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## Give Peace a Chance: Reconciling Four (not Three) “New Institutionalisms”<sup>1</sup>

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Over the past three decades, the ‘new institutionalism’ has become the main methodological battleground among political scientists. This is because political scientists differ in their preferred ‘new institutionalist’ approach to political science. There are four basic institutionalist approaches: three older ‘new institutionalisms—rational choice, historical, and sociological institutionalism—plus a fourth newer ‘new institutionalism’—discursive institutionalism. Rational choice institutionalism focuses on rational actors pursuing their interests and following their preferences within political institutions, defined as structures of incentives, according to a ‘logic of calculation.’ Historical institutionalism concentrates instead on the history of political institutions and their constituent parts, which have their origins in the (often unintended) outcomes of purposeful choices and historically unique initial conditions, and which develop over time following a ‘logic of path-dependence.’ Sociological institutionalism sees political institutions as socially constituted and culturally framed, with political agents acting according to a ‘logic of appropriateness’ that follows from culturally-specific rules and norms. Finally, the newest of the ‘new’ institutionalisms, ‘discursive’ institutionalism, considers the discourse that actors engage in the process of generating, deliberating, and/or legitimizing ideas about political action in institutional context according to a ‘logic of communication.’

These four institutionalisms have a core focus, the importance of institutions, but they otherwise differ along a wide variety of continua: from structure to agency, positivism to constructivism, universalism to particularism, statics to dynamics, and more. Many of the debates among them have the characteristics of war: battles for territory, for control, for dominance. In what follows, I suggest that rather than continuing with the methodological wars, we should declare peace and consider instead how these very different approaches interrelate—how they complement one another, where they contradict one another, and what they contribute to our knowledge of political social reality. Because the three older ‘new institutionalisms’ are well known, with the ‘battles’ among them well documented, I provide only brief sketches of these. I concentrate on the latest ‘new institutionalism,’ discursive institutionalism, not only because it is the newest of the new institutionalisms but also because it has the greatest potential for helping to explain the dynamics of institutional change. Moreover, because it is complementary to all three approaches, but in different ways, it can also help lend insight into how to reconcile the various approaches where possible and, where not, it can at least help establish the borders between approaches.

### **The Three ‘New Institutionalisms’: Rational Choice, Historical, Sociological**

The three older ‘new institutionalisms’ all share a commitment to bringing institutions back into the explanation of political action. But beyond this, they differ in their objects of explanation, whether the behavior of rational actors for rational choice institutionalists, institutional structures and practices for historical institutionalist, or norms and culture for sociological institutionalists; and in their logic of explanation, whether interest, path-dependency, or appropriateness. They all confront similar problems, however, albeit for

different reasons: they are overly deterministic, whether economically, historically, or culturally; and they are largely static, having difficulty explaining institutional change (for a fuller account, see Schmidt 2005).

### *Rational Choice Institutionalism*

Rational choice institutionalism posits rational actors with fixed preferences who calculate strategically to maximize their preferences, and for whom institutions represent the incentive structures that reduce the uncertainties resulting from the multiplicity of individual preferences and issues. In the absence of institutions that promote complementary behavior through coordination, these actors are seen to confront collective action problems such as the ‘prisoners’ dilemma’ and the ‘tragedy of the commons,’ where individual actors’ choice can only lead to sub-optimal solutions (Elster and Hylland 1986; Hardin 1982; Ostrom 1990).

The deductive nature of this approach to explanation makes it good at capturing the range of reasons actors would normally have for any action within a given institutional incentive structure as well as at predicting likely outcomes, even if future-oriented predictions are rarely offered. It is also useful in bringing out anomalies or actions that are unexpected given the general theory. However, for the most part it cannot explain these anomalies if they depart radically from interest-motivated action, while where the push is toward universalistic generalizations, problems with overgeneralization abound (Scharpf 1997).

Moreover, rational choice institutionalism’s very deductiveness, along with a theoretical generality that starts from universal claims about rationality, also makes it difficult for it to explain any one individual’s reasons for action within a given context or any particular set of real political events (Green and Shapiro 1994). The recent attempt to ‘contextualize’ analyses through ‘analytic narratives’ in which individual events are subsumed under more general

theories represents something of a corrective to this problem (Bates et al, 1998). But even so, individuals qua individuals are not present here, and the high level of abstraction with which rational choice institutionalist explanation works offers a very ‘thin’ definition of rationality indeed, with a somewhat simplistic understanding of human motivation that misses out on the subtleties of human reasons for action (see Mansbridge 1990).

In addition, the rational choice institutionalist approach is often highly functionalist because it tends to explain the origins of an institution largely in terms of its effects; highly intentionalist because it assumes that rational actors not only perceive the effects of the institutions that affect them but can also create and control them; and highly voluntarist because they see institutional creation as a quasi-contractual process rather than affected by asymmetries of power (see Hall and Taylor 1996, p. 952; Bates 1987).

Rational choice institutionalist explanation is also static (see Green and Shapiro 1994; Blyth 1997). Because it assumes fixed preferences and is focused on equilibrium conditions, it has difficulty accounting for why institutions change over time. Moreover, rational choice institutionalists’ emphasis on the self-interested nature of human motivation, especially where it is assumed to be economic self-interest, is value-laden, and can appear economically deterministic (Immergut 1998, p. 14). What is more, rational choice institutionalists do little to question the institutional rules within which rational actors seek to maximize their utility, instead mostly assuming them to be good (Moe 2003, p. 3) and/or efficient (North 1990).

