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The Feminist Potential of Sociological Institutionalism

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On the face of it, there is considerable potential for productive dialogue between sociological institutionalism (SI) and institutionally oriented

feminist political science (FPS).[1] Both approaches employ broad conceptions of the political and its interconnection with the social: Each is concerned with the interaction between actors and institutions, broadly defined; the interplay between formal rules and informal practices, norms, and "ways of doing things"; and the consequent effects of these dynamics. Each approach takes a "value-critical" stance, sharing an understanding that seemingly neutral institutional processes and practices are, in fact, embedded in norms and cognitive frames, and in wider cultural contexts. In this short essay, we argue that SI provides one fruitful source for tools and paradigms beyond conventional political science (Lovenduski 1998; Mackay 2004), tools that may potentially enhance feminist analyses of key questions such as the following: How are institutions and institutional processes gendered? By what processes and mechanisms are institutions (re)produced and, in turn, reflect and reproduce social systems, including gender relations? How do institutions constrain actors and interests? And what is the gendered potential for, and what are the limits of, institutional innovation, reform, and change in pursuit of gender justice?

In particular, we argue that a synthesis of SI and feminist gender analysis can systematically identify and track the norms as well as the symbolic and cultural factors that play an important role in gendering institutions and their practices. As such, the incorporation of elements of SI into a feminist institutionalism can remedy some of the difficulties associated with certain other institutionalisms, such as an overemphasis on a narrow conception of the "rational" actor and on formal institutions and practices. Nonetheless, though promising, we argue that a feminist institutionalism based upon SI on its own would be insufficient to tackle the core questions of gender, strategic action, power, and change.

After setting out the key characteristics of an SI framework and how it relates to feminist analysis, we illustrate the way in which two SI tools, isomorphism and decoupling, can be used and adapted in FPS analysis of institutions. In particular, these concepts provide potential insight into one of the central paradoxes of FPS research: The widespread formal adoption and development of similar gender equality — and wider equalities — initiatives by diverse institutional and governmental organizations, on the one hand, as contrasted with their partial and

1. In common with other contributors in this section, we hold to a minimal definition of feminist political science as concerned with gender as an analytical category; utilizing broadened definitions of politics including the social; and scholarship situated within wider projects of social transformation to challenge, lessen and/or overturn gendered inequalities.

variable institutionalization in terms of impact on institutional practices, norms, and outcomes, on the other.

Sociological Institutionalism: The Basics

SI has long been recognized as one of the three "new institutionalisms," even if it grew up somewhat independently of the other two (Hall and Taylor 1996). It emerged as a subfield of organization theory, which posed a challenge to the Weberian model of bureaucracy and critiqued the so-called rational basis of "modern" institutional forms and procedures. Sociological institutionalists, instead, claimed that "organizational structures are created and made more elaborate with the rise of institutional myths, and in highly institutionalized contexts, organization action must support these myths" (Meyer and Rowan 1977, 359). Institutional forms must therefore be analyzed not in terms of their rationality and efficiency but in terms of the culturally specific ways that they take on particular forms. Institutions are "systems of meaning, and their behaviour and the behaviour of individuals within them depend on the meanings incorporated and the symbols manipulated" (Peters 1999, 103). SI scholars define institutions broadly as formal and informal collections of interrelated norms, rules, and routines, understandings and frames of meaning that define "appropriate" action and roles and acceptable behavior of their members. They comprise normative, symbolic cognitive and regulatory aspects and are widely known, accepted, and regarded as legitimate (March and Olsen 1989; Powell and DiMaggio 1991). While institutional "ways of doing" and "ways of knowing" are not fixed, they are difficult to change precisely because they are perpetuated by institutional actors who "embody and enact" norms and scripts (McAdam and Scott 2005; Powell and DiMaggio 1991). In terms of day-to-day interaction, it is recourse to institutionalized repertoires of responses that explains much institutional behavior, rather than purposive action (Powell and DiMaggio 1991).

A broad school, SI scholars nonetheless share a distinctive understanding of the relationship between institutions and individual action, and understanding of institutional origins and change (Hall and Taylor 1996). Institutions influence behavior through the cognitive scripts, categories, and models they provide that are needed for both action and interpreting the world. Institutions and individual action are therefore mutually constitutive, and so any "rational act" is also socially constituted

(Hall and Taylor 1996, 948–49). Sociological institutionalists do not see the origins and change in institutional practices as rooted in rationality and efficiency but, instead, in a "logic of appropriateness" whereby institutional practices are adopted because they are widely valued within the wider culture and enhance the legitimacy of the institution.

SI therefore revisits the idea of context-bound rationality, focusing on the social context within which individual and group interests and norms are formed. It "thickens" rational choice paradigms by incorporating norms, values, and affective processes (Brinton and Nee 1998). Through its focus on the social norms that bridge the "micro world of actors and networks and larger institutional frameworks" (Nee 1998, 3), it can help to provide a "subtle analysis of the constraints of the interlocking roles of the formal and informal in structuring action" (Nee and Brinton 1998, xvi). There is clear evidence of the influence of ideas and concepts from SI — with its logic of *culture* — crossing over into other schools of institutionalism, helping them to widen their definitions of institutions and put more emphasis on norms, culture, and informal practices. (Merton 1998, xii).

