

The Theoretical Core of the New Institutionalism

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I. THE NEW INSTITUTIONALISM

Proclamations of a “new” institutionalism, while widespread, have met with some skepticism in the scientific community. Critics wonder what about the new institutionalism is really so new.¹ Institutions, surely, have been a focus of political science since its inception.² In Europe, the state has consistently been central to the study of politics and, hence, plans to “bring it back in” do not seem especially innovative.³ Further confusion has arisen because the new institutionalists do not propose one generally accepted definition of an institution, nor do they appear to share a common research program or methodology. In fact, three separate branches of scholarship—rational choice, organization theory, and historical institutionalism—all lay claim to the label, seemingly without adhering to an overarching theoretical framework.

I believe, however, that the new institutionalists do indeed share a common goal, one that cuts across these competing branches. My purpose in writing this essay is to communicate more clearly the content of this theoretical core. I hope in this way to clarify the contribution of the new institutionalism to political science and to indicate, as well, some of the problems currently facing this approach. Further, because historical institutionalism is the least well understood

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of these approaches, I will devote more space to its explication and critique. I will neglect entirely a potential fourth approach, the new institutionalism in economics, because the theoretical core that I outline here is less applicable to this particular variant of the new institutionalism.

II. BEHAVIORALISM

To understand the theoretical core of the new institutionalism, one must go back to the political behavior movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Interestingly, some of the questions and doubts raised about the new institutionalism resemble the complaints made about its predecessor. Like the new institutionalism, the political behavior movement was criticized because it was not entirely clear which methods, theories, and research topics comprised the “behavioral” approach. Nor was the term *political behavior* particularly definitive, as (like *institution*) it could encompass just about anything. Summarizing these disputes in the *American Political Science Review*, Robert Dahl conceded that the political behavior movement could be characterized as a “mood.”⁴ Nevertheless, after admitting the difficulties, he went on to describe what he saw as the core of this movement, working quite directly from an effort by David Truman to define the approach in 1951.⁵

Truman defined political behavior as “an orientation or a point of view which aims at *stating all of the phenomena of government in terms of the observed and observable behavior of men.*”⁶ While this ambition was linked to an interest in a scientific method of rigorous hypothesis testing based on empirical observation and, where possible, quantitative data, science was not the constitutive feature of this movement. Rather, it was the emphasis on observable behavior—how people vote, what the mayor delivers to various constituents—that was central to the behavioral approach.

This focus on observable behavior is precisely the point of departure for the new institutionalism. The new institutionalists vehemently reject observed behavior as the basic datum of political analysis; they do not believe that behavior is a sufficient basis for explaining “all of the phenomena of government.” For behavior occurs in the context of institutions and can only be so understood.

III. THE INSTITUTIONALIST CRITIQUE

There are three aspects to the institutionalist critique of behavior. The first questions the assumption that political behavior reveals preferences. For the behavioralist, a person’s “true” preferences cannot be ascertained. Therefore, one must rely on that person’s behavior to indicate those preferences. For all intents and purposes, the expressed preferences are the real preferences of any individual; preferences are revealed through behavior. Institutionalists, on the other hand, are interested precisely in the distinction between “expressed” and

“real” preferences.⁷ There may be any number of reasons why, under one particular set of circumstances, someone may make a political choice that deviates from the choice the same individual, with the same preferences, would make under other circumstances. For example, they may believe that the outcome they hope for is not feasible and that they should therefore vote for an alternative that is not their first choice but one that has the advantage of being realizable. Or, the “true” interests of individuals or groups may not be entirely clear. Institutionalists aim to analyze why these actors choose one particular definition of their interests and not some other equally plausible alternative. Definitions of interests are viewed as political results that must be analyzed and not as starting points for political action to be taken at face value. Thus, institutionalist theory aims to expose and analyze the discrepancy between “potential” interests and those that come to be expressed in political behavior.