### *Historical Institutionalism*

Historical institutionalism focuses on how institutions, understood as sets of regularized practices with rule-like qualities, structure action and outcomes (see Hall and Thelen 2006). It tends to emphasize sequences in development, timing of events, and phases of political change.

It examines not just the asymmetries of power related to the operation and development of institutions but also the path-dependencies and unintended consequences that result from such historical development (Hall and Taylor 1996, p. 938; Steinmo et al. 1992; Thelen 1999). Path-dependency ensures that rationality in the strict rational choice sense is present only insofar as institutions are the intended consequences of actors' choices. But this is often not the case, given the unintended consequences of intentional action and the unpredictability of intervening events, ensuring that the institutional structures of the historical institutionalists are neither as efficient as they appear to rational choice institutionalists nor as purposive as sociological institutionalists suggest (as we shall see below).

Interests, moreover, rather than being universally defined, are contextual (Zysman 1994; Thelen 1999). Compared to rational choice institutionalism, historical institutionalism tends to be less universalistic in its generalizations and more "mid-range" in its theory-building, by focusing on changes in a limited number of countries unified in space and/or time or on a specific kind of phenomenon that occurs in or affects a range of countries at one time or across time (Thelen 1999). But although more particular in its generalizations, it is still very general, tending to emphasize structures and processes much more than the events out of which they are constructed, let alone the individuals whose actions and interests spurred those events. Here, too, then, there are no individual actors as such. What is more, any 'micro-foundational logic,' as rationalists put it, is generally missing from this macro-historical work. Instead, it follows the logic of path-dependency. Rather than appearing economically deterministic, therefore, historical institutionalism can appear historically deterministic or even mechanistic where it focuses exclusively on continuities and path-dependencies. The 'critical junctures' literature that looks at 'configurative' moments (e.g., Gourevitch 1986; Collier and Collier 1991) or

‘punctuated equilibrium’ (Krasner 1988) is something of a corrective to this problem; but it still has difficulty explaining what brings about the crisis that spurs change. Moreover, it assumes that change comes only in bursts, with stasis in between, and cannot account for incremental change. Instead, as Kathleen Thelen (2004) and Wolfgang Streeck (Streeck and Thelen 2005) argue, institutional evolution can be explained by way of certain mechanisms of change such as the layering of new elements onto otherwise stable institutional frameworks and the conversion of institutions through the adoption of new goals or the incorporation of new groups. But although this approach effectively puts the history back into historical institutionalism, by explaining the full panoply of changes that may occur, it does not explain institutional change itself. How change is instigated—either through layering or conversion—remains unclear, and cannot be explained without adding elements from other analytic approaches (for a fuller discussion, see Schmidt 2006b).

The main problem for the historical institutionalists, given their emphasis on structures, is how to explain human agency. For this, historical institutionalists mostly turn to analyses that add what Peter Hall and Rosemary Taylor (1996, pp. 940-1) term either a ‘calculus’ approach—which puts the historical institutionalists closer to the rational choice institutionalists, albeit still with a primacy to historical structures that shape actors’ interests—or a ‘culture’ approach—which puts them closer to the sociological institutionalists, although here historical structures add to norms to give meaning to actors’ interests and worldview. Examples abound on the combination of historical institutionalism with rational calculus (e.g., Immergut 1992; Hall and Soskice 2001; Thelen 2004; Streeck and Thelen 2005) as well as with culture (e.g., Katzenstein 1996; Dobbin 1994; Fligstein 1990).

*Sociological Institutionalism*

Sociological institutionalism instead focuses on the forms and procedures of organizational life stemming from culturally-specific practices, with institutions cast as the norms, cognitive frames, and meaning systems that guide human action as well as the cultural scripts and schemata diffused through organizational environments, serving symbolic and ceremonial purposes rather than just utilitarian ones. Rationality for sociological institutionalists is socially constructed and culturally and historically contingent. It is defined by cultural institutions which set the limits of the imagination, establishing basic preferences and identity and setting the context within which purposive, goal-oriented action is deemed acceptable according to a 'logic of appropriateness.' (see DiMaggio and Powell 1991; March and Olsen 1989; see also the discussion in Campbell 2004). Sociological institutionalism is thus in direct contradiction to rationalists' views of human behavior as following a 'logic of calculation' which is prior to institutions, including culture, norms, and identity, by which individuals may be affected but not defined. Instead, it assumes that norms, identities, and culture constitute interests, and are therefore *endogenous* because embedded in culture, as opposed to *exogenous* (see Ruggie 1998; Wendt 1987).

But as a result, rather than being too general, sociological institutionalism is sometimes accused of being too specific, and the 'cultural knowledge' it provides useful mainly as preliminary to rational choice universalization. However, when the objects of sociological institutionalism are subsumed under rational choice explanation, often the very essence of sociological institutionalism—the norms, rules, and reasons which are culturally unique or anomalous because they do not fit generally expected interest-motivations—get lost. Because such explanations are arrived at inductively rather than deductively, they can lend insight into individuals' reasons for action in ways that rational choice institutionalism cannot, whether they

fit the norm or depart from it. Moreover, because such explanations account contextually for individuals' reasons for action, sociological institutionalism is better able to explain the events out of which historical institutional explanations are constructed. And because sociological institutional explanations emphasize the role that collective processes of interpretation and legitimacy play in the creation and development of institutions, they can account for the inefficiencies in institutions that rational choice institutionalism cannot (Meyer and Rowan 1977; see discussion in Hall and Taylor 1996, p. 953).