Feminist Political Science and Sociological Institutionalism: What Common Ground?

There is much apparent common ground and common cause between FPS and SI approaches (Kenny 2007; Mackay and Meier 2003). Both share a predominantly social constructionist approach to the analysis of institutions and actors and to the broader social context in which these are constituted. This mutual ontological foundation means that both camps are at ease with ideas that norms, values, and informal rules are keys for uncovering the dynamics of institutional continuity and change.

As the center of gravity of FPS scholarship has gradually moved from a focus on "women and politics" to more relational and institutional-level conceptions of "gender and politics" (Beckwith 2005; Lovenduski 1998; Mackay 2004), it has drawn upon pioneering work in the field of gender and organizational analysis to expose and theorize the gendered dimensions and dynamics of political institutions (for example, Acker 1990, 1992; Halford 1992; Kenney 1996; Savage and Witz 1992). This scholarship has common roots and has developed in parallel with mainstream SI, including trenchant critiques of the Weberian model of bureaucracy, the mutually constitutive nature of structure and agency,

and attention to the different levels of institutional dynamics of reproduction. However, in contrast to the SI canon, gender is posited as a fundamental part of political and social institutions: "[G]ender is present in the processes, practices, images and ideologies, and distributions of power in … institutions" (Acker 1992, 567). Gender relations play out at different institutional levels, ranging from the construction of images, symbols, and ideologies that justify, explain, and legitimize institutions and their gendered patterns of hierarchy and exclusion (Acker 1992, 568) to the "seemingly trivial" level of interpersonal day-to-day interaction and "doing" gender (West and Zimmerman 1987; Acker 1992; Connell 2002; Kenney 1996, 458).

Although feminist scholars have explored similar terrain to SI, with few exceptions they have not engaged explicitly with SI or "borrowed" SI tools and concepts. Relevant work has been undertaken in the large but theoretically and empirically eclectic literature that examines various gendered aspects of the state. Scholars have highlighted not only how state structures are nominally and substantively patriarchal but also how institutional norms, practices, and policymaking are gendered (Savage and Witz 1992; for recent review, see Kantola 2006).

Isomorphism and De/coupling: Useful Tools?

We turn now to examine briefly the potential use of the key SI concepts of isomorphism and institutional coupling and decoupling for tackling some of the central empirical puzzles of FPS: The widespread formal adoption and development of similar gender equality – and wider equalities – norms and initiatives, such as gender quotas, gender mainstreaming, and women's policy machinery by diverse institutional and governmental organizations, on the one hand, as contrasted with their partial and variable institutionalization in terms of impact on institutional practices, norms, and outcomes, on the other. We do so by drawing upon empirical work on equalities initiatives in the field of British local government (Monro 2007; Newman 2002) and the implementation of gender mainstreaming in the Commission of the European Union (Schmidt 2005).

SI scholars use isomorphism to help explain trends toward institutional homogeneity. For Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio (1991), isomorphism describes the process through which an organization adopts features from other organizations in its institutional environment, often

in an attempt to counter uncertainty and gain institutional legitimacy. Equal opportunities policies can be seen as part of such processes of institutional legitimation. According to Janet Newman (2002, 104), equal opportunities are an aspect of "the way a local authority presents itself to its stakeholders through its policies and strategies, and through the words and actions of senior members and managers."

Isomorphic processes can occur in three different ways: Mimetic (in which organizations copy each other in order to win legitimacy), coercive (in which the state obliges organizations to adopt particular practices), and normative, (linked to the development of new rules and to professional networks, for example, through the spread of dominant templates of what constitutes good practice) (Powell and DiMaggio 1991). There is evidence of all forms of isomorphism in the field of contemporary local-government equalities work in the UK. Legislative drivers are key to equalities work in local government, and the post–1997 Labour administrations brought in a raft of new legislation that obliges local authorities to consider sexuality and gender equalities more seriously than they had previously. Processes are also mimetic, as local authorities may adopt equality policies based on models initiated by others (Newman 2002). Authorities also learn from each other via informal and more formal networks (Monro 2007). Finally, there is a normative element to equalities work, as part of a dominant "logic of appropriateness," and policies play important ceremonial and symbolic roles (Newman 2002).

The SI concept of decoupling can explain how local authorities can adopt far-reaching equalities policies that appear to have little impact in practice, namely that the relationship between policy and implementation is weak. John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan (1991) argue that this happens because attempts to control and co-ordinate activities in institutionalized organizations can lead to conflicts and loss of legitimacy. Therefore elements of formal "ceremonial" structure are de-coupled from activities and from each other. Loosely coupled systems can pursue multiple goals and objectives, and attempts to achieve a tighter coupling between policy and delivery are often resisted. Indeed, Newman (2002, 109) points to tensions between the equality policies and the performance demands of the "new managerialism" in local authorities that make it likely that equality goals will remain symbolic, subordinate, and loosely coupled to other institutional goals.

