Commentary: Institutional History Rediscovered: Observing Organizations' Behavior in Times of Change

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The contributions to this volume are united by a shared interest in innovative forms of institutional history mainly – but not exclusively – in the field of political historical research. They express a growing dissatisfaction either with the completely un-theoretical nature of traditional political history, especially in the area of international relations. Or they feel uneasy with the theoretical offers that, for example, the New Institutionalism in political science provides. Whereas the former is rightly criticized for its state-centeredness and its treatment of nation states not only as 'data containers' but also – and more importantly – as monolithic collective agents bound up in a system of power within an otherwise anarchistic environment, the shortcomings of the latter are seen in a more nuanced way.

If we distinguish – in an admittedly coarse and overly pointed fashion – among three strands of Institutionalism: the discursivist, the structuralist-evolutionist, and the rational choice variant, the first two have been found faulty because of their respective 'structuralisms': the discursivist institutionalism for its contention that institutions are nothing but discursive constructions and stabilized solely by the mutual interpretations and expectations of their members ('sensemaking').[1] The structuralist-evolutionist institutionalism has been criticized because of its inherent reifying and determinist tendencies, and even the self-declared 'historical institutionalism' has been charged with explaining institutional change – if at all – by appealing to internal evolutionist trends rather than contingencies inherent in the open outcome of situated practices. The rational choice variant of institutionalism has not been referred to in any of the contributions of this volume, presumably because this approach combines the negative effects of a missing 'systemic' perspective with its theoretically impoverished concept of agency.

1 E.g.: K. E. Weick, Sensemaking in Organizations, London / New Delhi 1995.

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The motivation for searching for theoretical alternatives to traditional political history and the diverse variations of New Institutionalism are, as the articles show, mainly threefold: First, they are no longer content with accounts of politics which treat nation states as the only agents and as monolithic containers of power. Second, the repudiation of this view leads to a need to 'decenter' the political system into a number of different institutions with diverging access to power and differing degrees of independence. This is especially pertinent in the case of international organizations some of the articles in this volume deal with. Finally, the authors of these articles are questing for more convincing models of institutional change claiming the role of agency and contingency over the role of incrementalism and structural evolution in the process.

Most of the contributions to this volume endeavor in probing Anthony Giddens's 'structuration theory' whether it can meet these needs. What is it that makes this early attempt to establish a 'praxeological' social theory (we speak about the late 1970s) so attractive? First of all, it seems that Giddens's suggestion to replace the 'dualism' between agency and structure by a 'duality' has gained traction among historians who try to analyze political institutions not as *either* collective agents *or* anonymous structures but as *both*. Furthermore, Giddens's notion of 'social system' is much more open than either his antagonists in systems theory (as laid out most prominently by Niklas Luhmann) or functionalism (regardless whether you take Talcott Parsons or Robert K. Merton) but nevertheless provides for a sense of the internal structure of institutions which would define 'embeddedness', 'context-sensitivity', or 'situatedness' more precisely. Last but not least, Giddens's concept of 'structuration' which means the reproduction as well as modification of structures by and through the practices of 'knowledgeable social agents' who use these very same structures as the media of their action, may provide for a much more flexible view on institutional change, allowing for 'stickiness' as well as 'path dependency' or 'contingency' – as the eventual effects of 'unacknowledged conditions of action' or 'unintended consequences' thereof.

I do welcome the renewed interest in a political history understood in terms of a new institutional history and the subsequent creative reception of Anthony Giddens's 'structuration theory'. Yet I deem it necessary to point out in my commentary some of the pitfalls an outright adoption of this theory might entail and which are based either in a too broad assimilation of Giddens's vocabulary or his own airiness in many of his concrete concepts. Giddens was most concerned with, on the one hand, conceptualizing the relationship between the individual agent and the structural properties of social systems – that what he calls 'a new social ontology', or social theory – and, on the other hand, 'large' institutions on the level of society or on a global scale. This is the reason he did give the nation state so much prominence in the era of an escalating Cold War implying the danger of nuclear overkill during the 1980s. The theoretically sound explanation of 'institutions' on the meso-level of society is actually not among the numerous strengths of Giddens's approach. It is here, in the center of interest for all of the contributions to this volume, that we are asked to extend the 'structuration' vocabulary. The main advantage of Giddens's theoretical exercises is, on the other hand, that he has not left us with a

set of canonical definitions, hermetic in nature, but with a host of ideas that may be used like a toolbox to assimilate building blocks of other theories or a roadmap to develop adaptations of our own.

