POLITICS AND INSTITUTIONALISM: Explaining Durability and Change

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ABSTRACT
From the complex literatures on "institutionalisms" in political science and sociology, various components of institutional change are identified: mutability, contradiction, multiplicity, containment and diffusion, learning and innovation, and mediation. This exercise results in a number of clear prescriptions for the analysis of politics and institutional change: disaggregate institutions into schemas and resources; decompose institutional durability into processes of reproduction, disruption, and response to disruption; and, above all, appreciate the multiplicity and heterogeneity of the institutions that make up the social world. Recent empirical work on identities, interests, alternatives, and political innovation illustrates how political scientists and sociologists have begun to document the consequences of institutional contradiction and multiplicity and to trace the workings of institutional containment, diffusion, and mediation.

INTRODUCTION
Institutions endure. As a reaction against methodological individualism, technological determinism, and behavioralist models that highlight the flux of individual action or choice (March & Olsen 1989), the resurgence of institutional analysis in recent years has forcefully reminded social scientists of the significance of this "relative permanence of a distinctly social sort" (Hughes 1936:180, Zucker 1988:25). Observing that organizations and nation-states resemble one another more than one would predict given their different circumstances (DiMaggio & Powell 1983, Meyer & Rowan 1977, Meyer et al 1977),
institutionalist analyses have developed compelling explanations for the relative absence of variation across cases or over time. Institutional arguments may also explain persistent differences, as when national industrial policies toward comparable technical issues consistently diverge (Dobbin 1994). In both instances, the core theoretical insight is the same: The patterning of social life is not produced solely by the aggregation of individual and organizational behavior but also by institutions that structure action.

This important contribution has generated new puzzles. One challenge follows from institutionalism’s emphasis on enduring constraint. Institutions, it too often seems, “explain everything until they explain nothing” (Thelen & Steinmo 1992:15). Insofar as institutional arguments maintain that variation and change are minimized, those same arguments are ill-suited to the explanation of change (North 1981, Orren & Skowronek 1994, Powell 1991:183–200). A second challenge is to determine the locus of change. Insofar as institutional change happens, where and when is it most probable and why?

These questions are particularly relevant for political sociologists. In organizational and economic sociology, “institution” is often taken to mean formal law and state organizations (e.g. Congress, the Department of Agriculture) or the models of organization they embody. Consequently, the resurgence of interest in institutional analysis signals an opportunity for a more expansive conversation among these subfields. Yet the capacity of these “institutions” to constrain political action and policy variation appears to marginalize the processes of conflict and innovation that are central to politics (Campbell 1998, DiMaggio 1988, Hicks 1995, Hirsch & Lounsbury 1997, Stryker 1999). This concern has been directed with greatest force toward that sociologically rooted “new institutionalism” which has become predominantly (although not necessarily) associated with the constitutive role of culturally legitimate models of organization and action (e.g. DiMaggio & Powell 1983, 1991, Meyer & Rowan 1977). For political sociologists, therefore, the renewed interest in institutions constitutes a faustian bargain. Wider attention to political entities such as the state or law comes at the price of obscuring political processes.

This dilemma, we argue, results from the tendency to equate institutions with stability or durability. For many political scientists and sociologists, the massively reinforced and embedded array of the state exemplifies the concept of institution. Given the image of the state as concrete, powerful, and constraining, change is most easily understood as the product of some sort of exogenous shock that disrupts an established order (Krasner 1984, Thelen & Steinmo 1992:15). If, on the other hand, institutions are understood as self-sustaining higher-order effects (Jepperson 1991; Zucker 1977; on institutional self-replication, Stinchcombe 1968:108–18; on the reproduction of structure, Sewell 1992:19), theories about the sources of stability and instability can be developed and tested.
Rather than focusing on the trait of durability, this second formulation raises questions about reliable reproduction, potential sources of change, and responses to disruption. This approach also requires a disaggregation of the capacity of institutions to constrain and constitute action. This change in focus is indicated by the substitution of “institutional” for “state-centered” in the theoretical language of political sociology (Orloff 1993:41); the distinction between state-centered and societal accounts of policy development has been blurred by the recognition that policies themselves may induce interests (Moe 1987:281–83, Pierson 1994:27–50). In their efforts to conceptualize the interrelationships between political actors and institutions, many scholars have turned to the dualistic terms of “structuration theory” (Archer 1988, Giddens 1984, Sewell 1992) to distinguish both the “virtual” aspects of institutions—the model, template, or schema—and the resources, interactions, and interpretive processes that make that pattern self-sustaining.

These theoretical reformulations have generated an increasingly rich appreciation of the conditions, mechanisms, and processes that account for durability and change in political institutions. Disaggregation of the monolithic entity of “the state” also facilitates exchanges with institutionalist arguments developed in organizational analysis, social psychology, and simulation studies of social dynamics. In the sections that follow, we first survey the complicated definitional terrain of “institutionalism” and then sketch the components of change that emerge from the recent literature in political science and sociology: mutability, contradiction, multiplicity, containment and diffusion, learning and innovation, and mediation.

This exercise results in a number of clear prescriptions for the analysis of institutional change: disaggregate institutions into schemas and resources; decompose institutional durability into processes of reproduction, disruption, and response to disruption; and, above all, appreciate the multiplicity and heterogeneity of the institutions that make up the social world (Friedland & Alford 1991; see also Clemens 1997:45–59, 1999; Orren & Skowronek 1994). Recent empirical work demonstrates how these institutional processes generate both durability and change, although mutability remains relatively unexplored. Under the banners of the “new institutionalisms,” political scientists and sociologists have begun to document the consequences of institutional contradiction and multiplicity and to trace processes of containment, diffusion, innovation, and mediation.

WHAT IS AN INSTITUTION? AND WHY DO INSTITUTIONS ENDURE?

