

INSTITUTIONALISM AND THE STATE

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Vivien A. Schmidt
Boston University

The so-called ‘new institutionalism’ is a relatively recent addition to the pantheon of theories of the state and, like some of the other perspectives considered in this volume, it is by no means *only* a theory of the state. Nonetheless, and as explained in the introductory essay, its origins lie in the attempt to ‘bring the state back into’ mainstream political science by a range of theorists critical of the dominant agent-centred and behaviouralist approaches of the time (see, for instance, Evans et al. 1985). Such authors argued for the need to contextualize politics institutionally – in other words, to see the conditions of political opportunity as being, to a significant extent, set institutionally. In so doing, they developed a corrective to the dominance, as they saw it, of input-oriented theories of politics, which emphasized the pressures and influences brought to bear upon the state, rather than the capacity of the institutions of the state to respond to such pressures. This institutional contextualization of politics was initially confined to the attempt to bring the state back into political analysis but was later generalized, as neo-statism gave way to a more overarching new institutionalism. Yet, whilst the exclusive focus on the state has softened in the development of the new institutionalism out of neo-statism, the state still lies at the heart of new institutionalist scholarship – even if it not always labeled as such.

Institutionalism is characterized, unremarkably perhaps, by its emphasis upon the institutional context in which political events occur for the outcomes and effects they generate. In contrast to the then prevailing behaviouralist and rational choice orthodoxies it emphasizes the extent to which political conduct is shaped by the institutional landscape in which it occurs, the importance of the historical legacies bequeathed from the past to the present and the range of diversity of actors’ strategic orientation to the institutional contexts in which they find themselves (Hay 2002: 14-5). Each contributes to its distinctive view of the state.

In recent years, ‘new institutionalism,’ which involves ‘bringing institutions back in’ to the explanation of politics and society, has gained increasing currency in political science. What political scientists mean by new institutionalism, however, depends upon their preferred methodological approach to political science, and its particular epistemological and ontological presuppositions. And this in turn has significant implications for the study of the state. There are three main new institutionalisms—rational choice, historical, and sociological institutionalism—plus a fourth newer ‘new institutionalism—discursive institutionalism. Each has different objects, goals, and standards of explanation with regard to the state, and each has different advantages and disadvantages with regard to analyses of the state.

Rational choice institutionalism portrays the state either as itself a rational actor pursuing the ‘logic of interest’ or as a structure of incentives within which rational actors follow their preferences. Historical institutionalism concentrates instead on the origins and development of the state and its constituent parts, which it explains by the (often unintended) outcomes of purposeful choices and historically unique initial conditions in a ‘logic of path-dependence’. Sociological institutionalism sees the state as socially constituted and culturally framed, with political agents acting according to the ‘logic of appropriateness’ that follows from culturally-specific rules and norms. Finally, the newest of the ‘new’ institutionalisms, ‘discursive’ institutionalism, considers the state in terms of the ideas and discourse that actors use to explain, deliberate, and/or legitimize political action in institutional context according to the ‘logic of communication.’

This chapter begins with a discussion of the ‘old institutionalism’ that provided a largely descriptive view of the state’s institutional arrangements, of the ‘holistic’ approaches that looked instead to political systems, of the behaviorism that rejected both in favor of a focus on individual human behavior, and of the ‘new institutionalism’ that proposed to supercede all the previous approaches. It follows this with a closer analysis of each of the three main ‘new institutionalisms,’ providing definitional accounts of their main characteristics, their epistemological and ontological differences, their benefits and their drawbacks, and how they interrelate and intersect. It concludes with a consideration of the fourth and newest new institutionalism, as a remedy for some of the problems of the older new institutionalisms.

From the ‘Old Institutionalism’ to the ‘New Institutionalism’

No account of the new institutionalisms would be complete without first mentioning the ‘old’ institutionalism. The original institutionalism studied the formal institutions of government and defined the state in terms of its political, administrative, and legal arrangements—as epitomized in the work of Woodrow Wilson. It used a largely descriptive methodology to explain the relations among levels and branches of government, with conceptions of the state drawn from traditional political philosophy and understood in terms of sovereignty, justice, power, citizenship, and legal status in international law. Where the old institutionalism was comparative, it mainly juxtaposed different state configurations to demonstrate similarities or differences in how governments worked. It remained largely atheoretical, although some political theories did develop, such as pluralist theory of interest groups (e.g., Bentley), while there were some methodological dissenters in favor of ‘scientism,’ like Charles Merriam (see Somit and Tanenhaus 1982).

