

Why I am an Historical Institutional

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My remarks address two issues: Why I am a historical institutionalist and what I mean by that, and how I see my brand of historical institutionalism in relation to other approaches.

In the notes he very responsibly circulated in advance, my colleague and friend Mo Fiorina suggests ever so congenially that declarations of new institutionalist emphases in the social sciences, and especially in political science, are mostly product differentiation by a young Turk group of scholars trying to appear as if they are doing something innovative compared to their elders. Now that I am no longer very young, I am prepared to admit that a decade or so ago, I was trying to do a bit of what Mo suggests. But that is not all that I and others were doing when we began working in what I would now call a historical institutionalist vein.

By bringing the state and state-society relationships to the fore in the definition of important, substantive problems for research, and in the search for explanatory hypotheses, we were trying to highlight, without descending into functionalist holism, the interconnections of institutions and organizations that other scholars tended to treat separately from one another.

For example, consider how the overall pattern of U.S. governmental institutions, what we call the state, influenced the development of industrial workers' movements in the United States. Such an investigation requires us to analyze more than Congress or courts or parties or administrative agencies in isolation, one at a time, the way many traditional institutionalists have done. Looking at the interconnections, historical institutionalists have stressed that, during early industrialization, Ameri-

can workers seeking legislative solutions had to deal simultaneously with unusually sovereign courts and locally rooted patronage-based political parties.

The absence of national administrative bureaucracies and programmatic parties also influenced the goals and tactics evolved by U.S. labor movements, especially in comparison to European social democratic movements. The analysis of intergovernmental, interorganizational concepts, such as "the state" or "the polity" (which includes parties and organized political actors along with the state), almost of necessity becomes a comparative and historical enterprise. Comparisons, whether across countries, regions, localities, or time periods, are used to find interesting patterns to explain and to test the plausibility of causal hypotheses. Over time, processes are traced in order to discover the intersections of separately structured developments that often account for outcomes we wish to understand, whether they be revolutions, or their absence, strategies of labor union movements, or patterns of welfare state development.

I agree with Steve Skowronek and Karen Orren that historical institutionalists avoid thinking in terms of systemic synchronic equilibrium. The organizers of this panel posed a series of general theoretical and methodological questions to the participants. I am not very good at discussing such matters, because I always work out theoretical frameworks in close connection with empirical research on actual comparatively conceptualized patterns of some sort. Thus, in developing my recently published book, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*,¹ I juxtaposed theoretical debates about Western welfare states and empirical investigations of U.S. history in order to work out what I was trying to make sense of about the U.S. case.

But this was not at all an enterprise of applying a theoretical model to a case. Indeed, the most important patterns I ended up trying to explain, the expansion of pensions for Civil War veterans and survivors and the proliferation of social policies for mothers, came to my attention through empirical rummaging, not theorizing.

I also paid attention to the arguments of people who did politics and scholarship in the past. They noticed patterns that scholars subsequently forgot. Having defined some interesting patterns about present and absent social policies in the United States between the 1870s and 1920s, I then worked out a historical institutionalist's polity-centered explanation

1. Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

of what happened when and how, and of why some policies that might have emerged, did not.

My approach is too complex and too closely related to the substance of my book to deserve elaboration here. Analytically speaking, my polity-centered approach draws our attention to four kinds of processes. One, the establishment and transformations of state and party organizations through which politicians pursue policy initiatives. Two, the effects of political institutions and procedures as well as social changes and institutions on the identities, goals, and capacities of social groups that become involved in politics. Three, the fit or lack thereof between the goals and capacities of various politically active groups and the historically changing points of access and leverage allowed by a nation's political institutions. And four, the ways in which previously established social policies affect subsequent policies over time.

