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Spring 2008

Historic Institutionalism in Urban Sociology and Politics

- * Savitch, H. V. & Kantor, P. (2002). *Cities in the international marketplace: The political economy of urban development in North America and Western Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- * Altshuler, A. & Luberoff, D. (2003). *Mega-projects: The changing politics of urban public investment*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution Press.
- * Smith, R. C. (2006). *Mexican New York: Transnational lives of new immigrants*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Despite its near cult status elsewhere in the social sciences, New Institutionalism--the study of human behavior in the context of institutions-- remains relatively unexplored territory in urban studies. One explanation for the field's inattention to this emerging set of ideas may be that urban studies has implicitly concerned itself with urban institutions and institutional design for some time or perhaps it is because, arguably, both urban studies and planning are inherently, albeit unreflexively, institutional studies (Healey, 2007). Since the 1980s, several strains of the New Institutionalism have grown in popularity, including political science's rational choice model (rooted in micro-economic theory) and sociology's normative institutionalism (rooted in organizational theory). Despite the influence of both political science and sociological thought in urban studies and planning, there has been little spillover of these new institutional theories or methods into urban studies.

A third strain of the New Institutionalism, historical institutionalism, emerged in the 1980s, in part to address perceived weaknesses elsewhere in the emergent realm of institutional thought. Based in group theory and structural-functionalist traditions, historical institutionalism defines institutions procedurally through "routines, norms, and conventions embedded in the organizational structure of the political economy" (Hall & Taylor, 1996, 938). In historical institutional analysis, contextual comparison is the basis of analysis—actor preferences and

actions are historically situated—and path dependency figures largely in their explanations of social causation. The relative stability of institutions may be punctured at “critical junctures” when “substantial institutional change takes place” and “historical development moves to a new path” (Hall & Taylor, 1996, 942). For historical institutionalists, examination of uneven power across social groups is a primary focus.

Although none under consideration here would be cited as examples of historical institutionalism per se, I suggest that each of these recent books on urban politics and sociology contain implicit historical institutional analyses. I argue that examination of the ways these authors employ historical institutionalist approaches, both implicitly and explicitly, facilitates evaluation of the potential of this method for future research into urban phenomena. Following a brief summary of the themes, arguments, and findings of each book, I illustrate the common threads of historical institutionalism spanning them. This includes an analysis of the institutional variables in each, the argued relationship between them, the critical junctures or periodizations that shape the longitudinality of the studies, and the role of path dependency in their arguments. In conclusion, I discuss ways that explicit, rather than implicit, deployment of historical institutional analytic methods could have strengthened each of the works.

In *Mega-Projects*, Altshuler and Luberoff explore shifting patterns of public investment in expensive, large-scale public projects over a century of urban development. Driving their research is an attempt to explain shifts in recent decades away from direct public investment in mega-projects. Their multiple case study seeks to reveal national patterns over a fifty-year period in U.S. history using "empirical narrative analysis" via which they explain their empirical observations through the lenses of several structural theories of urban politics, including historical institutionalism. As they describe it, historical institutionalism sees collective choices

influenced by and influencing institutional arrangements slowly over time. These arrangements, along with actor preferences, shape political decision-making; thus, political behavior is best understood in its historical and institutional context. They stress that " a deep understanding of politics must proceed from an understanding of institutional arrangements and of historic pathways that cannot be observed currently" (73).

Reinforcing my assertion that there are no historical institutionalist urban theories, they suggest this as a fruitful future pathway for urban theory construction. Interestingly, they cite Katznelson's 1981 study on patterns of U.S. partisanship as a progenitor of urban historical institutionalism. They see the components of historical institutionalism defining his work despite the absence of claims to the title. In their case, Altshuler and Luberoff explicitly invoke historical institutionalism to supplement political economic explanations for the lack of "state-sponsored disruption" of mega-projects development in the "Do No Harm" era. Beyond the efforts of environmental movement (which they see as a major force shaping this period) they cite the persistence of policies and judicial action in constraining government action to support their argument that political and institutional factors contributed to shifting investment patterns over time more than economic factors.