By the 1950s and 1960s, systemic approaches to political science had largely superceded the old institutionalism, whether structural-functionalist or other ‘holistic’ approaches such as Marxian analysis, which had its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s. In structural-functionalist, the concept of the state was replaced by the political system and explained in terms of the equilibrium-seeking functioning of its structural parts—through interest articulation and aggregation (Almond and Powell 1966; Easton 1957). This had an essentially conservative bias in favor of the status quo. Embedded in the approach was the uncritical normative assumption that the system would go on so long as its structures functioned in such a way as to achieve its goal—self-maintenance—and that “societies which fulfill the functions more completely are *pro tanto* better” (Taylor 1967, p. 156). Moreover, the system was static in the sense that revolutions were

anomalies, unexplainable within the system, and change was absorbed by the system as an instance of ‘homeostatic equilibrium.’ Where the approach was linked to a political theory of the state, it picked up on traditional interest group theory, and assumed that the state’s role was to arbitrate among competing interests, with the outcome the public interest (Dahl 1961a; see also Chapter 1). The counter-theory was Marxian analysis which, although equally systemic, cast the state as a superstructure in the service of one interest, the bourgeoisie, and saw the system as a whole functioning via class conflict rather than interest competition, with the expected outcome not self-maintenance but self-destruction through revolution (Dahrendorf 1959; see also Chapter 3)]. This approach was clearly also normative in its assumptions, but critical of the status quo as well as socially determinist.

By the 1960s and 1970s, behaviorism, also begun in the 1950s, had for the most part submerged the old institutionalism as well as political systems approaches as the predominant approach in political science with a focus on individuals and their behavior (Somit and Tanenhaus 1982). The state as a term disappeared altogether, as did the political system. ‘Methodological individualism’ replaced the ‘methodological holism’ of structural-functionalist and Marxian approaches while the old institutionalism was dismissed as mere description. The behavioral ‘revolution’ sought to explain the “phenomena of government in terms of the observed and observable behavior of men” (Truman 1951—cited in Dahl 1961b) and rejected the normative biases of both structural-functional and Marxian approaches in favor of ‘objective’ empirical observation—since the political scientist was concerned with “what *is*, as he says, not what *ought* to be” (Dahl 1969). In addition, most behaviorists assumed that “human and social behavior can be explained in terms of general laws established by observation” (Przeworski and Teune 1970, p. 4) and sought to develop precise techniques by which to measure data and to demonstrate the validity of law-like theories (Kirkpatrick 1971, pp. 71-3). Naturally, that which could be most readily quantified, such as voting and public opinion via electoral studies, survey research, and opinion polling, became the focus. Where this was more difficult, rational choice (or public choice) approaches were pioneered using mathematical models drawn from economics—most notably with the work of Anthony Downs (1957; see Chapter 4).

‘New institutionalism’ began in the late 1970s and early 1980s with the desire by a wide range of scholars to bring the institutions of the state back into the explanation of political action. It was less focused on rejecting the ‘old institutionalism’, most of the concepts and information of which it treated as background knowledge, than on providing a counter to behaviorism. Behaviorism itself was by now under attack from the inside as well as from the outside because it was perceived as plagued by overquantification and undertheorizing, without much cumulation of knowledge into a coherent body of theory (see, e.g., Wahlke 1979; Ostrom 1982).

‘New institutionalism’ was a response to the absence of institutional analysis, of considering collective action *qua* collective—through composite or institutional actors—rather than reducing political action to its methodological individualist parts. The theoretical core uniting the very disparate kinds of institutionalisms that emerged rejected the proposition that observable behavior was the basic datum of political analysis and argued instead that behavior cannot be understood without reference to the ‘institutions’ within which such behavior occurs (Immergut 1998, pp. 6-8).

But while the new institutionalists have been united on the importance of institutions and in the rejection of behaviorism, they have been divided along a number of other dimensions. These include first and foremost the way in which they define the state—understood now as the whole range of governing structures in and/or through which political actors, governmental as well as non-governmental, interact—and the logic of political action. But new institutionalists have also been divided along continua ranging from universalistic to particularistic generalizations, from positivism to constructivism, and from static to more dynamic explanations of political action.