The enemy of my enemy is my friend. This basic political dynamic underlies much of the complexity of the current institutional turn across the social sci-
ences. The common “enemy” was provided by the dominance of reductionist, behaviorist, methodologically individualist, and functionalist arguments in social science theory in the decades following World War II (March & Olsen 1989). Against this background, efforts to reassert the significance of “higher order” constraints or influences on action developed in numerous disciplines (for reviews, see DiMaggio & Powell 1991, Hall & Taylor 1996, Scott 1995, Thelen & Steinmo 1992). Faced with regularities where a purely individualistic, instrumental model of action would predict instability, rational choice theorists in political science directed attention to conventions, such as the committee system in Congress, that help to solve collective action problems (see Sheple & Weingast 1987, Moe 1987 on the “positive theory of institutions”). A related “choice-within-constraint” framework has claimed the title of “the new institutionalism in sociology” (in contrast to the “new institutionalism in organizational analysis”); here the emphasis is on exploring the interrelationships among formal rules, informal norms, social networks, and purposive action (Brinton & Nee 1998).

Within political science and sociology, a part of the reaction against methodological individualism took the forms of neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian theories of the (relative) autonomy of the state (e.g. Nordlinger 1981, O’Connor 1973, Skocpol 1979, 1985), which in turn fueled a vibrant, interdisciplinary return to institutional and policy history (March & Olsen 1984, 1989, Skocpol 1992, Skowronek 1982). Confronted with the persistent divergence of national policy responses to similar political challenges, comparativists in political science, history, and sociology also called for renewed attention to the state and other institutions that structure political decision-making and conflict (Dobbin 1994, Hall 1986, Katzenstein 1985, Steinmo et al 1992). Intrigued by the unanticipated uniformity of firms in the modern economy and of nations within the world polity, sociologists argued for the power of taken-for-granted or legitimate models (rather than solely instrumental calculations) in shaping patterns of action and organization (DiMaggio & Powell 1983, Meyer & Rowan 1977). But although each of these literatures had a distinctive intellectual lineage, all concurred in claiming the label “institutional.”

Faced with this abundance of theoretical claims, each empirically plausible, many commentators have enumerated the differences between old and new institutionalisms as well as among the multiplying “new institutionalisms” (DiMaggio & Powell 1991, Hall & Taylor 1996, Scott 1995, Stinchcombe 1997). Others bemoan the lack of familiarity among institutional approaches and called for disciplined eclecticism (Campbell 1998, Ethington & McDonagh 1995, Finnemore 1996, Hall & Taylor 1996, Koelble 1995). In this latter spirit, we privilege a basic definition over the familiar distinctions among institutions as constraining or constitutive, as operating through regulative, normative, or cognitive mechanisms: Institutions exert patterned higher-order effects on the
actions, indeed the constitution, of individuals and organizations without requiring repeated collective mobilization or authoritative intervention to achieve these regularities (Jepperson 1991). Marriage, money, and the corporate form are institutions to the extent that these models of social relations and exchange are reliably reproduced through the actions of individuals and groups without requiring either repeated authoritative intervention or collective mobilization.

Such reliable higher-order effects have been attributed to distinct mechanisms, none mutually exclusive. First, institutions may negatively constrain action, define opportunity, and facilitate patterns of interaction. Here the imagery is architectural or maze-like, echoing Hobbes’ claim that “the use of Lawes . . . is not to bind the People from all voluntary actions; but to direct and keep them in such a motion, as not to hurt themselves by their own impetuous desires, rashnesse, or indiscretion, as Hedges are set, not to stop Travellers, but to keep them in the way” ([1651] 1968:388). In this formulation, desires and interests are conceptually distinct from institutions (although institutions may also shape preferences; see Steinmo 1993, Wildavsky 1987). Political scientists have tended to adopt this sense of institution as external constraint, as a schema massively embedded in resources for social control rather than internalized by well-socialized actors (on the conceptual alternative of “institution as equilibrium,” see Calvert 1995). Retaining a strong sense of the political actor as institutionally underdetermined (Hicks 1995:1226, Smith 1988:90–96), these analyses conceptualize institutions as configurations of rules and resources either inherited from the past (Thelen & Steinmo 1992) or constructed to solve collective action or decision-making problems (Shepsle & Weingast 1987). Although differing in the prominence of instrumental action and explicit bargaining or design in their accounts of institutional origins, both variants conceptualize institutions as “humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction” (North 1990:3). Institutions endure to the extent that they are not disrupted by exogenous shocks such as war or so long as shifts in other opportunities do not lead individual actors and coalitions to defect from institutionalized arrangements.

Institutions may also provide positive models for how to do something. Approaches that predominate in sociology conceive of institutions as models, schemas, or scripts for behavior. Consequently, institutions endure because these models become “taken for granted” through repeated use and interaction (Berger & Luckmann 1967, DiMaggio & Powell 1991:19–22) or “legitimate” through the endorsement of some authoritative or powerful individual or organization (Meyer & Rowan 1977). Institutions are understood as models that provide substantive guides for practical action. Institutions are durable to the extent that these models are reinforced through socialization or interaction or legitimation while alternative scripts remain unimaginable. The distinctions
between normative and cognitive variants are necessarily blurred insofar as the process of institutionalization, as understood by ethnomethodologists, “is one in which the moral becomes factual” (Zucker 1977:726). Although the cognitive or cultural emphasis in institutional analysis is often linked to the charge that institutionalism is apolitical, the processual question of how social arrangements and beliefs come to be taken for granted resonates with political theorists’ articulation of a “third level of power”: “the means through which power influences, shapes or determines conceptions of the necessities, possibilities, and strategies of challenge in situations of latent conflict” (Gaventa 1980:15, see also Lukes 1974).