Thus, path dependence, or the notion that the beginning makes a difference in the end, is an essential component shaping patterns of mega-project investment over time. The organization of *Mega-Projects* reflects this: the eras they describe mark turning points, what historical institutionalists call "critical junctures," where incremental shifts over time accumulate to result in what appears as a paradigm shift. Thus, despite the perpetual influence of business-led coalitions in urban politics and constantly increasing interlocal competition over the last fifty years, changes in intergovernmental contexts and emerging social movements were strong

enough to shift the direction of mega-project investment at critical points across the fifty year period they investigate.

In *Cities in the International Marketplace*, Savitch and Kantor undertake a massive comparative case study of ten Western cities to explain variations in their development patterns over a thirty-year period despite the arguably homogenizing forces of global capitalism. They conclude that despite global market forces, cities do have options with regard to development choices and their cross-national comparative analysis leads to development of the bargaining theory of urban development which explains that different patterns of development occur when a city's bargaining power in the global marketplace is mitigated by a combination of endogenous and exogenous factors.

Although they do not acknowledge the historical institutionalist approach, several of its premises underlie their work. Foremost is the notion of path dependency. Although they argue throughout the book that cities differ in their policy choices due to a combination of "steering" and "driving" variables, they ultimately concede that "[w]hile agency [urban political regimes] can prompt change, the likely pathways are influenced by the structural context within which governments bargain" (219). As their narratives of the individual urban contexts reinforce, these structural contexts are the result of decades (if not centuries) of political and economic development choices across subsequent political regimes. Cities differ in their development choices as a result of "circumstance" and "choice," thus their bargaining model serves only to predict in which direction cities might move in particular contexts (149). Although their book does not address critical junctures in these circumstances over time, the reader can infer from their retelling of the various city histories that shifting political regimes, ruling coalitions, and intergovernmental relationships mark these periods of dramatic change, much like those

Altshuler and Luberoff document. A key element of historical institutional analysis looks beyond understanding how decisions are made to explore how institutions shape and aggregate the interests of societal actors and in doing so narrow the range from possible to probable outcomes. Although not explicit, this is the aim of Savitch and Kanter's work.

In *Mexican New York*, Smith's fifteen-year cross-national case study considers the institutionalization and varying durations of transnational life across time and space as evidence of transformative power of international migration in a networked, global age. Given that the New Institutionalism has its own sociological sub-field, it may seem strange to include a sociological work in a discussion of historical institutionalism. In my estimation, however, Smith addresses several shortcomings of sociological institutionalism including limiting the range of possible outcomes to those institutions already in existence, explaining dominance of institutions in terms of efficiency, losing sight of actors and political agents through focus on macro-level processes, and a failure to observe disparate distributions of power within and across institutions (Hall & Taylor, 1992). More significantly, his book adds a sorely needed spatial component to historical institutionalist analysis, an aspect conspicuously absent across the New Institutionalist discourse.

Of the three books, Smith's is the most consistent with historical institutionalist methodologies. While this may suggest to some the "common sense" nature of the approach, it also suggests that this is may be an essential strategy for examining complex structural issues and the variations in outcomes across time and space resulting from relationships between and the influence of institutions on human behavior. Smith is explicit about the institutional nature of his research, as he traces the origins and evolution of the institution of "transnational life" through examination of practices and relationships. He posits transnational life as "embodied in

identities and social structures that help form the life world of immigrants and their children and is constructed in relations among people, institutions, and places” (p. 7). He draws the analogy between his work and evolutionary biology in terms of theory development, but I would argue the two also align in terms of path dependency. For Smith's ethnographic population, the institutional change unfolds slowly--and non-linearly--over the course of lifetimes and generations rather than months or years. Furthermore, the institutions upon which he bases his analysis--marriage, the family, gender, politics, religion, and adolescence--are critical social life processes.