Rational Choice Institutionalism

Rational choice institutionalism in political science has its roots in the problems encountered by rational choice analysts, in particular those interested in American congressional behavior. Because conventional rational choice analyses predicted instability in congressional decision-making due to uncertainties resulting from the multiplicity of individual preferences and issues (e.g., Riker 1980), how could it explain the unexpected stability of outcomes? The answer was found in the institutions of the state, in particular in the rules of procedure in Congress that lowered the transaction costs of making deals, thereby solving seemingly unsolvable collective action problems (Shepsle 1986).

In short, rational choice institutionalists brought the state back in as a way of explaining outcomes that could not be explained by universal theories of rational action without reference to institutional context. But rather than asking about the context itself, meaning the state, they generally took the institutions as given and asked about the nature of rational action within such institutions. Thus, they posit rational actors with fixed preferences who calculate strategically to maximize those preferences and who, in the absence of institutions that promote complementary behavior through coordination, 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; Ostrom 1990).

In American politics, rational choice institutionalist analyses are found in principal-agent theories of how ‘principals’—e.g., congress, the executive, or political parties—maintain control or gain compliance from the ‘agents’ to which they delegate power—e.g., bureaucracies, regulatory agencies, or courts (e.g., McCubbins and Sullivan 1987). In comparative politics, rational choice institutionalists consider delegation between European Union institutional actors (Pollack 1997; Moravcsik 1998), the European Parliament as agenda setter (Tsebelis 2002), and the collective decision-making traps in Europe (Scharpf 1999), while in international relations they examine delegation in international organizations (Martin 2000) or use a game-theoretic approach to democratic transitions (Przeworski 1991).

Rational choice institutionalism works best at identifying the interests and motivations behind rational actors’ behavior within given institutional settings. The deductive nature of its approach to explanation means that it is tremendously helpful 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 good at 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, and therefore might better be explained in sociological, historical, or discursive

institutional terms (Scharpf 1997). Moreover, where the push is toward universalistic generalizations, problems with overgeneralization abound. One approach that consciously seeks to avoid this problem is the ‘actor-centered institutionalism’ of Fritz Scharpf (1991), which develops “bounded generalizations” about the outcomes of actors’ institutionally-constituted strategic interactions through the identification of subsets of cases in which variance in policy outcomes can be explained by variances in the same set of factor constellations (i.e., problems, policy legacies, actors’ attributes, and institutional interactions).

But however ‘bounded’ the generalizations, because of rational choice institutionalism’s very deductiveness, along with a theoretical generality that starts from universal claims about rationality, rational choice institutionalism has difficulty explaining 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).

The rational choice institutionalist approach is also 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).

In addition, rational choice institutionalist explanation is 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 other than in purely functionalist terms. 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. The normative assumptions lie in positing political action as motivated by instrumental rationality alone, and thereby risks making the utilitarian calculus within established institutions the universal arbiter of justice (e.g., Elster and Hylland 1986, p. 22—see the critique by Immergut 1998, p. 14). What is more, despite the fact that rational choice institutionalists could question the institutional rules within which rational actors seek to maximize their utility, either in terms of the justness of the institutional rules or of the exercise of institutional power, they generally do not (see Immergut 1998, p. 13). They don’t even question them in terms of efficiency (e.g., North 1990)! Instead, as Terry Moe complains, they tend to see institutions “as good things, and it is their goodness that ultimately explains them: they exist and take the forms they do because they make people better off” (2003, p. 3—cited in Thelen 2004). A notable exception is Margaret Levi’s Marxian rationalist analysis of the ‘predatory’ state with regard to tax collection (1989). But mostly, institutions—and with them the state—are assumed to be good things that create greater stability for rational actors’ utility maximization.

Historical Institutionalism

Historical institutionalism is arguably the institutionalism most influenced by the old institutionalism as well as by political systems approaches, both structural-functional and Marxian approaches. From the old institutionalists came the continuing interest in the state and the formal institutions of government; from the structural-functionalists, the emphasis on structures (but not functions); and from the Marxists, the focus on power, with the state seen “no longer as a neutral broker among competing interests but as a complex of institutions capable of structuring the character and outcomes of group conflict” (Hall and Taylor 1996, p. 938). Thus, historical institutionalism, unlike rational choice institutionalism, focuses most explicitly on the state and its institutional development—with the state just as problematic as the action within it. Historical institutionalists have explored not just state structures but all the structures through which governing occurs: in political economy not just state actors but also labor organizations, business associations, and financial institutions; in public policy not just state legislators but also organized interests, the electorate and the judiciary (Hall and Taylor 1996; see also Steinmo et al. 1992).