However, because sociological institutionalism makes no universalistic claims about rationality and is generally focused on explanation within rather than across cultures, it risks an implicit relativism which leads one to question whether sociological institutionalism allows for any cross-national generalizations at all. In fact, generalizations are possible here too, by invoking similarities as well as differences in cultural norms and identities, much in the way of historical institutionalism with country-specific institutional structures and processes. The resulting explanation, however, involves a lower level of generality and less parsimonious, "thicker description" than in historical institutionalism, let alone rational choice institutionalism.

Finally, rather than appearing either economically or historically deterministic, sociological institutionalism can appear culturally deterministic where it emphasizes cultural routines and rituals to the exclusion of individual action which breaks out of the cultural norm, i.e., rule-creating action as opposed to rule-following action. Moreover, its emphasis on macro-patterns may make it appear like 'action without agents' (Hall and Taylor 1996, p. 954) or, worse, structures without agents (see the critique by Checkel 1998, p. 335). And like the rational choice approach, it too can be too static or equilibrium-focused, and unable to account for change over time—although where it adds a historical perspective, it can also show how norms

are institutionalized, as in the case of the police and military in postwar Japan and Germany (Katzenstein 1996) or how state identities can change and pull interests along with them, as in the case of anti-militarism in Germany and Japan (Berger 1998).

#### The Fourth 'New Institutionalism:' Discursive Institutionalism

Discursive institutionalism is the term I use for the fourth and newest of the 'new institutionalisms,' which focuses on the substantive content of ideas and on the interactive processes that serve to generate those ideas and communicate them to the public (Schmidt 2000, 2002, Ch. 5, 6; 2006a; Schmidt and Radaelli 2004). The 'institutionalism' in the term suggests that this is not only about the communication of ideas or 'text' but also about the institutional context in which and through which ideas are communicated. Although others have used the same term (see Campbell and Pederson 2001; Kjaer and Pederson 2001) or similar ones, such as ideational institutionalism (Hay 2001), constructivist institutionalism (Hay 2006), and economic constructivism (Abdelal, Blyth and Parsons n/a), they tend to focus much more on the ideas that are the substantive content of discourse than on the interactive processes involved in discourse. Sometimes, moreover, their definition tends to restrict the institutional context to the 'textual' one of the ideational constructivists (see Kjaer and Pederson 2001) or the cultural one of the sociological institutionalists, whereas my own categorization tends to be more open to sociological, historical and even possibly rational choice institutional contexts.

Discursive institutionalism differs from the three older 'new institutionalisms' in its objects of explanation, its logic of explanation, its problems of explanation, and its approach to questions of continuity and change (see Table 1). Importantly, it also has a greater ability to explain the dynamics of institutional change. This is because discursive institutionalism offers a

framework within which to theorize about how and when ideas in discursive interactions may enable actors to overcome constraints that explanations in terms of rational behavior and interests, historical rules and regularities, and/or cultural norms and frames present as overwhelming impediments to action.

[Table 1 about here]

This said, discursive institutionalism does not exist apart from the other institutionalisms. Institutions—whether understood in “new institutionalist” terms as socially constituted, historically evolving, or interest-based rules of interaction that represent incentives, opportunities, and/or constraints for individual and collective actors—frame the discourse, serving to define repertoires of more or less acceptable (and expectable) ideas and discursive interactions (see Schmidt 2002a, Ch. 5). As such, discursive institutionalism has a different relationship to the older three new institutionalisms from the ones they have to one another. Whereas the three older institutionalisms tend to offer rival analyses of political reality, discursive institutionalism tends to offer an analysis of political reality which, although also very different from the other three, may nonetheless build on any one of them in a complementary manner. In fact, discursive institutionalism has its sources in the turn to ideas of scholars immersed in the other three approaches, who looked to ideas as a way to enable them to explain the dynamics of institutional change within their own preferred institutionalism. This helps explain why discursive institutionalists themselves may more often have as interlocutors scholars who sit in any one of the older ‘new institutionalisms’ in which they themselves have roots than to discursive institutionalist scholars who follow in the tradition of another new institutionalism.

And it also lends insight into why some scholars who privilege the role of ideas (e.g., Campbell 2004) continue to posit only three new institutionalisms, while pointing to the turn to ideas and discourse as an important advance for all of the new institutionalisms.

### *The Turn to Ideas*

In all three of the older ‘new institutionalisms,’ how to explain change within essentially static institutions has been a fundamental problem. The turn to ideas has come as a natural progression, running the gamut from positivist approaches in which ideas are mainly seen as reflecting the strategic interests of actors to constructivist approaches in which ideas are seen to constitute interests. But while for some the turn to ideas has meant staying within the initial constructs of their older ‘new institutionalisms,’ others have moved beyond, into discursive institutionalism and a primary concern with ideas and how they are communicated through discourse.

Among rational choice institutionalists, the foray into the realm of ideas has remained rather circumscribed. In international relations, an early move to ideas was made by Judith Goldstein (1993), who suggested that under conditions of uncertainty, ideas behave like switches (or ‘road maps’) that funnel interests down specific policy directions, serving as filters, focal points, or lenses that provide policy-makers with strategies (see also Goldstein and Keohane 1993; Weingast 1995; Bates et al. 1998). Here, ideas have not gone very far beyond interests, since they are little more than mechanisms for choosing among interests, or as focal points for switching among equilibria (see critique by Ruggie 1998, pp. 866-7). Douglas North (1990) went farther, first by using ideas to overcome the problem of how to explain institutional construction, then by casting ideas as ‘shared mental modes.’ However, as Mark Blyth (2003, pp. 696-7; see also Blyth 2002, Chapter 2) insightfully argues, the contradictions inherent in

both such approaches may have been ‘a bridge too far.’ First, if ideas create institutions, then how can institutions make ideas ‘actionable?’ But second, if instead ideas are ‘mental modes,’ then what stops ideas from having an effect on the content of interests, and not just on the order of interests? This means that ideas would constitute interests, rather than the other way around. The problem for rational choice institutionalists, and the reason most quickly abandoned the pursuit of ideas, is that they could not continue to maintain the artificial separation of ‘objective’ interests from ‘subjective’ ideas about interests, i.e., beliefs and desires. And such subjective interests threatened to overwhelm the objective ones which were at the basis of the rationalists’ thin model of rationality, by undermining the ‘fixed’ nature of preferences and the notion of outcomes as a function of pre-existing preferences.