Giddens's emphasis is on the relationship of individual human agents with institutions – a term that in his set of concepts is clearly molded after the model of 'organizations' and not 'norms' like in the New Institutional Economics. This also implies that he has given much consideration to the relations between and among individual human agents *within* institutions sketching the 'production', 'reproduction' and 'modification' of institutions as a consummate product of the recurring social practices of the institution's members. Thus 'structuration theory' primarily allows for an actor-oriented institutional analysis focused on the inner workings of single institutions. Giddens has much less to say about the relations between and among several institutions. Here is a point of departure for further theoretical concept assemblage.

It would lead into a theoretical blind alley, however, to make the claim that the 'duality of structure and agency' should allow for assigning agency to entire institutions. This would only duplicate the reification and 'humanization' which is notorious in traditional political history's treatment of collective agents. Institutions *are not* 'living organisms' but social systems *inhabited* by human agents. I believe that the attractiveness of the homology that institutions can be attributed agency is rooted in the need to both reintroduce 'autonomy' – as measured against the monolithic view of the nation state – and 'contingency' – the potential to act otherwise even under severely constraining conditions to refined accounts of inter-institutional relations and institutional change. Yet this twist of 'structuration theory' towards the needs of a new institutional history is unsubstantiated in the original Giddens. And it would, that is my point of view, cut back the potentials an 'actor-oriented institutional analysis' has in political history.

Only individual agents – 'knowledgeable human agents' – have agency, and the interesting question is how such agents 'structure' institutions in their combined daily practices and how their agency in return is 'structured' by the respective institution. But, of course, the issue of inter-institutional relations matters, and even the 'actor-oriented institutional analysis' cannot settle for the purely internal interaction among the members involved. What is at stake here is the production of a collective outcome which is aimed at meeting the institution's declared or undeclared goals. Talcott Parsons has termed this function of social systems 'goal attainment'. Yet although these institutional outcomes are produced by the practices of the institution's individual members and are perhaps conveyed by individual members of the institution – for example by the act of signing a treaty by an ambassador of a certain nation state – they cannot be equated with individual agency. I suggest calling these outcomes – products of the specialized interaction of knowledgeable agents within the institution – 'institutional effects'. Inter-institutional relations, then, are constituted by the communication and interference of several 'institutional effects'.

'Institutional effects' are a homology to 'agency' which can – according to Giddens – only be attributed to individual human actors. This means that we have to find theoretical homologies for the structural elements that 'enable' actors to act: structural elements such as

'rules' and 'resources' on the institutional level. I would suggest to define these after one under-developed concept by Giddens termed 'structural properties' of a social system, 'empowering assets' of institutions if you will. Whereas 'rules' and 'resources' are reserved for individual human agents as media of their 'enabled' actions, 'structural properties' are the media for the 'empowerment' of institutions. This adds a level of complexity to the analysis of institutions, because it forces us to discern the practices and procedures that 'make' the empowering assets of institutions whose roots can be in the mobilizing of individual qualities in the members (e.g., expertise) as well as in the material equipment or procedural tuning of the respective institution itself (e.g., the organization of effective violence in military units). I deem it very important at this point to direct your attention to an under-appreciated chapter of Giddens's *Constitution of Society*, namely the one on "Time, Space, and Regionalization" In admittedly rather cursory remarks Giddens here establishes a measurement for the power of institutions (in his case prominently: such as the nation state) in terms of 'distanciation' – or geographical reach – of institutions, 'time spacing' – or the stability of institutions over time, including the absence of its members – and 'regionalization' which a little flippantly could be illustrated by the saying "divide and conquer". It will be of paramount importance not only to analyze the internal production of "institutional effects" but to extend the analysis to the actual consequence of these effects in inter-institutional relations.

"Time, Space, and Regionalization" is also a mandatory starting point when it comes to the explanation of institutional change. 'Structuration theory' has been charged with an explanatory indifference in regard to the explanation of change because it attributes all change to contingency. The result would be an 'episodic' take on historical development which could be descriptive at best, only narrative at worst.[2] This is only one side of the coin. 'Time and space distanciation' allows for a theoretical juxtaposition of the 'potential life-span' of institutions with their actual real-time biography, and this opens up very potent avenues of explanatory analysis. Might, for example, the 40 years endurance of the GDR be closely linked to the lifespan of its machine park much of which dated back from the interwar years and was not successfully modernized on an encompassing scale after 1945?