Historical institutionalism began in the late 1970s with the works of comparativists like Theda Skocpol (1979) and Peter Katzenstein (1978), international relations scholars like Stephen Krasner (1980), and Americanists like Stephen Skowronek (1982), all of whom were intent on ‘bringing the state back in’ (Evans et al. 1985). These scholars argued that political action could not be reduced to individual behavior alone or even to group activity because of the importance of how the state structured action and of how state capacity and policy legacies structured outcomes. Their work formed the basis for the subsequent, more self-consciously historical institutionalist body of literature. Among these, Peter Hall (1986) explained the different trajectories of British and French political economic development as the result of the structural constraints implicit in their socio-economic organization; Peter Katzenstein (1985) demonstrated that the economic openness of small states combined with strong welfare states could be explained by historically-developed, corporatist institutional structures; while Paul Pierson (1994) showed how past welfare state policies set the conditions for future policies in a comparison of the US and Britain.

Historical institutionalism works best at delineating the origins and development of institutional structures and processes over time. It tends to focus on sequences in development, timing of events, and phases of political change. It emphasizes 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.

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, the “new” historical institutionalism rarely stays at the level of the “mere story-telling” of which it is sometimes accused by rational choice institutionalists. Noticeably absent is the focus on “great men” or “great moments” characteristic of more traditional historical approaches in the old institutionalism. In fact, the macro-historical approach prevalent in most accounts tends 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 (2003; 2004) argues, 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 even here, how change is instigated—either through layering or conversion—remains unclear without adding elements from other analytic approaches.

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. There is, however, an alternative ontology to both culture and calculus, as Colin Hay and Dan Wincott argue (1998), which situates agency within the historical institutionalist approach itself. But this will be considered below, because it flows into the discussion below of ideas and discourse. . Examples abound on the combination of historical institutionalism with rational calculus. Ellen Immergut’s (1992) comparative study of healthcare reform explains cross-national differences in physicians’ calculations of their interests in terms of the way in which governing structures—as veto-points—affect their expectations of future success in limiting (or not) reform efforts. Thelen’s (2004) study of institutional change in skills regimes in Britain, Germany, Japan and the United States turns to rationalist accounts of ongoing political negotiation focusing on political coalitions and political conflicts to explain change through layering and conversion. Peter Hall in a collaborative project with David Soskice (2001) embedded a rationalist analysis of firm-centered coordination in a historical institutionalist analysis of the binary division of capitalism into liberal market economies (e.g., Britain) and coordinated market economies (e.g., Germany), in seeking micro-foundations for historical institutionalism. Building on a combination of historical institutionalism and rationalist calculus but bringing the state back into a comparison of the evolving political economies of Britain, France, and Germany, I argue that there are at least three varieties of market economy, with France representing the third, state-enhanced variety (Schmidt

2002, Part II). Paul Pierson (2004), finally, in his study of the dimension of time in political analysis has tipped to the other side in an attempt to provide a temporal dimension to rational choice institutionalism (2004).

Sociological Institutionalism

Sociological institutionalism, much like historical institutionalism, had its beginnings in the late 1970s, mainly in the sociological sub-field of organizational theory. Sociological institutionalists also rejected the older methodological approaches, including behaviorism, systems approaches, as well as rational choice analyses. Against Weberian assumptions about the rationality and efficiency of organizations in particular, sociological institutionalists turned to the forms and procedures of organizational life stemming from culturally-specific practices. Sociological institutionalists' institutions are cast as the norms, cognitive frames, and meaning systems that guide human action as well as the cultural scripts and schema diffused through organizational environments, serving symbolic and ceremonial purposes rather than just utilitarian ones. Here too, then, much like rational choice institutionalism, the state is the taken for granted environment in which action occurs—but the sociological institutionalist's state looks very different from the rationalists' state, as cultural practices rather than rational action infuse it with meaning.

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 Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; DiMaggio and Powell 1991; March and Olsen 1989; see also the discussions in Hall and Taylor 1996, pp. 947-8; Campbell and Pederson 2001, pp. 7-8; Campbell 2004). Sociological institutionalism is thus in direct contradiction to rationalists' views of human behavior as following a 'logic of interest' which is prior to institutions, by which individuals may be affected but not defined.