For the relatively few rational choice institutionalists who flipped over into discursive institutionalism, however, some of the most knotty problems could be addressed, such as assumptions about institutions as inherently good (or bad) and actors as instrumental. If one takes ideas seriously, as Bo Rothstein argues, institutions need no longer be treated as neutral structures of incentives or (worse) the immutable products of ‘culture’ that lead to inescapable ‘social traps.’ Instead, institutions are better understood as the carriers of ideas or ‘collective memories,’ which make them objects of trust or mistrust and changeable over time as actors’ ideas and discourse about them change in tandem with changes in their performance (Rothstein 2005, Ch. 1, 7). Moreover, if one sees ideas as constitutive of interests, then, as Paul Sabatier demonstrates, the dynamics of policymaking can be better cast in terms of the advocacy coalitions that are differentiable not just in terms of cognitive ideas—meaning perceptions of objective interests—but also in their normative ideas—meaning perceptions of which interests are appropriately pursued (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). Relatively few dyed-in-the-wool

rational choice institutionalists who considered the role of ideas have taken this last step, however. This is because taking ideas this seriously would force them to abandon the whole range of assumptions, in particular about fixed preferences and neutral institutional incentive structures, that make for the parsimony of the approach and everything that follows from it, including the ability to mathematically model games rational actors play as opposed to those ‘real actors play’ (see Rothstein 2005, ch. 1; Scharpf 1997).

In the historical institutionalist tradition, the move into ideas has been more significant. Here, the question is really where the tipping point is between historical institutionalists who continue to see institutions as constitutive of ideas, determining which ideas are acceptable, and those who might better be called discursive institutionalists within a historical institutionalist tradition because they see ideas as constitutive of institutions even if shaped by them. Interestingly enough, even in the book that gave historical institutionalism its name (Steinmo, Thelen, and Longstreth 1992), the few chapters that were focused on ideas—those of Peter Hall, Desmond King, and Margaret Weir—take us beyond historical institutionalism. But whereas Peter Hall’s earlier edited volume on the adoption of Keynesianism ideas (Hall 1989) remained largely historical institutionalist because historical structures come prior to ideas, influencing their adoptability, his later article on the introduction of monetarist ideas in Thatcher’s Britain (Hall 1993) crossed the line into discursive institutionalism, since ideas are central to change and constitutive of new institutions. Similarly, Desmond King (1999) in his book on illiberal social policy in Britain and the US made the move into ideas quite explicit, although he also retained a strong historical institutionalist emphasis on how institutional context made it easier for the British government to take up ideas and impose reform than in the US.

What defines work that is clearly discursive institutionalist within the historical institutionalist tradition is the focus on ideas as explanatory of change, often with a demonstration that such ideas do not fit predictable ‘rationalist’ interests, are underdetermined by structural factors, and/or represent a break with historical paths. Examples include Sheri Berman’s (1998) historical contrast between the German Social Democrat capitulation before Nazism because they were trapped in their Marxist ideology and the Swedish Social Democrats’ success in reinventing socialism; Kate McNamara’s (1998) account of European monetary union through a learning process that led to a neo-liberal consensus on monetarism following the German exemplar; Craig Parsons’ (2003) detailed history of the ways in which French ideas about constructing EU institutions became the institutionalized ideas which constrained subsequent French leaders’ ideas and actions; and my own elaboration of the ideas and discourse that help explain the different dynamics of change in the three (rather than just two) varieties of capitalism exemplified in the economic policies and practices of Britain, Germany, and France (Schmidt 2002a, Ch.’s 5 and 6).

In the sociological institutionalist tradition, one cannot talk about a move into ideas as such, since ideas have always been at the basis of the approach—as norms, cognitive frames, and meaning systems. However, there is also a tipping point here, On the one side are those ‘constructivist’ scholars who see ideas more as static ideational structures, as norms and identities constituted by culture, and who therefore remain largely sociological institutionalist as per the earlier definition. These include constructivists like Peter Katzenstein and his colleagues who shows how interests developed from state identities structure national perceptions of defense and security issues (Katzenstein 1996). On the other side are those constructivists who more clearly fit under the rubric of discursive institutionalism. These are the constructivists who,

in addition to putting ideas into cultural context, put them into their ‘meaning’ context as well (e.g., Kjaer and Pederson 2001, Hay 2006). They tend to present ideas as more dynamic, that is, as norms, frames, and narratives that not only establish how actors conceptualize the world but also enable them to reconceptualize the world, serving as a resource to promote change through ‘structuration’ (Wendt 1987, pp. 359-60), through the diffusion of international norms in developing countries (e.g., Finnemore 1996), or through the reconstruction of state identities and ideas about European integration (Risse 2001).