Both theoretical models may account for the same empirical observations. If a mouse repeatedly takes the same path across a table, this regular pattern may be due to either to the presence of a maze that obstructs many possible changes in direction or to effective socialization through behavior modification. However, since the mouse may be well-socialized and in a maze, these “institutionalisms” are properly understood as complements, rather than as mutually exclusive explanations. Recognition of the multiple sources of regular patterns in social life has the further advantage of allowing one to conceptualize institutional durability as a continuous variable. Given a well-built maze and thoroughly conditioned mouse, one would not expect the mouse to deviate from the appointed path; given a less sturdy maze and a mouse bent on escape, the outcome is less certain.

The theoretical literature employs varied combinations of these two basic images of institutions: the first constraining and prescriptive, the second constitutive and prescriptive. One strategy has been to sort the social world into domains governed by noninstitutional “instrumental logics” or technical considerations and those governed by “logics of appropriateness” (March & Olsen 1989, Meyer et al 1983). This approach is undermined, however, by the increasing recognition of the socially constructed character of technical rationality (Espeland 1998, Porter 1995) as well as by attention to how actors perceive and interpret information (North 1995, Ikegami 1995:340). The once-sharp lines between rational choice (the “positive theory of institutions”) and historical or cultural institutional analyses have been eroded by the elaboration of a “choice-theoretic” or “choice-within-constraints” version of institutional theory, which adopts a culturally or contextually nuanced sense of “thick rationality” (Nee 1998:10–11). Network analysis has also diminished the distinction between these imageries. Networks may generate durable ties and practices through constitutive processes of social interaction or by shaping the opportunities and obstacles to exchange and cooperate (Nee & Ingram 1998, Powell 1991:190, Zucker 1988:29). From many directions, the development of institutional analysis has muted the conventional distinctions among institutionalisms.
Rather than highlighting the theoretical differences among these arguments, the tales of a mouse in a maze underscore the multiple dimensions of institutional durability. Given that regular patterns of social action may be produced by external constraints or internalized models, those regularities will be stronger to the extent that these multiple sources of regularity coincide and reinforce one another. In light of the potential for complex interactions among institutional processes (Stryker 1994, 1999), the following discussions are organized around the outcomes that combine to produce institutional durability and change: reproduction, disruption, and responses to disruption.

COMPONENTS OF INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE: REPRODUCTION AND DISRUPTION

Following the resurgence of interest in institutional theory, scholars soon faced the puzzle of explaining institutional change. Initial arguments stressed the alternation of stable institutions and dramatic change, a tempo captured in Krasner’s (1984) appropriation of the evolutionary concept of “punctuated equilibrium.” In this formulation, institutions are stable until disrupted by some force exogenous to the institutional system itself (see Sewell 1992:3, 16): war or global economic changes may disrupt national regimes, new laws may disrupt institutionalized economic arrangements (Fligstein 1990).

Recent work has greatly refined the causal imagery of some external force or legislative deus ex machina smacking into stable institutional arrangements and creating indeterminacy. Historical analyses demonstrate how choices among institutional arrangements may be “constitutive moments” or branching points that channel subsequent political and economic developments (Berk 1994, Rothstein 1992, 1998). At the same time, the concrete imagery of “state as [relatively autonomous] structure” is increasingly replaced by an understanding of institutions as constituted by a cultural component (variously labeled a model, schema, template, or rule) embedded in, or sustained by, or enacted through resources and/or social networks (see Archer 1988, Giddens 1984, Sewell 1992; for alternative formulations of “culture as a resource” see Pedriana & Stryker 1997:638–42). This distinction between schemas and resources provides a framework for thinking about sources of institutional change: within or among schemas; within or among resources; or between schemas and resources. The second of these has received little attention to date, but analyses of institutional change offer multiple variations on the first and last possibilities. Schemas may be more or less mutable; they may embody internal contradictions; or multiple schemas or institutional rules may be potentially relevant to a context for action. Within an existing system of institutional rules, resources and networks may contain variations or facilitate diffusion;
they may support learning or innovation, thereby incrementally altering sche-
mas; or they may mediate the impact of exogenous shocks and environmental
changes on institutions.

Schemas and Institutional Change
Cognitive, cultural, or normative variants of institutional theory typically em-
phasize the role of existing models or scripts in shaping behavior, particularly
but far from exclusively under conditions of uncertainty. But variation is rarely
addressed in such arguments. Are there characteristics of models, or the condi-
tions under which they are adopted, that produce more or less reliable repro-
duction of established templates? Focusing on the role of established schemas
in maintaining institutional stability, this section addresses three possible
sources of change: mutability, internal contradictions, and multiplicity.

MUTABILITY Although much political analysis concerns the change from one
sort of institutional order or regime to another, a more fundamental form of
institutional change involves the loss of order or growth of social entropy
(Zucker 1988). Reliable reproduction in the face of stochastic change is thus
central to the concept of institution: “institutions are those social patterns that,
when chronically reproduced, owe their survival to relatively self-activating
social processes” (Jepperson 1991:145).

At the most basic level, some sets of rules or models of action may be more
mutable than others. For example, Crawford & Ostrom (1995:583) begin with
the concept of an institutional statement, “a shared linguistic constraint or op-
portunity that prescribes, permits, or advises actions or outcomes for actors
(both individual and corporate).” Such statements about “shared strategies” of
action specify to whom the statement applied; for what purposes; under what
conditions; with what sanctions; and whether the statement must, must not, or
may be followed. Clear implications for institutional mutability may be de-

erived from the last of these components. If followed, an exclusively “must” set
of institutional rules would maximize accurate reproduction; a set of “must
not” rules would function as Hobbes’ hedges, predicting only the boundaries
of what is doable; and a thoroughly “may” set would minimize the institutional
determination of social action promoting mutation and innovation.