Sociological institutionalist analyses that are particularly significant for political scientists include Frank Dobbin's (1994) study of nineteenth century railway policy, where reasonably similar policies were 'concealed' as state actions in the United States but 'revealed' as state actions in France; Neil Fligstein's (1990) account of the transformation of corporate control as resulting from change not just in economic environments but also in corporate leaders' perceptual lenses; and Yasemin Soysal's (1994) contrast of immigration policy in Europe and America, which showed the importance of distinctive 'incorporation regimes' for absorbing immigrants based on differing models of citizenship. In political science itself, the seminal work is by James March and Johan Olsen (1989), who argued that cultural as well as historical structures matter, and who therefore have been claimed as one of their own by historical institutionalists as much as by sociological institutionalists. More recently, a number of political scientists have moved to sociological institutionalism (see Finnemore 1996a), in particular in international relations, where they often call themselves 'constructivists.' Most notable has been Peter Katzenstein's edited volume (1996) that focuses on how interests develop from state identities, with norms acting as collective expectations about the proper behavior for a given identity, and with state identities structuring national perceptions of defense and security issues.

Sociological institutionalism works best at delineating the shared understandings and norms that frame action, shape identities, influence interests, and affect what are perceived as problems and what are conceived as solutions. It stands in direct opposition to rational choice institutionalism in its assumption that norms, identities, and culture constitute interests, and are therefore *endogenous* because embedded in culture, as opposed to seeing interests as *exogenous* and culture, norms, and identity epiphenomena that follow from interests rather than preceding them (see Ruggie 1998; Wendt 1987).

But as a result, rather than being too general, it 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 1987; 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 the 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 1996b) 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).

Discursive Institutionalism

Discursive institutionalism is the term I use for the fourth and newest of the ‘new institutionalisms’ (Schmidt 2002; see also Campbell 2001), although other terms such as ideational institutionalism (Hay 2001), constructivist institutionalism (Hay 2006), and economic constructivism (Abdelal, Blyth and Parson 2005) would also be appropriate. This approach has grown out of many new institutionalists’ concern with the seeming inability of any of the three older new institutionalisms to explain change, given their often very static view of institutions. The problem with the other approaches was brought home as a result of real events, in particular as Communist states collapsed following the fall of the Berlin wall, giving the lie to the static presuppositions of all three approaches (see Blyth 2003), and as the rationalist presuppositions of neo-liberalism encountered problems with democratic transitions (Campbell and Pederson 2001, p. 7-8; Campbell 2004). The turn to the role of ideas and discourse was a natural next step for scholars immersed in all three of the new institutionalisms but concerned to explain changes within the state and to the state. And in so doing, most added the institutional context of their own preferred approaches. But while for some, turning to ideas meant staying within the initial constructs of their own institutionalist approach, others 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 been relatively short-lived. 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; 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? And if ideas constitute interests rather than the other way around, then how can rationalists maintain their notion of the ‘fixed’ nature of preferences which is at the basis of their thin model of rationality? This helps explain why rational choice institutionalists quickly abandoned the pursuit of ideas.

In the historical institutionalist tradition, the move into ideas has been more lasting. 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. Thus, Peter Hall, whose earliest work was squarely within historical institutionalism, focusing on the institutional stability of institutions over time (1986), and whose latest work combined historical institutional structures of capitalism with a rational choice institutionalist focus on strategic firm coordination

(2001), in between focused on the role of economic ideas to explain change. However, whereas in his first ideational approach, on the adoption of Keynesianism ideas (Hall 1989), he remained largely historical institutionalist because historical structures come prior to ideas, influencing their adoptability, in the second, on the introduction of monetarist ideas in Thatcher's Britain (Hall 1993), he crossed the line to discursive institutionalism, since ideas are central to change and constitutive of new institutions. Interestingly enough, even in the book that gave historical institutionalism its name (Steinmo et al. 1992), the few chapters that were focused on ideas—those of Peter Hall, Desmond King, and Margaret Weir—take us beyond historical institutionalism. Desmond King (1999) in his book on illiberal social policy in Britain and the US makes this move quite explicit through the focus on the role of ideas and knowledge in the making of policy, although King also retains a strong historical institutionalist component with his emphasis on how institutional context makes it easier for the British government to take up ideas and impose reform than in the US.