With this wide range of approaches to ideas, an immediate critique could be that there are too many ideas about ideas, that is, definitions of what they are and how they work—especially between those writing in the more rational choice or historical institutionalist tradition on the one hand and those in the more constructivist historical institutionalist tradition on the other. In fact, the diversity is not so problematic because the different approaches focus on different aspects of ideas: cognitive and normative, and therefore tend to be situated along different sides of a positivist-constructivist continuum.

Those on the more positivist side tend to follow in the rational choice or historical institutionalist tradition, to focus on the cognitive aspects of ideas, and to work in comparative politics and political economy. They tend to be preoccupied with establishing how new ideas get accepted, how to determine kinds and degrees or ‘orders’ of change, generally following Kuhn (Hall 1993; Hay 2001; Schmidt 2002a, Ch. 5), and what criteria for success can be established (Schmidt 2002a, Ch. 5). By contrast, those on the more constructivist side of the continuum tend to follow in the sociological institutionalist tradition, to focus on the normative aspects of discourse, and to work in international relations. They tend to be more concerned with how ideas constitute the norms, narratives, discourses, and frames of reference which serve to

(re)construct actors' understandings of interest and redirect their actions within institutions (e.g., Wendt 1987; Finnemore 1996, Risse 2001), with how and why they 'resonate' with national values, and how they may 'revalue' values, all within a logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen 1989; Rein and Schön 1991; Schmidt 2000a, Habermas 1996).

Not all scholars fit neatly into one or the other camp, however. In comparative politics in particular, those who focus on the role of economic ideas may look positivist because they consider the cognitive usages of those ideas in legitimizing policy change. But they are often also constructivist in their critique of the normative spin of those ideas. This is as much the case of Colin Hay and Ben Rosamund, who investigate the normative underpinnings of neo-liberal ideas and their social construction in the process of globalization (Hay and Rosamund 2002), as of Mark Blyth (2002), who analyzes the role of foundational economic ideas the 'embedding' and 'disembedding' of liberalism in Sweden and the US. My own work on the role of values and discourse in the politics of adjustment of the welfare state is similarly constructivist (Schmidt 2000).

There is one major problem with this focus on ideas, which is that we have yet to really explain the dynamics of institutional change. Although concentrating on ideas gets us closer to why institutional changes occur, with the tracing of change in ideas over time that presage the institutional shifts, they still don't explain how such institutional changes occur, that is, how the ideas themselves promote institutional change. For this, we need to consider another aspect of discursive institutionalism, which is the interactive side of discourse. How ideas are generated among policy actors and diffused to the public by political actors through discourse is key to explaining institutional change (and continuity).

*Discourse as Interactive Process*

Most of the discursive institutionalists just discussed tend to deal mainly with ideas, leaving the interactive processes of discourse implicit as they discuss the ideas generated, deliberated, and legitimized by the various actors. Some scholars, however, have gone farther to formalize the interactive processes of idea generation, diffusion, and legitimization, and to clarify how they are structured. They tend to see discourse not only as a set of ideas bringing new rules, values and practices but also as a resource used by entrepreneurial actors to produce and legitimate those ideas. Their approaches can be divided into those focused on the ‘coordinative’ discourse among policy actors and those more interested in the ‘communicative’ discourse between political actors and the public (see Schmidt 2002a, Ch. 5). Note that these scholars, too, can be differentiated along a continuum from positivist to constructivist.

In the coordinative sphere, discursive institutionalists tends to emphasize primarily the individuals and groups at the center of policy construction who generate the ideas that form the bases for collective action and identity. Some of these scholars tend to be largely positivist as they focus on the loosely connected individuals united by a common set of ideas in ‘epistemic communities’ in the international arena (Haas 1992) or as they target more closely connected individuals united by the attempt to put those ideas into action through “advocacy coalitions” in localized policy contexts (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). Others tend to be more constructivist, as they describe how ideas are conveyed through “advocacy networks” of activists in international politics (Keck and Sikkink 1998) or single out the individuals who, as ‘entrepreneurs’ (Fligstein and Mara-Drita 1996; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) or ‘mediators’ (Jobert 1992; Muller 1995) draw on and articulate the ideas of discursive communities and coalitions in particular policy domains in domestic or international arenas.

In the communicative sphere, discursive institutionalists emphasize the use of ideas in the mass process of public persuasion in the political sphere. Some of these scholars tend to be more positivist in their accounts of the processes of communication in electoral politics and mass public opinion creation (Mutz, Sniderman, and Brody 1996), when politicians translate the ideas developed by policy elites into the political platforms that are put to the test through voting and elections. Others tend to be more constructivist in their concern with the ‘communicative action’ (Habermas 1996) that frames national political understandings or with the more specific deliberations in the ‘policy forums’ of informed publics (Rein and Schön 1991) about the ongoing policy initiatives of governments. Exemplary of this is David Art’s (2006) investigation of the elite-led public debates about the Nazi past in Germany and Austria in the 1980s that engendered very different political cultures and partisan politics by the 1990s, leading to highly contrasting results with regard to the rise of the far right.

In all of these approaches, the empirical analysis of the process of institutional change is very different from that found in rationalist, historical, or sociological institutionalism, since it is focused on who talks to whom about what when how and why, in order to show how ideas are generated, debated, adopted, and changed as policymakers, political leaders, and the public are persuaded, or not, of the cognitive necessity and normative appropriateness of ideas. Institutional context clearly matters here, but not quite in the way that it matters for rationalist, historical, or sociological institutionalists.

