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Already Doin' It for Ourselves? Skeptical Notes on Feminism and Institutionalism

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Let us first lay our cards on the table: We are both invested in the "feminist institutionalist project" and have highlighted the potential benefits of such a synthesis in earlier interventions (Kenny 2007; Lovenduski 1998; Mackay

and Meier 2003; see also Lovenduski 1998).[1] However, in this essay we sound a cautionary note and urge a more skeptical approach. We pose the questions: Why does feminism need new institutionalism? What do neoinstitutionalist approaches contribute to feminist scholarship on political institutions, broadly defined? When considering the potential for intellectual "borrowing" between feminism and new institutionalism, it is important to consider whether new institutional theory is "an enabling framework — or an intellectual strait-jacket" for feminist scholarship (Mackay and Meier 2003, 6). The question, then, is not only what the new institutionalism can contribute to feminist research but also what scope there is to "gender" the new institutionalism.

Why Do Feminists Need New Institutionalism?

According to the contributions in this *Critical Perspectives* and others, feminist scholarship needs new institutionalism (NI) theories and tools in order to enable them to answer some of the "big questions" of feminist political science (FPS), such as "how certain institutions and regimes are gendered, how they came into being, and how change can come about, as well as understanding the relationship between different actors and the institutional context" — in other words, key themes of gender, power, and change (Waylen this volume; see also Kenny 2007; Mackay and Meier 2003). Tools drawn from different strands of new institutionalism are highlighted as providing sharper, stronger, analytic leverage on a host of questions relating to strategic agency, the diffusion of institutional innovation, and the gap between formal rhetoric and practice (Driscoll and Krook in this issue; Mackay, Monro, and Waylen in this issue; see also Chappell 2002, 2006). Furthermore, variants of institutionalism are seen to offer a promising framework for investigating causal regularities in systematic, but highly contextualized, comparisons through time (Kulawik in this issue; Waylen in this issue; see also Waylen 2007).

The attraction of (certain variants of institutionalism) for FPS is their mutual interest in temporality, relationality, and contextuality in political developments. Soft concepts of causality that examine the configuration of constellations of elements over time, developed for example in historical institutionalism, appear well equipped to deal with the

1. See www.femfiin.com for details of a new international collaborative project, which seeks to develop a systematic feminist institutionalism.

empirical complexities of gendered institutions and political processes (Kulawik this issue), complexities which often seem to confound approaches using standard variable analysis.

While broadly in agreement with these arguments, we have a number of issues. First, we think greater clarity is needed as to whether the aim is to "borrow" tools for specific questions, to simply apply new institutionalist frameworks, or to synthesize both approaches. Each strategy brings with it different epistemological and strategic costs and benefits (Vickers 2008). In particular, while there may indeed be instances where rational choice approaches may provide insight, Amanda Driscoll and Mona Lena Krook's bold ambition to create a feminist rational choice institutionalism seems likely to flounder because of epistemological incompatibilities, illustrated by the contrast between the undersocialized human agent of rational choice institutionalism (RCI) and the complex, gendered, socially embedded, and relational agent of FPS. It is interesting that to make their case, they draw upon those RCI scholars who are nearest in approach to historical institutionalism (HI), and, indeed, on HI scholars such as Kathleen Thelen.

Second, while there is more apparent overlap between the other "schools" of institutionalism and FPS, we are unconvinced that any of the institutional approaches — unmodified — cast light on the big questions of how institutions and regimes are gendered and regendered. As we discuss in the following section, feminist scholarship already provides rich insights into the interconnections between gender and institutions and, furthermore, has developed sophisticated understandings of gender and power, two concepts that are underdeveloped in mainstream analyses. It is around the big questions of institutional continuity and change that institutionalist approaches appear to offer the most potential. However, again, FPS and wider feminist social science have developed critical insights in parallel, which have been almost entirely overlooked in the new institutionalist literature.

Gender, Power, and Change: Feminist and Institutional Insights

While more attention has been placed on the benefits of using new institutionalism in feminist research, decidedly less attention has been placed on the implications of "gendering" NI, that is, in exploring the insights that a gendered approach, developed in feminist political and

social science, might offer to new institutional analysis. In this section, we briefly review the respective approaches to the key issues of gender, power, and change.