Institutional statements that neither demand nor prohibit a particular behav-
ior promote heterogeneity of action. Actors relate to institutional rules as a rep-
ertoire or tool kit (Clemens 1997, Minkoff 1994, Swidler 1986) of alternative
models or schemas. The presence of alternatives lessens the institutional deter-
nmination of action while also facilitating innovation through recombination.
Haveman & Rao (1997:1620) demonstrate that in an environment of multiple
competing institutional mandates, hybrid forms can emerge that combine vari-
ous properties of competing models. Thus, the contrasts among “must,” “must
In the capacity of institutional arrangements to sustain reliable reproduction, **INTERNAL CONTRADICTIONS** building on a biological analogy, mutability may be understood as stochastic. Social theory, however, frequently asserts that change is determined by the character of prior arrangements, specifically by their internal contradictions. Captured most forcefully in the concept of the dialectic, this insight highlights the instabilities inherent in certain systems of belief or practice. Often, these instabilities unfold developmentally, as when the faculty–graduate student relationship designed to produce new colleagues must be transformed from a supervisory into a collegial relationship; the success of the first institutional arrangement requires its own transformation. Analogous dynamics are invoked in analyses of political mobilization and formal institutions. Models or scripts for behavior may be appropriate in one situation, yet dysfunctional in the new conditions brought about by following the script. Mass membership movements that successfully disrupt existing institutions may be superseded by leadership movements that exploit the openings produced by that disruption (Schwartz 1976); presidential candidates who present themselves as loyal party members in order to secure the nomination then seek to use the autonomous powers of the presidency to succeed on the terms of that office (Skowronek 1993).

In accounts of macrohistorical change, the power of internal contradiction is most associated with Marxian dialectics. And, like capitalism, institutions may produce their own grave-diggers. Citizenship classifications used to administer empires or federations may construct “minorities” or “nationalities” that become the basis for challenges to the rule of the central state (Anderson 1983, Brubaker 1996). Policies that require workers to fund their own insurance through unions may strengthen those unions as the organizational base of a politicized working class (Rothstein 1992). To the extent that institutional arrangements embody contradictions or generate challengers, reliable reproduction will be less likely.

**MULTIPlicity** Institutional contradictions may be fully internal to a particular model for social action, but they may also be generated by tensions among multiple institutions (Sewell 1992:16–19). In the absence of alternatives—or due to the failure to perceive or conceive of them—institutional arrangements generate regularities in social action and may become “taken for granted.” This ethnomethodological precept has clear parallels in political analyses. Revolution becomes possible once institutions, however fragile or robust, are no longer perceived as inevitable (Stinchcombe 1978:40; on “cognitive liberation,” see McAdam 1982:48–51).

Yet what are the conditions under which what was once taken for granted comes to be perceived as less than inevitable? For Gramsci, hegemony was
continually challenged by the contradiction between two theoretical consciousnesses: “one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed” (1971:333). The existence of multiple institutions (e.g. competing models of authority or exchange) can have similar consequences. Beginning with a description of role strain, Eckstein (1966:234) emphasizes disjuncture as a source of instability and congruence as a source of stability: “a government will tend to be stable if its authority pattern is congruent with the other authority patterns of the society of which it is a party.” The same insight informs the imagery of peripheries, margins, borderlands, and interstices in accounts of institutional change (Clemens 1997:92–93, Mann 1986:15–19, Morrill 1999). Whether one assumes instrumental actors constrained by institutions or well-socialized actors who have internalized schemas, action becomes less predictable where multiple institutions compete or no institution is firmly established.

**Resources, Schemas, and Change**

Mutability, internal contradictions, and multiplicity do not automatically produce significant change. The consequences of variation in reliable reproduction for institutional change are powerfully conditioned by the extent to which those variations are contained, diffused, or mediated. Here, prospects for institutional change are powerfully shaped by the interaction of schemas with social networks and other resources in processes of diffusion, innovation, and mediation. As will be evident, these factors interact in diverse ways, suggesting the complex topography of institutional change.

**CONTAINMENT AND DIFFUSION** Attention to networks provides one account for minimizing mutability. Zucker (1988:31) argues that the density of network ties enhances the reinforcement of existing institutions, rendering social systems more stable and coherent. Experimental and simulation studies sustain these claims, demonstrating that processes of social influence are more effective and durable when cognitive claims are embedded in quite minimal attributions of organizational hierarchy or legitimation (Zucker 1977) or in systems of social ties (Carley 1989, 1991).

In the absence of exogenous disturbances, therefore, institutional reproduction should be most reliable when (a) institutional statements are nondiscretionary and substantive (“must” statements); (b) social heterogeneity is minimized (Blau & Schwartz 1984, Carley 1991, Suitor & Keeton 1997), and (c) social ties are dense and rarely extend across significant social distances (Carley 1989, Feld 1981, Mark 1998). Conversely, institutional change will be
highest when (a) models of action are understood to be discretionary, (b) social heterogeneity is high, and (c) social networks are fragmented and cross important social cleavages. In their study of political centralization in Renaissance Florence, Padgett & Ansell (1993) present a striking analysis of how the Medici harnessed disjunctions among elite networks and controlled their own followers by segregating ties based on marriage and economic relationships.

Dense network ties also establish the conditions for maintaining order and punishing defectors from institutional arrangements (North 1990:36–40). Grief et al (1995) demonstrate how the ability of merchant guilds to provide security for long distance trade against the predations of foreign rulers depended on the existence of densely connected merchant communities capable of punishing any individual who traded with an untrustworthy ruler. Adams (1996) argues that the Dutch East India company used its monopoly on trade with the metropole to control its agents in the colony; with the development of the British trading empire in India, would-be defectors or entrepreneurs had alternative opportunities to structure the terms of trade.