Yet how can we extend the 'actor-oriented institutional analysis' from the micro-level of intra-institutional practices and the meso-level of the production of 'institutional effects' to the macro-level of inter-institutional relations? I think a reappraisal of Giddens's concept of 'social system' could be a valuable starting point. His notion of 'system' is much more open and looser than Luhmann's rather rigid use of the term in his theory of functional differentiation. For Giddens, a social system is a set of structural properties which organizes mutually recursive practices of its members and relies for its stability on built-in mechanisms of 'system integration'. A social system can change without the danger of disintegration and also endures the temporary absence of its members ('time

2 H. Joas and W. Knöbl (ed.), Sozialtheorie. Zwanzig einführende Vorlesungen. 4. ext. ed. Frankfurt am Main 2013, pp. 426-428.

distanciation'). On the other hand, a social system is constituted, reproduced and modified by nothing other than the mutually recursive practices it organizes. Thus the 'systemness' of social systems must be located not in the *material* practices as such (which differ from system type to another) but in their 'recursiveness'. Consequently, for the agents involved as well as for the observer the 'systemness' of social systems appears as a 'mode' which sets the 'key' as to what practices are required and what rules and resources the members can command in the process. As the 'rules' and 'resources' are the 'media' for social action of individual agents, the 'modes' of social systems configure and calibrate those 'media' to the purpose or 'mission' of the system as a whole. As can be seen easily, this specification of the Giddensian concept of 'system' is geared to a notion of 'institution' which actually implies 'organization'. Yet whereas not all social systems are organizations, all organizations are social systems. Organizations, then, appear as specifically modern types of social systems with a high degree of 'systemness' or, in Giddens's words, 'system integration'. Whereas in premodern times almost all of the 'enactment' of social systems had to be through rituals (recursiveness in time), the strong 'modes' of modern organizations – without jettisoning rituals completely – transform much of the ritualistic 'enactment' into 'routines' (repetitive synchronic recursiveness).[3]

According to Giddens, all human interaction combines elements of signification, legitimation and power / domination in varying proportions. We cannot simply claim these elements for the level of 'institutional effects' in the form of a simple homology. However, we can ask – bearing in mind that we more or less mean 'organization' when we talk of 'institutions' – what forms 'institutional effects' typically assume, and then try to identify their basic functions when looking at empirically observable institutions as the contributions to this volume have demonstrated. I suggest that typical 'institutional effects' of organizations are: 'products', 'procedures', 'operations', 'information', 'decisions', 'classification / recognition', 'consultation / deliberation', 'negotiation', and 'representation'. This comprehensive but probably not exhaustive typology enables institutional analysis, on the one hand, to scrutinize the *production* of 'institutional effects' by concrete practices within the institutions and to locate the individual agents in the process. On the other hand, institutional analysis gains a *vocabulary* for the historical reconstruction of inter-institutional relations.

And here, on this macro-level of inter-institutional relations – which is clearly in the focus of almost all of the contributions to this volume – we would have to come up with an equivalent to the concept of 'social system' which is only valid where individual human agents are involved. Yet even the fact that 'institutional effects' are often communicated or executed by designated individuals, or groups of people, does not warrant the transfer of the concept 'system' to a higher level of aggregation. Yet the idea of 'systemness' as a 'mode' of organizing recursive practices is valid on this level. Giddens himself has provided us with two of his sometimes rather fuzzy neologisms, namely the 'axis of structuration' and the 'structural principles'. They mean basically the same thing

3 B. Stollberg-Rilinger, Rituale. Historische Einführungen, Frankfurt am Main/New York 2013.

from juxtaposed perspectives: 'structural principles' define the 'modes' of institutions, organizations and complexes of human interactions in a certain sector of society (not to be mistaken with nation states), whereas 'axis of structuration' has the same designation with the view 'from the bottom up'. This sounds very sophisticated as a way to bridge the micro-macro divide but is not excessively helpful in analyzing phenomena on the macro-level of society (not to be mistaken with nation states) in an – even historically spanned diachronic – view.

I would suggest adapting Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the 'social field' for this level of social 'systemness'. This term is open enough for allowing the search for the boundaries – and who sets them. It also allows for the identification what practices count – out of the list above – and who would be admitted as an institutional player in the field with what 'empowering' structural properties and what 'legitimate' institutional effects. All contributions to this volume deal with political institutions. This means that the institutional effect 'products' would be a matter of negligence since it pertains mostly to economic organizations. Yet all the other typical practices associated with organizations would be interesting areas of research. The contributions to this volume have been mostly concerned with political organizations, and here it would be of utmost importance to single out what qualifies political institutions to be recognized as legitimate players in the political field and what 'structural properties' they could bring to bear. Most of the articles have already given intriguing insight in the concrete workings of national and international organizations. It is, of course, time to systematize these empirical approaches to a new historical institutionalism, and theory-building is one of the genuine tasks of historians. On the other hand, the discussion of limitations of currently available theoretical approaches leads us to see that for the historian the narrative of concrete cases is our eventual task, and narrative descriptions on the development of and confrontation between political institutions will help to carve out avenues for further theoretical advances.