Within the historical institutionalist tradition, in fact, much recent work focused on ideas tips into what I call discursive institutionalism—although the dividing line is admittedly fuzzy. What defines these 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 (see discussion in Blyth 2003). Examples include Sheri Berman's (1998) historical contrast between the German Social Democrats' capitulation before Nazism, in large measure because they could not think beyond their long-held Marxist ideas, and the Swedish Social Democrats' success in not only fighting fascism but also in creating a social democratic state because they were free of any such ideational legacy and able to reinvent socialism; Kate McNamara's (1998) account of European monetary union which posited a three-step learning process of, first, policy failure, second, the search for new ideas that led to a neo-liberal consensus on monetarism and, third, the adoption of the German exemplar; and finally Mark Blyth's (2002) analysis of the role of foundational economic ideas at moments of economic crisis first in 'embedding' liberalism in the 1930s and then 'disembedding' it beginning in the 1970s in Sweden and the United States. My own analysis of the political economies of Britain, France, and Germany highlights the differences between historical institutionalist and discursive institutionalist approaches by first presenting (in Schmidt 2002, Part II) a calculus-oriented, historical institutionalist examination of the evolution in the three countries' economic practices followed (in Part III) by a discursive institutionalist discussion of the changing ideas and discourse in the politics of economic adjustment.

It is interesting to note that most of the ideational approaches that follow from the historical institutionalist tradition sit closer to the positivist end of the positivist-constructivist continuum, and are found for the most part in comparative politics. In these approaches, ideas are seen as representing the necessary conditions for collective action within the state, by serving to redefine economic interest and to reconfigure interest-based coalitions. The focus tends to be on the cognitive aspects of ideas, that is, on how new ideas get accepted, how to determine kinds and degrees or 'orders' of change, generally following Kuhn (Hall 1993; Hay 2001; Schmidt 2002, Ch. 5), and what criteria for success can be applied in terms of relevance, applicability, and coherence or consistency (Schmidt 2002, Ch. 5).

Most ideational approaches that are within the sociological institutionalist tradition, by contrast, sit closer to the constructivist end, and are mostly found in international relations. In these approaches, ideas constitute the norms, narratives, discourses, and frames of reference which serve to (re)construct actors' understandings of interests and redirect their actions within the institutions of the state. The focus here is on the normative aspects of discourse, that is, how and why new ideas 'resonate' with national values, and how they may 'revaluate' values, all within a logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen 1989; Rein and Schön 1991; Schmidt 2000).

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 scholars who see ideas more as static ideational structures, as norms and identities constituted by culture, and thus remain largely sociological institutionalists as per the earlier definition. These include 'constructivists' like Katzenstein and his colleagues (1996) who stay largely within sociological institutionalism because they "cut into the problem of ideational causation at the level of 'collective representations' of ideational social facts and then trace the impact of these representations on behavior" (Ruggie 1998, pp. 884-5). On the other side are constructivists who more clearly fit under the rubric of discursive institutionalism because they 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. These include Alexander Wendt, who sees social structures as having "an inherently discursive dimension in the sense that they are inseparable from the reasons and self-understandings that agents bring to their actions" while agents and structures are "mutually constitutive," with "each in some sense an effect of the other" (1987, pp. 359-60). Scholars who explore this more dynamic dimension empirically include Martha Finnemore (1996b), who examines the diffusion of international norms to developing countries, and Thomas Risse (2001) who considers the ways in which different European countries successively constructed and reconstructed their state identities and ideas about European integration.

Some scholars don't fit neatly into one or the other camp. 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 constructivists in their critique of the normative spin of those ideas. Colin Hay and Ben Rosamund in particular have been explicit in their investigation of the normative underpinnings of neo-liberal ideas and their social construction in the process of globalization (Hay and Rosamund 2002; Hay 2005; Rosamund 2005). But Schmidt (2000) and Blyth (2002) and Schmidt (2002) to a lesser extent could also be seen as constructivist in their combination of cognitive and normative analysis of ideas.