Network ties may also facilitate the diffusion of institutions (Strang & Meyer 1993, Strang & Soule 1998). Extensive literatures on the adoption of the model of the nation-state within the world polity (e.g. Meyer et al 1992, Strang 1990, Strang & Chang 1993), of policy adoption across subnational units (Soule & Zylan 1997), and of organizational responses to changes in law (e.g. Dobbin et al 1994, Edelman 1990, Sutton et al 1994, Tolbert & Zucker 1983) demonstrate how ties, connectedness, visibility, and proximity facilitate the adoption of new organizational forms or policies (for a review, see Schnei-berg & Clemens 1999).

Insofar as networks may facilitate either containment or diffusion, the juxtaposition of these studies raises a basic question. Under what conditions do social networks have the homeostatic properties associated with feedback models and historicist explanations (Stinchcombe 1968:103–20)? And under what conditions do networks propagate initially small variations producing path-dependent trajectories of social change (North 1990:93–98)?

LEARNING AND INNOVATION  The content of institutions can change over time as a result of learning as well as of variation and diffusion. Within the constraints imposed by particular technological or economic configurations, actors can modify institutions to solve new problems, to facilitate network-based collective learning, or to achieve increasing efficiency (March 1991, Powell et al 1996, Thelen 1991). The path of learning, while conditioned by previous cognitive models (Hecklo 1974), can also involve trial and error experimentation taking old rules in new directions (Levitt & March 1988). Zhou (1993) argues that insofar as organizational learning tends toward a greater fit
with environmental demands over time, new organizations and those in changing environments should display more learning-based change.

Diffusion processes may also spur innovation as actors seek to accommodate newly adopted institutional rules to existing practices, resources, and competing schemas (Campbell 1988:382–83, Soysal 1994, Stryker 1999, Westney 1987). Such efforts entail the “transposition” of dispositions (Bourdieu 1977) or schemas to new settings: “Knowledge of a rule or schema by definition means the ability to transpose or extend it creatively. If this is so, then agency, . . . the capacity to transpose and extend schemas to new contexts, is inherent in the knowledge of cultural schemas that characterizes all minimally competent members of society” (Sewell 1992:18). But such recombinations of schema and context may produce innovation. The greater the mutability or multiplicity of institutional arrangements, the more likely that such efforts to transpose models and embed them in different social networks or resources will disrupt reliable reproduction.

While experimentation may be an important part of institutional change, not all actors are equally likely to experiment. Groups marginal to the political system are more likely to tinker with institutions for two reasons. Denied the social benefits of current institutional configurations, marginal groups have fewer costs associated with deviating from those configurations (Leblebici et al 1991, Stearns & Allan 1996). Challengers may innovate with the aim of using an alternative model of mobilization or policy to gain access to the polity (Clemens 1993, Hirsch 1986, Morrill 1999, Schneiberg 1998). Mutability and multiplicity enhance the stock of alternative schemas available to be transposed to new efforts; internal contradictions increase the probability that challengers will exist to exploit these alternatives.

INSTITUTIONAL MEDITATION In addition to contributing to an endogenous model of institutional change, contradiction and multiplicity usefully complicate the analysis of exogenous shock. To the extent that homogeneity and an absence of alternatives figure prominently in our understandings of institutional stability, decreases in heterogeneity will increase the relative importance of exogenous shock as a source of change (Stryker 1999). In addition, exogenous changes may either intensify or dissipate contradictions within existing institutions. Consider the dilemma of a newly elected president caught between a debt to the party organization for a successful campaign and a desire to demonstrate presidential greatness by striking out in new directions; in this dilemma, a crisis may actually delay the realization of the inevitable contradiction (Skowronek 1993:263). Events may also “disrupt the operative systems of ideas, beliefs, values, roles, and institutional practices of a given society” creating a space in which political actors struggle to reestablish interpretive frames for multiple audiences (Ellingson 1995:103). Here again, heterogene-
Exogenous shocks or environmental changes may have effects by altering the salience of institutions or their relationship to domains of social life. The impact of swings in public opinion or the mobilization of new constituent groups is mediated by the openness of political systems to these changes (Amenta et al. 1992, Amenta et al. 1994, Amenta 1998). Using a resource dependency analysis, Sparrow (1996) compares multiple policy domains to demonstrate how ties of dependence either magnified or interrupted the momentum for institutional change stemming from military mobilization for World War II. Other comparisons across policy domains (Hooks 1990, 1993) or nations (Carruthers 1994, Orloff 1993, Weir & Skocpol 1985) address the relative autonomy of various agencies within national governments—their capacity to sustain innovative policy in the absence of exogenous shock or to persist in established routines in the midst of economic or geopolitical turmoil.

Once these potential sources of institutional disruption are identified, political sociologists appear to have made greater progress in explaining institutional change than is suggested by recent overviews of institutional theory (but see Scott 1995:66–77). Studies document how models of political organization become increasingly taken-for-granted and enmeshed in networks of dependence, expectation, and alliance. Analyses of policy innovation and change regularly invoke the same principles: innovation is generated by networks that crosscut important institutional boundaries; societal heterogeneity facilitates the mobilization of political challengers and constitutes loci of structural indeterminacy that may be exploited by political entrepreneurs. These basic theoretical claims infuse much recent research on the sources of institutional durability and transformation.

EXPLANATIONS OF DURABILITY AND CHANGE

Crosscutting the familiar distinctions among regulative, normative, and cognitive aspects of institutions, this survey of the components of institutional change redirects attention to heterogeneity and the processes by which heterogeneity disrupts reliable reproduction. Echoing the basic understanding of institutions as higher-order effects, scholars have addressed how the organization of rule constitutes both the identities and interests of actors. For the analysis of institutional change, the critical question is to what extent do these constituted identities and interests converge with or diverge from the schemas and distribution of resources that organize rule?
Institutional theory also suggests that more is at stake in politics than Lasswell’s (1936) famous formulation of “who gets what, when, how?” The ultimate distribution of benefits is determined, at least in part, by a different sort of politics that centers on expanding or eliminating alternatives and opportunities for exit. Struggles over the available set of alternatives, in turn, shape the space for a distinctive style of politics in which entrepreneurs or challengers seek to “transpose” (Sewell 1992) schemas for collective action or policy responses from one social setting to another.