Material interests, economic in particular, which are at the basis of much of the institutional incentives in the rational choice institutionalist literature, are not ignored. But in discursive institutionalism, scholars tend to separate material interests analytically into material reality and interests rather than to conflate them. Moreover, whereas they posit interests as

constituted by ideas and discourse, such that interests cannot be separated from ideas about interests, they see material reality mostly as separate from interests, and best understood as the setting within which or in response to which agents conceive of their interests. Thus, they problematize the rationalists' whole notion of 'objective' material interests by theorizing interests as subjective responses to material conditions (see Blyth 2002 and discussion in Hay 2006). This kind of analytic distinction is sometimes hard to maintain in practice, however, as Colin Hay (this volume) points out in his critique of Blyth (2002), since even the most committed of constructivist discursive institutionalists sometimes treat interests as materially-given and/or structurally derived. But although this may very well be a manifestation of rationalist backsliding, it could instead be interpreted as a short-hand way of dealing with the fact that a certain range of responses to material realities can be expected (although not predicted), given what we know about human rationality (and irrationality). Importantly, in contrast to rational choice institutionalists, who extrapolate from such expected responses their predictions about rational actors' 'objective' and fixed preferences, discursive institutionalists take the actual responses to material reality as their subject of inquiry.

Equally significantly, however, discursive institutionalists often go beyond the focus on the construction of interests alone to include values, whether understood as cultural mores, community morals, or ethics. This takes them into the domain of sociological institutionalism, where culture and norms are at the basis of much of the institutional framing of the sociological institutionalist literature. But again, the ideas in discourse do not only reflect cultural norms; the discourse through which they are conveyed, if persuasive, can also serve to reframe such norms and recreate new cultural mores.

Finally, the macro-structures and regularized practices that are the subject of historical institutionalist analysis are also significant for shaping ideas. But importantly, ideas and discourse can also serve to reshape the macro-structures and regularized practices. This suggests another avenue for historical institutionalists who seek to go beyond description to explanation of ‘what happens.’ Instead of turning to rational choice or sociological institutionalism for human agency, both of which are still quite static, as we have already seen, they could turn to discursive institutionalism to help explain the dynamics of institutional change, with ideas and discourse providing another kind of micro-foundational logic to institutional development.

Historical institutionalism, however, with its focus on formal (as well as informal) institutional contexts, can also add a macro-structural logic to discursive institutionalist accounts of ideas and discourse. This is because institutional arrangements do not only shape ideas, they also shape the discourse, affecting *where* discourse matters, by establishing who talks to whom about what, where and when.

For example, in ‘simple’ polities (or single-actor constellations) where governing activity tends to be channeled through a single authority, mainly the executive—primarily countries with majoritarian representative institutions, statist policymaking, and unitary states like Britain and France—the communicative discourse to the general public tends to be much more elaborate than the coordinative discourse among policy actors. This naturally follows from the fact that a restricted group of policymakers, largely made up of or guided by government actors tends to generate the policies that political leaders then seek to legitimate to all, including the most affected groups. The communicative discourse is therefore crucial, since without it governments face sanctions ranging from interest group protest to loss of public confidence and loss of elections (see Schmidt 2002a; 2006a).

By contrast, in ‘compound’ polities where governing activity tends to be dispersed among multiple authorities—countries with proportional representation systems, corporatist policymaking, and/or federal or regionalized states like Germany and Italy—the coordinative discourse among policy actors tends to be much more elaborate than the communicative discourse to the public. This naturally follows from the large group of policy actors, including government officials, business and union representatives, as well as local and regional government representatives, all of whom may be engaged in the generation of policies. The coordinative discourse is therefore crucial not just with regard to reaching agreement on policy among the many policy actors involved but also in legitimating such agreement to those actors’ different constituencies. The communicative discourse is by contrast likely to be quite thin because political leaders’ discourse tends to be very general, in order to avoid jeopardizing any of the compromises made in private among policy actors. An exception among compound polities is the United States, since it has a strong communicative discourse as a result of its majoritarian politics and presidential system along with a strong coordinative discourse as a result of its pluralist processes and federal structures. The highly compound European Union, by comparison, has the weakest of communicative discourses as a result of the lack of an elected central government—and its dependence on national leaders to speak for it—and the strongest of coordinative discourses, given its highly complex, quasi-pluralist processes and quasi-federal structures (see Schmidt 2006).

### *The Limits of Discursive Institutionalism*

Discursive institutionalism works best, in short, at explaining the dynamics of change (but also continuity) through ideas and discursive interactions. As such, it largely avoids the static determinism of the other three ‘new institutionalisms.’ By the same token, however, it

risks appearing highly voluntaristic unless the structural constraints derived from the three newer institutionalisms are included—whether rationalist interests, historical paths, or cultural norms. The appearance of voluntarism is especially problematic for scholars who focus only on ideas, where ‘text’ appears without context, as in postmodernist approaches. But even where the context is considered, other problems may arise.

In discursive approaches that follow in the sociological institutionalist tradition, there is always the danger that social construction goes too far, and that material interests qua material interests are ignored in favor of seeing everything as socially constructed within a given culture (see the critique of Sikkink 1991 by Jacobsen 1995). This leads one to question whether there is anything ‘out there’ at all, mutually recognizable across cultures. But while discursive approaches in the sociological institutionalist tradition may suffer from too much constructivism, those in the rational choice or historical institutionalist tradition may suffer from too much positivism, with political action assumed to be motivated by instrumental rationality alone, such that cognitive ideas about interests overdetermine the choice of ideas, crowding out the normative values which also color any conceptualization of interest.