The combination of isomorphism and de/coupling provides FPS with useful tools for explaining both the ubiquity of, and processes

underpinning, the formal adoption of commitments by governments and other public organizations to gender equality norms in institutional forms, such as gender candidate quotas, gender mainstreaming, equalities policies, the creation of gender policy machineries, and the variable institutionalization of those reforms in norms and practices. However, without the integration of gendered perspectives, SI cannot answer the question of why it appears to be more difficult to institutionalize gender equality reforms and norms than other sorts of innovations. The work of Verena Schmidt (2005) provides a promising way forward; she operationalizes a gendered model of institutionalization to explain the gap between espoused commitment to gender mainstreaming in the European Commission and discernible shifts in daily routines. She argues that while decoupling has occurred, there are variations in the degree of institutionalization that relate to the specific dimensions and dynamics of gendered structures and gendered actors, both "face to face and time-space" in different sections of the European Commission, and in the importance of feminist advocacy networks and other gendered resources in these processes (2005, 118–26).

Louise Chappell provides another example of gendering, rather than uncritically borrowing SI concepts. Despite the attention to normative dimensions in SI, she argues that conceptions of terms such as "logic of appropriateness" as gender neutral fail to recognize that institutional norms also prescribe and proscribe "'acceptable' masculine and feminine forms of behavior, rules, and values for men and women within institutions" (Chappell 2006, 226). Her analysis of the "logic of appropriateness" that underlies the norm of bureaucratic neutrality demonstrates that it is profoundly gendered. Indeed, using evidence from Australia, Canada and the UK, she argues that the more embedded and enforced the norm of neutrality is, the harder it will be for feminists to advance "biased" claims of gender equality.

The Limits of Sociological Institutionalism for a Feminist Institutionalism

We have seen how a number of SI concepts are useful in sharpening feminist analyses of organizations and how they operate. However, there are also problems and tensions involved in the development of a straightforwardly feminist SI. The most important feminist SI echoes

Peter Hall and Rosemary Taylor's (1996, 954) criticism of the "curiously bloodless" account of SI, namely, that it misses the power clashes and contestation among actors with competing interests. Indeed, sociological institutionalism can be criticized for tending toward a functionalism, which assumes a cohesive set of group norms, erasing or subsuming tensions, conflicts, and inequalities concerning gender. For example, as one sociological institutionalist argues:

> Norms are implicit or explicit rules of expected behaviour that embody the interests and preferences of members of a close-knit group or community. The institution of modern marriage, for example, encompasses social norms. . . . Insofar as norms help solve the problem of coordination and collective action, they enable actors to capture the gains from cooperation, which, in the case of marriage, entails the sharing and thus lessening the burden of bearing and raising children (Nee 1998, 8).

As Hall and Taylor (1996, 954) argue, "the approach as a whole might benefit from more attention to the way in which frames of meaning, scripts and symbols emerge not only from processes of interpretation but also from processes of contestation." Actors inside and outside institutions can be involved in power struggles that do not appear within SI accounts. Indeed as Newman (2002, 115) argues, "the impetus and drive for equality originated, and is partly sustained through political agency outside the frameworks of formalized institutions. The struggles around gender, race, sexuality and disability tend, with some exceptions, to be non-institutionalized: Indeed they flourish precisely through the challenges they present to mainstream institutions." There are also broader problems for feminists with the way in which "institutional conceptions of the political tend not to prioritize power, focusing instead on procedure and norms" (Squires 1999, 32).

The analytical framework and concepts outlined above are very useful for *describing* the institutional processes that may take place regarding gender and sexuality. However, for feminist analyses, it is important to understand not only how processes and institutions are gendered but also how analyses of these processes and institutions might contribute to the achievement of change that necessitates a sophisticated understanding of both power and agency. In summary, it is "two cheers" for SI. While promising, we argue that a feminist institutionalism based upon SI alone would be insufficient to tackle feminism's core questions of gender, strategic action, power, and change.

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Staking the Frame of a Feminist Discursive Institutionalism

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This essay proposes an integrated discursive institutionalism as a framework for feminist political analysis. Both historical institutionalism and discourse analysis have merits and limitations, and both perspectives complement each other and offer solutions to their respective deficiencies. Traditionally there has been a strong demarcation between the two perspectives. A common way to divide both approaches is between investigating "causal regularities" and "understanding meaning." I argue that a feminist institutionalism needs to deconstruct the dichotomy of causal explanation versus meaning and description and to reformulate the concept of causality. There is no adequate explanation without "meaning," and the stretching of institutionalism toward "ideas" exemplifies this inadequacy.

Rather than emphasizing their differences, I stress that institutionalism and discourse theory share important epistemological insights that facilitate their convergence into an integrated approach. Both theoretical perspectives emerged in response to the economic determinism in materialist theory. Both approaches use concepts of temporality,

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