**Political Institutions as Constitutive of Actors**

Rejecting the naturalism of methodological individualism, one of the core insights of institutional theory is that institutions constitute actors (Meyer & Jepperson 1999). By extension, different kinds of institutional orders constitute different kinds of actors and different patterns of ties among them. This line of argument pushes beyond the claim that one’s institutional position shapes preferences and interests to assert that core identities of political actors are shaped by broader institutional arrangements.

The seed of this process lies in the character of states as projects of social control. Control, in turn, requires knowledge or legibility of the world that is to be ruled. “Legibility,” Scott (1998:2) argues, is “a central problem in statecraft.” But purely textual imagery is misleading, he argues, because to make the world knowable is to transform the world. Categories are not simply imposed; the practices of rule seek to transform the world to fit the categories. The effort of state agents to document the distribution of income or wealth both changes individual behavior and leads to the cultural transformation of the meaning of activities—such as reproductive or caring labor—that are not defined as producing income (McCaffery 1997). The puzzle is whether these processes enhance or undermine the reproduction of the institutions of social governance.

Attention to how the constitution of identities generates challenges to the organization of rule is central to the study of nationalism and national identity. Relations of ruling constitute the identities of rulers and ruled alike. Anderson’s analysis in *Imagined Communities* (1983) exemplifies both processes: intertwined administrative careers limited to the colonies generate a shared identity among creole elites; the imposition of colonial practices of rule on a particular territory elicits a territorially grounded national identity among the ruled. Both identities embodied developmental contradictions—colonial administrators doomed to be subordinate to the metropole, the colonized taught to celebrate the history of the metropole as an independent nation—that eventually fueled nationalist revolutions.

Deployed in worlds that are always already organized and meaningful, the constitutive powers of political institutions frequently have unintended conse-
quences. Brubaker (1996) traces how the Soviet regime used the construct of nationality—as an attribute of both persons and places—to organize the administration of its ethnically heterogeneous territories. Although the Soviet Union itself was not organized as a nation state, this template for identity was displaced to regional and ethnic entities, made real through administrative practices such as the passport system, and thus eventually served as fuel for the thoroughly nationalist disintegration of the USSR. In the struggle to block construction of a dam on their reservation, the Yavapai of Arizona constructed “a portrait of themselves in categories that made sense to them” and that resisted the efforts of federal bureaucrats to subsume the unique and incommensurable character of their land within the cost-benefit framework of technocratic analysis. With the defeat of the dam, effective political activism was incorporated as an important component of their collective identity (Espeland 1998: 219–22). In a study of the property tax revolts that culminated in California’s Proposition 13, Lo (1990) traces the disintegration of the legitimacy of state government built on the promise of delivering great public education, impressive highways, and safe neighborhoods. Having reconstituted the citizen as consumer, this politics of technocratic social provision helped to draw more migrants to the state, which drove up housing prices, which drove up taxes, which led those citizen-consumers to hobble their government with drastic restrictions on revenue collection while they continued to demand high-quality public services.

Given the destabilization so often associated with the constitution of national or citizen identities, under what conditions do institutionally constituted identities contribute to reliable reproduction? For Bourdieu (1994:3–4), the project of constructing the state entails not only the Weberian requirement of a monopoly over physical violence but also an incarnation of “itself simultaneously in objectivity, in the form of specific organizational structures and mechanisms and in subjectivity in the form of mental structures adapted to them.” Ikegami (1995:5) elegantly demonstrates the intertwined processes of state-formation and the construction of cultural models of the self and institutional settings that enhanced “the trustworthiness of individuals who had otherwise strong centrifugal tendencies.” Her analysis forcefully transcends the distinction between exogenous constraint and subjective constitution often used to organize discussions of the multiple “new institutionalisms”: “The distinctive character of the state lies in its ability to create and sustain a number of institutions that variably affect people’s lives. Although each institution by itself is not necessarily embedded in or intended to serve a particular purpose of moral or ideological regulation, taken together they form an institutional field that deeply affects individuals’ decision-making. New institutional constraints resulting from state-making transform a society’s wider cultural environment in critical and unforeseen ways” (Ikegami 1995:33).
Institutions as Constituting Interests

In addition to constituting identities, formal political institutions structure interests and incentives. One important mechanism for generating commitments of constituents to policies involves altering the costs and benefits of a particular line of action. In a study of tax expenditures in the United States, Howard (1997) provides particularly clear examples of this process. Introduced in the early years of the federal income tax, the home mortgage interest deduction came to profoundly shape individual investment decisions and the housing market once the income tax became a mass tax during World War II. The shift from owning to renting became more costly as house-sellers faced both the loss of the deduction and the tax on any appreciation in their home’s value (on the behavioral consequences of income taxation for gender inequality and family organization, see McCaffery 1997). As importantly, the federally subsidized expansion of the residential real estate market gave rise to third parties—organized realtors, bankers, and developers—who have been far more active in protecting this tax expenditure than the individual taxpayers who are its explicit beneficiaries. A similar process is evident in health care where federal expenditures on hospital construction, Medicare, and Medicaid have stimulated the development of a thickly organized field of stakeholders (Laumann & Knoke 1987, Skocpol 1996; for social policy generally, see Pierson 1994).