I believe that a similar approach, focused on state-society interactions and tracing processes over time, is being used by a variety of other historical institutionalists. To take a quick stab at one of the conceptual questions posed to us by the panel organizers, institutions for me are sets of relationships that persist, although in an inherently conflictual and tension filled way. Institutions may be formal organizations or informal networks. They have shared meetings and relatively stable bundles of resources attached to them. I take an organizational realist approach to institutions, viewing them as actual patterns of communication and activity, rather than seeing them primarily as values, norms, ideas, or official rules. I am primarily interested in studying political processes and outcomes, and I see these as brought about, usually without intentional foresight and control, by actors whose goals and capacities and conflicts with one another are grounded in institutions.

Let me conclude by addressing the relationship of the sort of historical institutionalism I practice to rational choice theorizing and to interpretive approaches to historical cultural understanding. With interpretivists, I share certain hunches about how to define substantively important issues to study. I also share an interest in group identity formation and its effects in the political process. But I believe that causal analysis and hypothesis testing about variations are the way to proceed methodologically. It is not enough just to explore how people talk or think. We must also find patterns in what they do. I do not think that institutions are simply or primarily systems of meaning or normative frameworks. Group identities for me are grounded in organizational linkages, access to resources, and some sense of "success" over time in political undertakings.

I share quite a lot with those rational choice theorists who are willing

to situate actors in a given and partially manipulable institutional context. I have in mind such scholars as Terry Moe, Barry Weingast, Margaret Levi, Robert Bates, and last but certainly not least, my fellow panelist, Mo Fiorina. I call them institutionally situated rational choice analysts. They do not presume that the entire world is one big Adam Smith-style free market. They ask about strategies and outcomes within settings that have institutional rules of the game in place.

Rational choice analysts have been correct to stress that non-reified actors must be specified, that there must be room for strategic choices and maneuvering in explanatory arguments. Unfortunately, rational choice theorists too often presume that actors must be individuals, rather than looking for groups or organizations that in some ways act together. Worse, some rational choicers are so taken with formal deductive modeling that they necessarily avoid messy historical changes and real life political processes. But others, including all the people I mentioned, are grappling with making sense of transformations in state institutions, with governmental interventions in markets, and with the determinants of legislative outcomes.

Rational choice scholars often seek to model one set of events and the maneuvers of actors in one institutional setting at a time. Historical institutionalists are more likely to trace sequences of outcomes over time, showing how earlier outcomes change the parameters for subsequent developments. Historical institutionalists are also interested in conjunctures of separately located processes or conflicts. Nevertheless, I believe that there are many potential complementarities between historical institutionalism and institutionally embedded rational choice. The differing languages and styles of work should not prevent substantive dialogues in historical social science.

Rational Choice and the New(?) Institutionalism

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Sitting here today I feel a kinship with Admiral Stockdale: "why am I here?" I'm not a member of SSHA, do not self-consciously identify as an institutionalist, and to the best of my recollection have never described any of my work as "new institutionalism." In fact, at some risk of provoking the other panelists, I'll confess that I'm not completely persuaded that the "new institutionalism" amounts to much beyond the normal progression of social science stimulated by the normal desire of younger scholars to distinguish themselves from the generation ahead of them.

In that slightly argumentative spirit I first offer some remarks about the alleged revival of institutionalism within political science. Then, switching to a kinder, gentler spirit, I'll turn to the reason I'm presumably here and say some things about rational choice approaches to the study of institutions and political history.

Institutionalism and the Study of American Politics

In 1982-83, during an enjoyable year at Stanford, I became friends with an eminent scholar who was extremely enthused about something called "bringing the state back in." According to my colleague this enterprise was (1) institutional, (2) historical, and (3) new. As an American politics specialist I was amused. If by "state" he meant government or public officials, there was no need to bring them back in, since they already were back in—if they had ever been gone. The academic study of American politics had been broadly divided into "behavior" and "institutions" at least since the mid-1960s when I became professionally aware. Every major department had a good representation of both "behavior people" (voting and public opinion, parties and interest groups) and