But all discursive institutionalist approaches, whether positivist or constructivist, may also be overly deterministic with regard to the role of ideas, seeing the influence of ideas everywhere in the way that rational choice institutionalists see instrumental rationality everywhere or sociological institutionalists, cultural rationality. Most importantly, ‘stuff happens.’ As the historical institutionalists remind us, processes of change are often unconscious—as people may act without any clear sense of what they are doing, creating new practices as a result of ‘bricolage’ and destroying old ones as a result of ‘drift’ (Thelen 2004; Streeck and Thelen 2005; see also Campbell 2004: 69-74). But even when there is conscious

action, when people do have ideas about what they are doing, what they do most often has unintended consequences, not only in an historical institutionalist sense because the outcomes may be unanticipated but also in a discursive institutionalist sense because ideas may be reinterpreted or misunderstood.

Thus, the big question for discursive institutionalism in explaining change, once we have established that ideas and discourse do matter and how they matter, is: *When* do ideas and discourse matter, that is, when do they exert a causal influence? And when don't they?

Establishing causality with regard to ideas and discourse can be problematic. The very question itself may seem inappropriate to constructivist discursive institutionalists who see causal logics of explanation as operating in a different domain from constructivist logics of interpretation (e.g., Wendt 1999; Bevir and Rhodes 2003). Other constructivists, however, argue that bracketing off questions of causality and explanation from those of meaning and interpretation is unnecessary (see Hay 2004: 145). In fact, whether constructivist or positivist, most discursive institutionalists see their main explanatory task as that of demonstrating the causal influence of ideas and discourse (e.g., Hay 2001; Schmidt 2002, Ch. 5 and 6; Blyth 2003; Parsons 2003). This approach to the causal influence of ideas and discourse is very different from that of historical institutionalists like Hall (1989), whose Keynesian ideas are presented as objective and universally meaningful ideas, diffusing change across nations and time, acting as causal forces coming from the outside. And it is even more different from those of rationalists like Goldstein and Keohane (1993), where ideas are 'switches' or 'mental modes' that determine preferences. But it is also different from those of constructivists who emphasize culture as constitutive of ideas. This is because, here, ideas are seen from the inside, as empirical subjects to be studied in terms of their development in interpretive meaning contexts (see Kjaer and

Pederson 2001). Thus, for discursive institutionalists, the question of causality is an empirical one of showing when ideas and discourse matter, and when they don't.

Discourse, just as any other factor, sometimes matters, sometimes does not in the explanation of change. The question is *when* does it matter, say, by redefining interests as opposed to merely reflecting them in rationalist calculations, by reshaping historical paths as opposed to being shaped by them, or by recreating cultural norms as opposed to reifying them (see Schmidt 2002: 250-256). And when are other factors more significant, say, where the creation of new institutional paths or cultural norms may be better captured by historical or sociological institutionalist analysis, because actors don't have any clear idea about what they are doing when they are doing it. Part of the reason many political scientists avoid explanations related to discourse is that it is difficult to separate it from other variables, to identify it as *the* independent variable. But instead of ignoring discourse because of the difficulties, because it may not be *the* cause, it is much better to ask when is discourse *a* cause, that is, when does discourse serve to reconceptualize interests, to chart new institutional paths, and to reframe cultural norms.

For this, we need to establish what criteria to use in evaluating whether discourse has a causal influence, that is, when it is 'transformative,' and when not. Such criteria require a lot more elaboration than possible here. Suffice to say that in the realm of ideas, a 'good' discourse depends upon the relative strength or 'truthfulness' of its cognitive arguments, the resonance of its normative arguments, the adequacy of the information upon which the arguments build; the relevance or applicability of its recommendations; the coherence and consistency of its ideas, and more (Schmidt and Radaelli 2004). In the realm of discursive interactions, who is speaking to whom in coordinative and communicative spheres also matters. And all of this can be

investigated empirically, for example, through process-tracing of ideas held by different actors that led to different policy choices (Berman 1998); through matched pairs of country cases where everything is controlled for except the discourse to show the impact of discourse on welfare adjustment (see Schmidt 2002b); through speeches and debates of political elites that then lead to political action (Dobbin 1994; Art 2006); through opinion polls and surveys to measure the impact of the communicative discourse (Koopmans 2004); through interviews and network analysis to gauge the significance of the coordinative discourse, and more.

Institutional context also needs to be taken into consideration, however. For example, in ‘simple’ polities (or ‘single-actor’ systems) where the communicative discourse is most elaborate, the causal influence of discourse is most likely to be ascertainable in the responses of the general public over time, as discovered through protests and election results, opinion polls, and surveys. By contrast, in ‘compound’ polities (or ‘multi-actor’ systems) in which the coordinative discourse is most elaborate, the causal influence is more likely to be seen in whether or not there is any agreed policy, with empirical investigation focused on interviews and reports of policy actors (Schmidt 2002a).

## **Conclusion**

To get a sense of how the four new institutionalisms fit together in a very general way, I present a chart that arrays the four institutionalisms along a horizontal continuum from positivism to constructivism—from interests to culture, with history in between—and along a vertical continuum from statics to dynamics, with interests, history, and culture at the static end, ideas and discourse at the dynamic end (see Figure 1). I put historical institutionalism between rational choice and sociological institutionalism, mainly because rational choice and sociological

institutionalism are largely incompatible, whereas historical institutionalism can go either to the positivist or the constructivist side when it adds agency. I put discursive institutionalism underneath all three because, although it is distinctive, it can rest upon the insights of any one of the three and because scholars often see themselves as continuing to fit into one or another of the traditions even as they cross the line into discursive institutionalism.

