agenda has always been fed by the concern to show how society functions, feeds, and perpetuates imbalanced gender relations. The research agenda is also informed by action-oriented goals, namely to change institutions in order to create a more equal society.

This brings us back to what we would like to do in this workshop. Our central aim is to explore the relationship between three concepts, namely institutions, change and gender. They are the central red threads at the outset of this workshop, but we might discover more as we go along and have all these discussions fed by the different promising papers.

We reiterate some of our questions to spark off discussions. What is the relationship and dynamic between gendered institutional architects, gendered institutionalised subjects and gendered institutional environments? How, and at what level, are institutions best understood? What causes change? How do we understand change? How does change in one institution inter relate with other institutions? Can we speak of feminists as intentional designers? What have been the unintended consequences of feminist-inspired institutional redesign?

To what extent does a new institutionalist focus help us to analyse gender, institutions and change and what, if anything, would a feminist analysis add to new institutionalism? Is new institutionalism an enabling framework – or an intellectual strait-jacket that would be unable to cope with the gendered dynamics of institutions? Are there other literatures and analytic frameworks that serve us better?

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