

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

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I am broadly optimistic about the prospect of a feminist institutionalism (FI) and believe that it offers a promising way forward for feminist research on gender and political institutions. However, I think that greater clarity is needed on the following points:

1. What is the *aim* of FI? Are we 'borrowing' new institutionalist tools for specific questions, applying NI frameworks to a gender-related topic, or synthesizing NI and FPS approaches? Each strategy brings with it different epistemological and strategic costs and benefits (Vickers, 2008).
2. Second, I think greater clarity is needed as to the *benefits* of, but more importantly, the *costs* of engaging with NI theory.

It's important, then, to revisit the question originally posed by Fiona Mackay and Petra Meier in 2003: is NI an 'enabling framework – or an intellectual strait-jacket' for feminist scholarship on gender and institutions? (Mackay and Meier, 2003, p. 6).

Why do feminists need new institutionalism?

I understand the term 'feminist institutionalism' as a theoretical synthesis of new institutionalism (NI) and feminist political science (FPS). I'm interested not just in what NI can contribute to FPS, but also how a feminist approach can enrich and (potentially) transform NI theory. FI has the potential to get at some of the 'big questions' of FPS, such as how certain institutions and regimes are gendered, how they came into being and how change can come about as well as understanding the relationship between different actors and the institutional context (see Kenny and Mackay, 2009 forthcoming). In other words, key themes of gender, power and change.

I'm primarily interested in historical institutionalism (HI), and particularly, recent work in HI (specifically the work of Paul Pierson, Kathleen Thelen, and Eric Schickler). Recent work in the HI field takes a more *dynamic* approach to conceptualizing institutions, particularly the dynamics of institutional stability and

change. In addition, there is a renewed central emphasis on *power*, putting a central emphasis on contestation, political conflict, and coalitions (e.g. Schickler, 2001; Thelen, 2004).

Assessing the costs

However, more consideration needs to be given to the theoretical and practical implications of engaging with mainstream NI theory. I think we can raise questions here as to the 'usefulness' of NI for FPS.

1. NI is 'notably silent' on issues of women and gender, as well as relevant feminist scholarship (Kenny and Mackay, 2009 forthcoming; see also Chappell, 2006; Kenny, 2007; Mackay and Meier, 2003). Even when gender is given surface attention in NI, it is rarely developed and is often relegated to the status of a background variable.
2. While recent developments in NI (particularly HI) are potentially useful, I'd argue that many of these insights are already presaged in existing feminist scholarship on social and political institutions (albeit sometimes implicitly) (for further discussion on this point, see Kenny and Mackay, 2009 forthcoming).

So, I think we need to ask the question, what scope is there to gender NI? And does (or can) NI actually cast light on 'big questions' of how institutions and regimes are gendered and regendered (Kenny and Mackay, 2009 forthcoming). I think there are four key areas in recent HI scholarship that need a 'closer look':

1. *The move towards a more 'realistic' conception of political institutions*, as advocated by Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Thelen (2005). Streeck and Thelen argue that institutional change is generated 'as a result of the normal, everyday implementation and enactment of an institution' (2005, p. 11). While these theoretical insights are 'ground-breaking' in NI terms, this is arguably a commonplace observation in feminist scholarship, which highlights the complex interplay between the meso- and micro- level in which institutions are constantly enacted through everyday gender practice (see for example Acker, 1992; Connell, 1987, 2002; Hawkesworth, 2003; Kathlene, 1995; Kenney, 1996).
2. *The relationship between endogenous and exogenous change*. NI has often ignored or underplayed the possibility of endogenously-generated change (focusing on exogenous shocks in the surrounding environment). In contrast, feminist research provides rich insights into these issues, highlighting the importance of both insider and outsider activism in feminist engagements with political institutions (e.g. Chappell, 2002; Dobrowolsky, 2003; Katzenstein, 1998). In addition, feminist work on change agents explicitly underlines the costs of challenging the institutional status quo.

3. *A renewed central emphasis on (formal) rules* (see in particular Thelen and Mahoney, 2009 forthcoming). Streeck and Thelen, for example, are very explicit in their 2005 book that they are only interested in formal institutions (informal institutions are too 'messy' to capture). Does this miss part of the picture? Again, feminist research provides rich illustrations of the interplay between formal and informal institutions. Gendered norms and expectations shape formal institutions, but may also contradict or undermine formal rules (e.g. Kathlene, 1995).
4. *A central emphasis on numbers*. NI continues to highlight the importance of numbers in instigating institutional change, using the language of 'tipping points', 'critical mass', etc (see in particular Pierson, 2004; Streeck and Thelen, 2005). Feminist work on gender and institutions (particularly work on SRW) offers more nuanced conceptions of the effect of numbers and bodies in political institutions.

Conclusion

So, while FI is a promising approach, I would suggest that more attention needs to be given to the epistemological and strategic costs and benefits of engaging with mainstream NI. There needs to be a recognition that much of institutionally focused feminist work already 'hits the mark', and that many of the 'ground-breaking' theoretical insights in recent NI literature are already either implicitly or explicitly presaged in feminist work on gender and institutions. I think we need to revisit the question, then, as to the usefulness of NI for FPS? Are NI conceptual tools adequately equipped to deal with the complexities of gender? Or will a FI approach (have to) generate new conceptual tools?

I'll end on a note of caution. As others have noted, efforts at creating a dialogue between FPS and NI have been instigated almost exclusively by feminist scholars. We may do well, then, to heed the words of Anne Savage and Mike Witz (1992) who caution feminists not to be too hasty to retrofit their work within the terms and agendas of mainstream masculinist theorists.

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