[Figure 1 about here]

But although discursive institutionalism thus appears at the bottom of the explanatory hierarchy, lending new insights into the reconceptualization of rationalist interests, the reshaping of historical paths, and the reframing of cultural norms, it would be a mistake to therefore think of it as something of an afterthought, to be dismissed as too complex, not ‘parsimonious’ enough, or too micro-foundational. Rather, it would be better to see it as in a natural progression from the three older new institutionalisms, and a progress over them. As such, we might do better to flip the hierarchy over. In this sequence, we could present the other three new institutionalisms as background knowledge to the discursive institutionalist approach, providing useful insights into the crystallized ideas about rationalist interests and cultural norms or the frozen landscapes of macro-structures and routinized actions prior to our investigation into the dynamics of change. Put another way, the old ‘new institutionalisms’ could be seen as good shortcuts to the uncontested regularities and rationalities of institutionalized behavior and interactions. But to explain change, as well as to test the accuracy of such crystallized ideas and frozen landscapes, we need something more: discursive institutionalism.

The overall goal of this essay has been to argue for tolerance for many methodological approaches, as represented by the four new institutionalisms, and to give peace a chance. But is this likely? For a long time now, political scientists, having developed their own theoretically sophisticated arguments with which to explain and defend their approaches, have seen one another as rivals, often at war to prove not only that they are predominant but also to predominate. The problem with this is that there has been little real engagement, since there are few possibilities for pitched battles. At best, there are skirmishes at the borders of the various approaches—and occasional truces in these inter-border regions. This is because the different approaches fight with different weapons on different terrain for different ends against different adversaries. But occupying such different territories means that instead of seeing their relations with rival approaches as methodological wars where the battles are fought over conceptual territory, they would do better to declare peace, and begin exploring areas of mutual compatibility along their borders. Thus, they could and should see one as all engaged in the theoretically and empirically worthwhile tasks of explaining different parts of political reality, and to take a more ‘eclectic’ approach to political analysis (Sil and Katzenstein 2005). This would surely move all four new institutionalisms forward theoretically, while providing the greatest benefits for empirical research.

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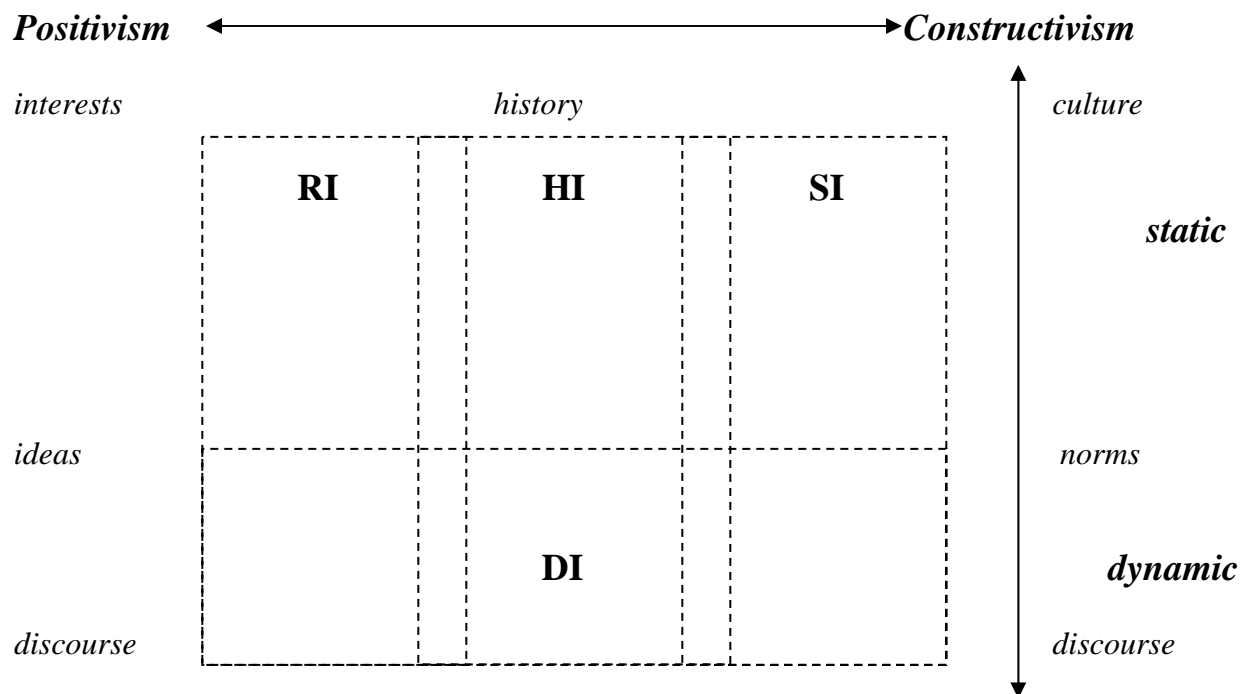
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**Table 1: The Four New Institutionalisms**

	Rational Choice Institutionalism	Historical Institutionalism	Sociological Institutionalism	Discursive Institutionalism
Object of Explanation	Rational Behavior and Interests	Historical Rules and Regularities	Cultural Norms and Frames	Ideas and Discourse
Logic of Explanation	Calculation	Path-dependency	Appropriateness	Communication
Problems of Explanation	Economic determinism	Historical determinism	Cultural determinism or relativism	Ideational determinism or relativism
Ability to explain change	Static: continuity through fixed preferences	Static: continuity through path dependence	Static: continuity through cultural norms	Dynamic: change and continuity through ideas & discursive interaction



**Figure 1: Spatial Relationship of the Four New Institutionalisms: Rational Choice (RI), Historical (HI), Sociological (SI), and Discursive (DI)**  
(dotted lines represent border areas)

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