Gender

Gendering new institutionalism would first establish gender as a crucial dimension of institutions. As new understandings of gender have gradually moved feminist research from an individual to an institutional level of analysis, gender relations are increasingly conceptualized as social structures. Not only are gender relations seen to be "institutional," but these relations are also "institutionalized," embedded in particular political institutions and constraining and shaping social interaction. Feminist theoretical and empirical work on gender and institutions suggests that gender relations are cross-cutting, that they play out in different types of institutions, as well as at different institutional levels, ranging from the symbolic level to the "seemingly trivial" level of interpersonal day-to-day interaction, where the continuous performance of gender takes place (Kenney 1996, 458; Acker 1992; Connell 1987, 2002).

In contrast, gender is almost totally neglected in mainstream NI, with little to no mention of gender as an analytic category or of women as institutional actors, except in one or two notable cases (Pierson 1996; Skocpol 1992). Yet while the majority of NI research is gender-blind, several feminist scholars highlight new institutionalism's "normative turn," which opens up possibilities for the introduction of a gendered perspective (Chappell 2002; 2006). Both FPS and NI, particularly the historical and sociological schools, share an understanding that seemingly neutral institutional processes and practices are in fact embedded in hidden norms and values, privileging certain groups over others. Others draw attention to ideational trends in the NI field (Kulawik this issue), highlighting a shared interest in reflexivity, relationality, contextuality, and temporality between FPS and NI. Again, however, while these trends may open up possibilities for dialogue, the NI literature remains notably silent on issues of women and gender and rarely draws upon relevant feminist scholarship. For example, while NI's normative turn opens up possibilities for exploring the ways in which gender norms shape political institutions, the NI literature gives little attention to the gendered foundations of these institutional norms, generally failing 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).

Power

Gendering new institutionalism also brings power to the forefront of institutional analysis. While both new institutionalism and feminist political science recognize that institutions reflect and reinforce asymmetrical power relations, feminist political science is centrally concerned with issues of power, seeking not only to recognize but also transform gendered power inequalities. FPS, together with other fields of feminist social enquiry, has produced rich descriptions of how power is produced and reproduced through gender.

In contrast, while new institutionalists acknowledge that some groups are privileged over others, they are often criticized for underplaying the importance of power relations, and power is still a relatively slippery concept in the new institutionalist literature. As Driscoll and Krook note (see essay in this issue), power is at best a "peripheral component" of rational choice institutionalism, and those rational choice institutionalists who do emphasize the importance of power relations in institutional analysis remain the exception rather than the norm in the field (e.g., Moe 2006). Historical institutionalism is frequently criticized for its overly conservative view of institutional power relations, emphasizing the power that past decisions hold for future developments (Peters 1999). Meanwhile, the sociological institutionalists' "bloodless" understanding of institutions as shared "scripts" and cultural understandings frequently ignores or overlooks the power conflicts (so vividly exposed by feminist scholars), failing to recognize that processes of interpretation can also be processes of contention (Thelen 1999).

Critics of NI may have underplayed the ways that power, albeit underdeveloped, is incorporated in institutionalist understandings of actors and interests (Thelen 2004, 32–33) and the role of negotiation, conflict, and contestation in the creation and adaptation of institutions. Recent work in the historical institutionalist field, particularly the work of Kathleen Thelen (1999; 2003; 2004), examines institutional power relations in a more dynamic way, putting a central emphasis on political conflict and coalitions.

Yet while this work represents a step forward, there are still significant limitations to new institutionalist conceptions of power, which continue to pay little or no attention to major social divisions such as gender and race. When new institutionalist accounts attend to power, they frequently

rely on distributional models, emphasizing how powerful actors anchor their privileged institutional positions. They are less likely to employ Foucauldian concepts of power as dispersed and constitutive, unlike, for example, scholars of state feminism (e.g., Franzway, Court, and Connell 1989; Halford 1992; Kantola 2006). The "discursive turn" in feminist analysis (e.g., Bacchi 1999) moves beyond power-distributional perspectives, highlighting the complex interplay of discursive struggles over the interpretation and representation of needs, problems, and identities (Kulawik in this issue; see also Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009; Verloo 2007). As such, Teresa Kulawik's "feminist discursive institutionalism" (see essay in this issue), which proposes to integrate feminist discourse analysis and HI, is a significantly different undertaking from, for example, Vivien Schmidt's (2006) discursive institutionalism. Unlike recent discursive trends in the NI field, feminist discourse analysis has gender at its core, that is to say, it is centrally concerned with problematizing and, ultimately, challenging hegemonic discursive constructions of gender.