The response of political regimes to societal demands also shapes the subsequent development of those organized interests. Skocpol (1992) explores the “policy feedback processes” by which nineteenth-century social spending reinforced the mobilization of constituencies such as Civil War veterans. Such beneficial feedback cycles may be established quite unintentionally. Swedish unionists failed to secure a state-run, compulsory system of unemployment insurance and settled for a voluntary system, managed by unions; ironically, this “Ghent” system created powerful incentives for workers to join unions and contributed to the emerging dominance of the Swedish Social Democratic Party (Rothstein 1992). Feedback cycles may also demobilize or depoliticize organized claimants. Whereas British workers in the nineteenth century became increasingly oriented to political action as more mobilization produced legislative results, their American counterparts repeatedly saw legislative victories annulled by the courts and, in time, abandoned political strategies in favor of business unionism (Hattam 1993).

Success in articulating, passing, and implementing policy often depends on embedding a proposed program in an array of supportive constituencies. Comparative studies of welfare state development point to the extent to which party systems mobilize cross-class constituencies (Amenta 1998, Orloff 1993, Skocpol 1992, Steinmo & Watts 1995). Debt can generate the same results as spending. Those who have extended credit to “kings, rulers, states and govern-
ments... have a financial interest in the ability of sovereigns to repay their
debts and therefore they acquire a political interest in the survival of the sover-
eign regime. They become its allies” (Carruthers 1996:4). Opposition to inden-
debtedness is thus also opposition to certain kinds of entangling alliances
(Skowronek 1993:64). Instrumental rationality and constitutive identities re-
force one another: “Reproduction ensues when rules induce roles, which
induce interests, which induce strategic exchanges, which lock in patterns of
collective action that depend on the rules” (Padgett & Ansell 1993:1259–60).

At the level of taken-for-grantedness, effective politicians may enhance the
obviousness of a particular policy by building deep analogies to already insti-
tutionalized models or widely held norms (Campbell 1998:394–98). National
approaches to economic regulation, Dobbin (1994) argues, were modelled on
basic templates of political governance. The proponents of Social Security
consciously invoked the imagery of individual savings accounts (only recently
secured by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation) to build a constituency
for Old Age, Disability, and Survivors’ Insurance; only as more citizens came
to depend on what was initially a less prominent component of the 1935 legis-
lation was this novel program transformed into the “third rail” of American
politics (Amenta 1998, Zollars & Skocpol 1994). Once entrenched, Social Se-
curity could then provide an analogical foundation for Medicare and Medicaid
during the 1960s (Skocpol 1996).

Such embedded analogies may also render some policy alternatives risky or
unthinkable. Prior commitment to a color-blind model of civil rights presented
an obstacle to African-American leaders interested in the possibilities of af-
firmative action; those policies were ultimately implemented under the rubric
of “crisis management” in response to the urban riots of the 1960s (Skrentny
1996). In conjunction with the War on Poverty, employment policy became
increasingly linked to racial politics and, therefore, unavailable for use as a
tool of macroeconomic policy as in the 1930s (Weir 1992). This realignment
of policies and imputed beneficiaries tainted an alternative that had once ce-
menced the alliance of organized workers and the Democratic party.

These cases highlight the politics of effective institution-building. The
institutional effects attributable to normative legitimacy or taken-for-
grantedness (e.g. home ownership as the American dream or Medicare as an
unquestioned, allegedly earned entitlement) are reinforced by the more explicit-
ly political mobilization of a set of stakeholders and alignment of incentives.
To the extent that rules of access or the configuration of agencies facilitate
the influence of these stakeholders, the policy domain becomes increasingly insti-
tutionalized, shaping the terms on which new actors or new issues are encoun-
tered. With this “institutional thickening,” the ability of political actors to
achieve significant policy retrenchment or reconstruction is increasingly
limited (Pierson 1994, Skowronek 1993).
Institutions as Eliminating Alternatives

The absence of alternatives and opportunities for exit enhances the prospects for reliable reproduction of any project of social control. If societies are conceptualized as “social cages” constructed from “multiple overlapping and intersecting sociospatial networks of power” (Mann 1986:1), such cages may be weakened by disruption of any network. If ideological power is weakened, alternatives become imaginable. New opportunities for economic exchange among actors at the periphery erode the capacity of central brokers to exercise control through their monopoly on trade (Adams 1996). This image of change informs macro-comparative studies of societal transformation, particularly those addressing the classic problem of “the rise of the west.” Comparing China and Europe, Chirot (1985) attributes the dynamism of the latter in part to its more varied geography, political decentralization, and complex patterns of political conflict.

These arguments reinforce a theme found in many theoretical reflections on the politics of state-formation and institution-building. If alternative sets of prescriptions and proscriptions (or the perception of them) are suppressed, currently dominant institutional arrangements are more likely to persist. Formal political institutions have great capacities for eliminating alternatives. At a “constitutive moment” in an American political economy disordered by the Civil War and industrialization, debates over how to organize railroads were “at the center of a nearly half-century-long struggle to reimpose order on an inchoate world” (Berk 1994:13). Although regional railroads with practices foreshadowing modern “flexible specialization” were an already realized option a series of judicial decisions consolidated the model of the centralized, national railroad.

Institutional arrangements may also suppress alternatives by decoupling the components necessary to enact a particular policy. The distribution of surplus food is a possible response to poverty at home and abroad, but programs such as food stamps are lodged institutionally in the agricultural policy domain and are more responsive to the market conditions confronting American farmers than to the malnutrition of children (Laumann & Knoke 1987). The segregation of capacities for policy formation in think tanks and for policy implementation in state agencies undercuts the ability of the US political system to generate viable policy innovations (Weir 1992).

Finally, the interpretation of experience (Ellingson 1995) may eliminate alternatives from the repertoire available to political entrepreneurs. Voss (1996) compares the consequences of the defeat of broad-based, politically oriented labor movements in the late nineteenth century. In Britain, defeat was interpreted through a Marxist lens that predicted many failures on the road to socialism. The model retained its legitimacy and was resurrected a few dec-
ades later. In the United States, however, the collapse of the Knights of Labor discredited this model of mobilization just as the failure of the People’s Party delegitimated the third party model among farmers (Clemens 1997:156–61).