Most of the discursive institutionalists just discussed—whether in the historical or sociological institutionalist tradition or straddling the two—tend to deal mainly with ideas, leaving the interactive processes of discourse implicit as they discuss the ideas generated, accepted, and legitimized by the various actors. Some scholars, however, have gone farther to formalize the interactive processes of idea generation, acceptance, 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 2002, Ch. 5)

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 focus on the loosely connected individuals united by a common set of ideas in ‘epistemic communities’ in the international arena (Haas 1992). Others 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) or through “advocacy networks” of activists in international politics (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Yet others single out the individuals who, as ‘entrepreneurs’ (Fligstein and Mara-Drita 1996; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) of ‘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 focus on electoral politics and mass opinion (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 are more concerned with the ‘communicative action’ (Habermas 1996) that frames national political understandings; yet others, on the more specific deliberations in the ‘policy forums’ of informed publics (Rein and Schön 1991) about the on-going policy initiatives of governments.

Discursive institutionalism works best at explaining the dynamics of change (but also continuity) through its attention to ideas and discursive interactions, new or continuing. As such, it largely avoids the economic, historical, or cultural 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. This is not so much an issue for the discursive institutionalist scholars discussed above, given that their approaches already follow from one or a combination of institutionalist traditions—but where ‘text’ appears without context, as in postmodernist approaches, the risks are significant.

There are other problems, however. 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 historical institutionalist tradition may suffer from too much positivism, with political action assumed to be motivated by instrumental rationality alone (even if contextualized by history and culture), such that cognitive ideas about interests overdetermine the choice of ideas, crowding out the normative values which also color any conceptualization of interest.

Finally, establishing causality can be a problem. Discourse, just as any other factor, sometimes matters, sometimes does not in the explanation of change. The question is *when* does discourse matter, that is, when does it exert a causal influence on policy change, say, by redefining interests as opposed to merely reflecting them in rationalist calculations (see Schmidt 2002), 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 cannot be *the* cause, it is much better to ask when is discourse *a* cause, that is, when does discourse serve to reconceptualize interests rather than just reflect them, to chart new institutional paths instead of simply following old ones, and to reframe cultural norms rather than only reify them.

Conclusion

The study of the state, as we have seen, is very different depending upon the kind of new institutionalism. Each has a different object of explanation—whether rational behavior, historical structures, norms and culture, or ideas and discourse; a different logic of explanation—whether interests, path-dependency, appropriateness, or communication; a different emphasis on continuity or change—whether on continuity through fixed preferences, through path dependency, or through cultural norms, or on change through ideas and discursive interactions (see Table 1). The result is that there are very different kinds of institutionalist studies of the state, many of which focus little on the state itself but, rather, on different kinds of action within the state.

[Table 1 about here]

To get a sense of how all of this fits together in a very general way, I conclude with a chart that situates the works cited above within each of the four institutionalisms while arraying 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 discourse 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 in one or another of the traditions even as they fit best in discursive institutionalism. I have a darkened line under rational choice institutionalism to indicate its inability to handle ideas and discourse in a dynamic way.

[Figure 1 about here]

Among the questions that remain to be answered is one crucial one: can these four new institutionalisms fit together? Can empirical studies of any one issue mix approaches? Many of the most theory-driven of new institutionalists would answer in the negative, because their

purpose is to demonstrate how their particular approach is the best way of explaining politics. More problem oriented scholars mix approaches all the time, using whichever approaches seem the most appropriate to explaining their object of study. More recently, some scholars have also been addressing the question of how to use the insights of all four approaches in their empirical work. In policy analysis, to take just one example, David Marsh and Martin Smith (2000) have proposed a dialectical approach to understanding policy networks which uses methods from all four new institutionalisms to explaining the ways in which policy actors in given institutional contexts under certain constraints with particular learning experiences and ideas choose different courses of action over time. But while this may help answer the practical question of how to meld approaches in empirical investigation, it does not resolve the question of how they may fit together theoretically. Indeed, a look at the responses to Marsh and Smith demonstrates this well, as all come back to defend their own approaches (e.g., Dowding 2001; Raab 2001). For a theoretical answer to the question of how the various approaches fit together, new institutionalists need first to stop 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. This would surely move all four new institutionalisms forward theoretically, while providing the greatest benefits for empirical research.