Change

It seems to us that it is in the area of institutional (continuity and) change that new institutionalism offers the most "value added" in terms of tools and concepts. Nonetheless, gendering new institutionalism in this respect would contribute further important insights into the dynamics of agency and change. Feminist political science has as a central feature a transformative agenda. That is to say that feminist political science is explicitly concerned not only with recognizing how institutions reproduce gendered power distributions but also with how these institutions can be changed.

While new institutionalism is often criticized for focusing more on institutional stability than institutional change, recent work (particularly Thelen 2003; 2004) highlights the need to examine institutional stability and change as a dynamic process, opening up possibilities for dialogue with feminist political science. We concur with Georgina Waylen's view (see essay in this issue) that these more dynamic conceptions, in particular institutional layering, offer prospective tools for reconceptualizing gender relations and gender regimes as key institutional legacies, potentially providing insights into the dynamics of institutional reform and redesign in the context of powerful gendered norms. However, we question the extent to which these recent developments in the new institutionalist literature are, in fact, "new,"

given that many of these insights are already either explicitly or implicitly presaged in existing feminist scholarship on social and political institutions.

For example, in recent agenda-setting work on institutional change, Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Thelen propose a "realistic" conception of political institutions, arguing that institutional change is generated "as a result of the *normal, everyday implementation and enactment of an institution*" (2005, 11; emphasis added). While these theoretical insights are "groundbreaking" in NI terms, this is arguably a commonplace observation in feminist scholarship, which highlights the complex interplay between the meso and micro level in which institutions are continually enacted through everyday gender practice (see, for example, Acker 1992; Connell 1987, 2002; Hawkesworth 2003; Kathlene 1995; Kenney, 1996). While institutions constrain practice, defining possibilities for action, institutions themselves are constituted from moment to moment by these practices of "doing gender" (Connell 1987; 2002). This, in turn, opens up possibilities for agency and change: If these institutions are gendered, then they can also be "regendered" (Beckwith 2005).

Recent work in the new institutionalist field has also highlighted the dual dynamics of institutional change and continuity, arguing that any understanding of institutional change requires an analysis of the foundations of political stability, that is, an analysis of the mechanisms through which institutions are sustained and reproduced (see Thelen 1999; 2003). Again, the NI emphasis on the interconnections among institutional reproduction, stability, and change is also highlighted in much of the feminist work on gender and institutions, though perhaps more implicitly. This feminist scholarship is centrally concerned with exposing the active and ongoing institutional processes and structures involved in constructing and maintaining gendered political institutions (see, for example, Chappell 2002; Duerst-Lahti 2002; Halford 1992; Hawkesworth 2003).

Both NI and FPS emphasize the importance of strategic agency in processes of institutional change, highlighting the ways in which strategic actors initiate change within a context of opportunities and constraints. While NI highlights the role of institutional "entrepreneurs" (Schickler 2001), FPS similarly emphasizes the importance of insider and outsider strategic actors, or, to use Louise Chappell's (2006) term, "gender equity entrepreneurs," as sources of institutional innovation and political and policy change (see, for example, Bashevkin, 1998; Chappell 2002; Katzenstein 1998). Institutional reforms are often "common carriers" for

multiple interests; therefore, entrepreneurs are often needed to construct and frame reform proposals so as to motivate different parties and coalitions to work together (see Schickler 2001), and feminist empirical work across a range of fields provides rich examples of strategic framing in processes of change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while a "feminist institutionalism" seems to be a promising approach for the study of gender and institutions, more consideration needs to be given to the theoretical and practical implications of integrating feminist insights into new institutional theory. There is a substantial amount of overlap between the new institutionalism and feminist political and social science. However, this brief survey leaves the impression that feminism may have more to offer the new institutionalism than the other way around. Feminist scholarship highlights at least two significant dimensions of analysis that are completely ignored (or nearly so) by the new institutionalists: gender and power. At the very least, we argue that there needs to be recognition that much institutionally focused feminist work already hits the mark — and care should be taken to accredit these independently generated ideas and insights. In short, we should avoid the temptation of underplaying continuity and 'neologizing' in the 'stories we tell' about developments in the feminist analysis (Hemmings 2005). Furthermore, a feminist institutionalism must go beyond simply "adding" in gender, potentially challenging the gendered foundations of mainstream institutional theory, changing and transforming new institutionalist tools and concepts, or even generating new ones.

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