**The Politics of Institutional Change**

The presence of multiple institutional orders or alternatives constitutes an opportunity for agency (Sewell 1992:19) in which political entrepreneurs seek to negotiate multiple sets of expectations or to embed their project more firmly in one of the possible institutional foundations (Friedland & Alford 1991, Pedriana & Stryker 1997, Skowronek 1993). Common to these arguments is a distinctive type of political action: “The essence of institutional entrepreneurship is to align skillfully an organizational form and the specific institution it embodies with the master rules of society” (Haveman & Rao 1997:1614, see also Swidler 1986).

Given this oblique style of politics, significant change may escape notice. When political entrepreneurs seek to transform the overarching institutions of political life, they face particularly high demands to embed calls for change within accepted models. Consequently “no institution is created de novo” (Riker 1995:121), and the most ambitious innovators may well cloak their efforts for change in appeals to restore tradition (Skowronek 1993, also Fligstein 1996, Fligstein & Mara-Drita 1996, Ikegami 1995:364, Pedriana & Stryker 1997:679, Skrentny 1996:154–58).

Alternatively, political challengers may mobilize by deploying familiar models of social organization in unfamiliar ways. At the turn of the century, a wide range of political challengers in the United States sought to circumvent the major political parties and to increase popular control over policy outcomes. Organized workers, who were relatively integrated into the party system, had the least success in sustaining alternative vehicles for mobilization; women, by contrast, were formally and culturally excluded from the fraternal world of electoral politics but showed the greatest innovation in refashioning models drawn from social clubs and business practices as the templates for novel forms of political engagement (Clemens 1997). Finally, challengers faced with the constraints of existing organizational schemas may simply invent new ones. Confronting a construction of scientific expertise premised on disinterestedness, activist scientists attempted to reconcile the contradiction between their professional identity and their political commitments by founding public interest science organizations (Moore 1996).

This style of political entrepreneurship presumes a degree of fragmentation or the availability of alternative models for mobilization and intervention. Analyzing changes in US policy on racial inequality, Skrentny (1996) argues that the organizational complexity of the federal government and the routines
of different agencies generated alternative “solutions” to the grievances manifested in urban riots. The presence of alternatives created a space for political action and policy innovation. The opportunities for entrepreneurship are further complicated when there are multiple audiences for whom new political events or arrangements must be interpreted and legitimated (Ellingson 1995, Stryker 1999). As Padgett & Ansell argue, “robust action” is grounded in “multivocality—the fact that single actions can be interpreted coherently from multiple perspectives simultaneously” (1993:1263). Yet not every actor confronts the conditions of institutional multiplicity or possesses the skills to exploit them. In our efforts to appreciate human agency, we should beware of assuming “every actor a Cosimo de’ Medici.”

When institutions are challenged, what factors determine their resistance or capacity to restore the status quo ante? Research in comparative politics provides rich examples of how variations in institutional structure produce differences in the degree to which changes in the environment (e.g. shifts in public opinion or economic conditions) are translated into political outcomes. In the United States, the combination of federalism and the division of authority among the branches of the federal government presents obstacles to the establishment of new national policies and fragments constituencies; monarchical or parliamentary regimes may have a greater capacity to act autonomously from entanglements with organized interests or elected representatives (Dunlavy 1994, Steinmo 1993, Steinmo & Watts 1995).

The obverse of the autonomy or capacity of state agencies is the degree of access that societal actors enjoy with respect to political decision-making. Looking at the fate of a range of social policies proposed during the New Deal, Amenta (1998) documents how electoral arrangements sustained Southern Democrats in their opposition to reform and necessitated particularly widespread Democratic victories in the north to secure new progressive policies. This line of argument is refined further by comparative analysis of the articulation of societal and state actors with one another. Immergut (1992) attributes variations in national health care policy to the distinctive constellations of “veto points” built into different regimes. Kriesi (1996) uses the concept of opportunity structures to compare the relationship of social movements to national polities. These arguments underscore the variability of the robustness of institutional arrangements in the face of exogenous shock or endogenous challenge.

IN CONCLUSION

In the mid-1980s, the call went out to “bring the state back in” (Evans et al 1985) and to challenge the hegemony of behavioralism and methodological individualism in political science and sociology. The slogan itself only crystal-
lized a turn toward institutional analysis in process across diverse fields within the social sciences. Initially, this resurgent interest in political institutions produced an image of the state as a concrete, massive, autonomous force within politics. Emphasizing durability and embeddedness, this imagery made it difficult to address the sources and mechanisms of institutional change.

More recently, however, a wide array of scholars have responded to this dilemma by reconsidering their imagery of the state and of political institutions more generally. Drawing on diverse theoretical resources, they have increasingly disaggregated “the state,” recognizing both that societies are often structured by multiple institutions and that institutions themselves are complex embeddings of schemas into resources and networks. In the place of an all-or-nothing durability of the state, analyses of institutional change increasingly address the multiple processes of institutional reproduction, disruption, and responses to disruption.

Although many surveys emphasize the different theories of action (instrumental, normative, cognitive) that inform the various “new institutionalisms,” when refracted through the sensibilities of a structuralist these literatures converge on a series of implications for the study of institutional change. For example, institutional multiplicity should undermine reliable reproduction, whether strategic actors are playing off competing alternatives, normative actors are torn between competing ideals, or actors are trying to make reconcile diverse cognitive schemas. Mutability, contradiction, learning, containment or diffusion, and mediation are additional conditions or processes that influence the likelihood and the trajectories of institutional change. Taken together, these literatures suggest that the analysis of institutional change rests on an appreciation of the heterogeneity of institutional arrangements and the resulting patterns of conflict or prospects for agency and innovation.

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