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Table 1: The Four New Institutionalisms

	Rational Choice Institutionalism	Historical Institutionalism	Sociological Institutionalism	Discursive Institutionalism
Object of Explanation	Rational Behavior	Historical structures	Norms and Culture	Ideas and Discourse
Logic of Explanation	Interest	Path-dependency	Appropriateness	Communication
Ability to explain change	Static--- emphasis on continuity through fixed preferences	Static--- emphasis on continuity through path dependency	Static--- emphasis on continuity through cultural norms	Dynamic--- emphasis on change and continuity through ideas and discursive interaction
Examples	Principle-agent theory; game theory	historical institutionalism process tracing varieties of capitalism	Constructivism; norms; cultural analysis	Ideas; discourse; constructivism; narratives; frames; advocacy coalitions; epistemic communities

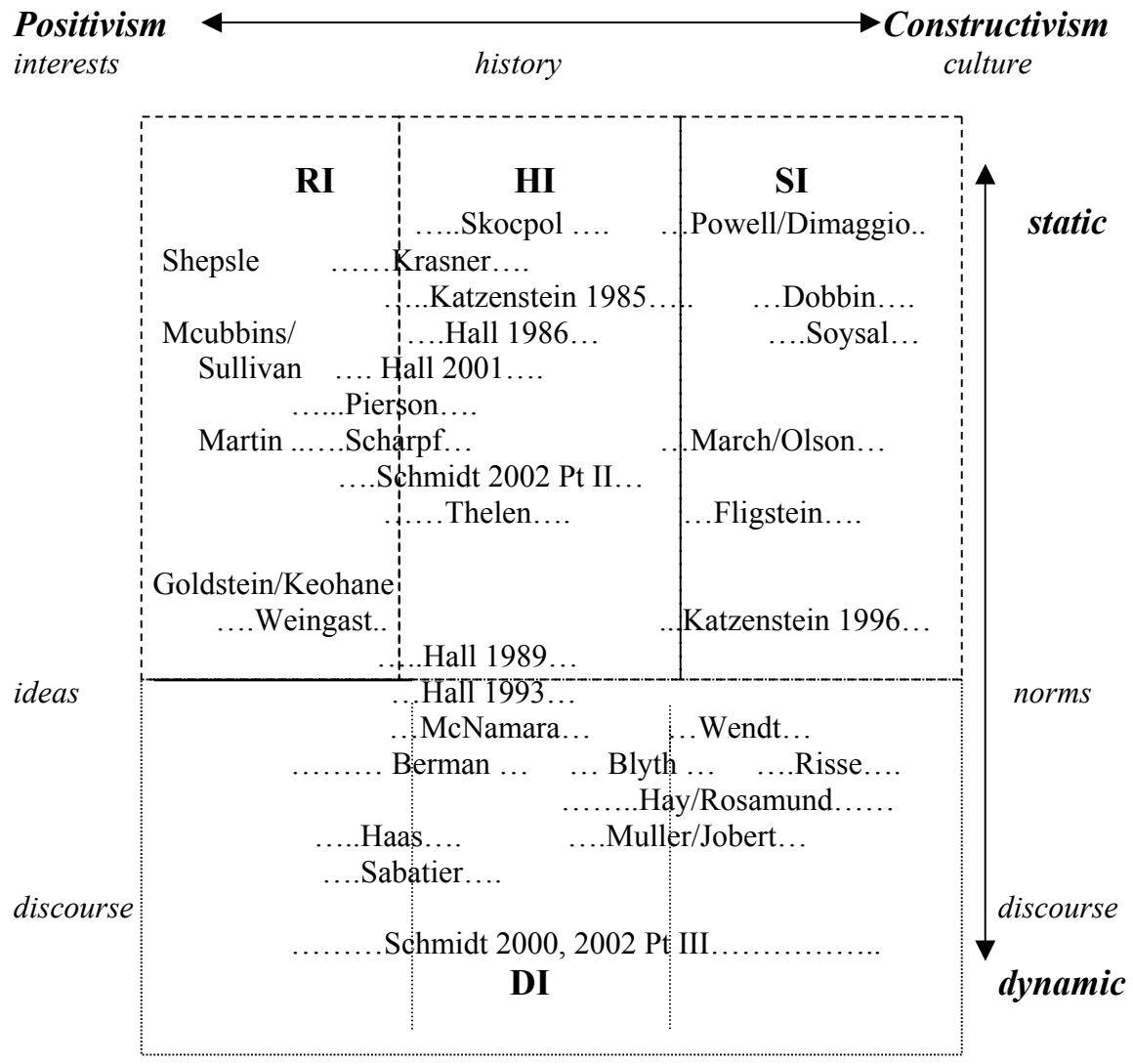


Figure 1: Scholars’ use of the Four New Institutionalisms: Rational Choice (RI), Historical (HI), Sociological (SI), and Discursive (DI)

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