Ironically, the book that relies least explicitly on historical institutionalist methods seems most aligned with its precepts. Although the critical junctures in *Mexican New York* are largely a matter of both local and global politics, there are more nuanced moments when gender identities shift in a multigenerational transnational context and even more subtly when individual identities shift in accordance with processes of migration and assimilation. Although Smith undervalues notion of space/time compression (ideationally and technologically) in his analysis, overall he explains shifts in the migration experience over time as an outcome of the complex interplay of institutions with each other and with individuals, wrangling admirably with the structure/agency dialectic--the ultimate goal of historical institutionalism, in my estimation.

Although in *Mega-Projects* Altshuler and Luberoff employ historical institutionalism as one facet of their analysis, they assume a rather limited view of the role of institutions throughout most of the book. Much of their data screams for an historical institutionalist analysis: had they adopted it throughout, than they might have had a stronger argument than that they arrived at by piecing together a patchwork quilt of theoretical explanations. Although they finally concede that economic arguments are insufficient explanation for their observed

phenomena (p. 253) the chief themes of contemporary urban development they identify are business domination and the primacy of economic development as a local policy objective. One wonders what a cross-cultural comparison of mega-projects in the same period might have added to their findings.¹

Finally, Altshuler and Luberoff appear preoccupied with the point at which one shifts from "researcher" to "theorist". The authors seem slaves to misconceptions about case research, convinced that they need to keep "theory" separate from their observations. An historical institutionalist approach might have eased their discomfort in this realm, allowing them to couch their claims of causality in the critical junctures of path dependency. Using this framework, they might have found it judicious to weave their observations from chapter eight throughout their discussion rather than separating their observations from "theory," sidestepping altogether the pitfall of privileging one and weakening the other through separation.

In *Cities in the International Marketplace*, Savitch and Kantor grapple with the structure/agency question throughout their analysis. In a quasi-rational choice model they claim that local urban agents are political regimes--synonymous with ruling elites, dominant regimes, local institutions, local government and political leadership. These (all of them) are the "agent" that battle in opposition to structural forces. This results in what appears to be a conflation of steering with driving variables in the realm of intergovernmental relations. At what point are the intergovernmental relationships the agents and at which the structure? One wonders how an historical institutional analysis might have changed their findings. I imagine they might have had to reconfigure the oppositional nature of their endogenous and exogenous variables to reflect the

¹ In fact, in *Megaprojects and risk: An anatomy of ambition* (2003, Cambridge UP) Flyvbjerg et al undertake a cross-national investigation of mega-project development that highlights several institutional factors Altshuler and Luberoff gloss over or overlook entirely, including professional conventions of mega-project development, local decision-making processes, and traditions regarding accountability in public/private relationships.

embeddedness of local regimes within bargaining contexts within a global context, a nesting process facilitated by historical institutionalist approaches.

This review demonstrates that, in many ways, these scholars share a common theoretical orientation and methodology. These commonalities contribute to the strength of their case studies, allowing them to test theoretical claims and, if not to make direct causal inferences, to account for causal complexity. This review suggests that rather than incorporating it incidentally, more explicit application of historical institutional analytic methods in urban studies can increase confidence in both the generalizability and reliability of case study research into "big structures, large processes, and huge comparisons" (Tilly 1984). Furthermore, conscientious development and adherence to systematic historical institutionalist methodologies in urban studies facilitates examination of local institutions embedded in multi-level global contexts. The analytical rigor in historical institutionalist structural comparisons comes from the identification of causal relationships between variables over time and space. Thus, this approach may help move qualitative studies of urban phenomena beyond the realm of "storytelling," and even beyond the realm of probabilistic quantitative analysis, to emerge as reliable, verifiable post-positivist social science.

References

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