Second, the institutionalist approach views the summation of preferences—or, for that matter, the aggregation of individual behaviors into collective phenomena—as exceedingly problematic. Dahl himself notes that “analysis of individual preferences cannot fully explain collective decisions, for in addition we need to understand the mechanisms by which individual decisions are aggregated and combined into collective decisions.”⁸ Yet, whereas behavioral studies assume that preferences can be aggregated and generally view mechanisms for the aggregation of interests as perfectly efficient, the institutional approach disputes the notion of aggregation itself. The separate branches of the new institutionalism reject the possibility of interest aggregation for different reasons—which will be discussed in more detail below—but they all agree that political decisions cannot be based on the aggregation of individual preferences. For, on this view, it is simply not possible to add interests together. Human interests are so complex, that to speak of summing or aggregating them is merely applying a metaphor to a complicated process. Mechanisms for aggregating interests do not sum but in fact reshape interests—by developing new ideas through discussions and getting some persons to redefine their preferences, by selecting out some interests at the expense of others, or by reducing a multifaceted set of issues to two alternatives that can be voted on.⁹ Thus, mechanisms for collective decisions do not measure the sum of individual preferences. Instead, they allow us to reach decisions, even where there may be no clear-cut consensus.

To put this point more concretely, let us consider the relationship between voters and public policy. If voters could freely express their full views on every policy issue, the result would more likely be a chaos of opinions than a policy consensus. Political procedures, like rules for holding referenda or electing representatives, but also practices like dividing legislatures into specialized jurisdictions or leaving the informational burden of policy to experts, put limits on the political process that allow decisions to be made, even where there is no natural equilibrium of preferences.¹⁰

Table 1
Behavioralism versus Institutionalism

	Preferences (X_i)	Aggregation (ΣX_i)	Normative Standard
Behavioralism	Subjective Revealed through behavior (e.g., voting)	Efficient summation \rightarrow equilibrium (e.g., interest group market)	Utilitarian: $\Sigma X_i =$ public interest/ common good
Institutionalism	True \neq expressed preferences (problem with X_i)	Inefficient aggregation Equilibrium problems \rightarrow outcomes/decisions $\neq \Sigma X_i$ (problem with ΣX_i)	Rejects utilitarian standard $\Sigma X_i \neq$ public interest Assessment of bias Eradication of bias Common good = ??

The third institutionalist challenge is normative. If the institutionalists are correct, much or all of political behavior and collective decision making is an artifact of the procedures used to make decisions. If political processes are seen to be this decisive, the analyst's evaluation of politics will change. Interests will no longer be regarded as subjective assessments of individuals; collective decisions will not be viewed as the sum of those individual wishes. The recognition of bias in institutions, however, burdens the institutionalist with two responsibilities. Institutionalists should discuss the direction and implications of this bias, and they should suggest ways to improve the justness of institutional outcomes. Yet, for reasons related to institutionalist assumptions themselves, these challenges are extremely difficult to meet. A brief look at the roots of the institutional tradition will help to make clear why this is the case.

IV. THE INSTITUTIONAL TRADITION

The three starting assumptions of the new institutionalism—that preferences or interests expressed in action should not be conflated with “true” preferences, that methods for aggregating interests inevitably distort, that institutional configurations may privilege particular sets of interests and may need to be reformed—are part of a much older tradition in social and political theory. The links are so close that it is probably preferable to speak of the institutional tradition and not to focus so much on the differences between the “old” and the “new.”

The main points of the institutional approach can already be found, for example, in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His criticism of Hobbes, Locke, and others for assuming that the behavior of possessive individuals in a particular historical and social context expressed the natural preferences and traits of all human beings is an institutionalist claim that behavior and preferences are not a coincident.¹¹ Rousseau viewed preferences, such as the desire to accumulate property, not as universal postulates on which one could found a scientific theory

of politics but as products of society—its norms and its institutions. Law and custom shaped men's preferences and institutionalized power and privilege, thus converting natural inequalities into more pernicious social inequalities.¹² To discover the true nature of man, untainted by the social order, one would have to imagine men in a presocial state, stripped of all effects of social intercourse and even language. To restore the natural freedom of man under modern conditions, Rousseau proposed the social contract. Such a contract would allow men to “find a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before.”¹³

Institutions—most centrally the law and the constitution—thus play a dual role. They constrain and corrupt human behavior. Yet, they provide the means of liberation from the social bond. Social institutions do not embody man's fundamental nature. Instead, as artifacts of history (in this case, of the civilizing process), institutions induce particular behaviors. Being creations of man, however, they can be transformed by politics. Political institutions can be reworked to function more justly, and political decisions made within these institutions will alter social institutions so as to produce better citizens. New laws could reform property rights or the educational system, for instance, thereby causing citizens to think more about the common good and less about their personal possessions.

Most germane for contemporary institutionalists are Rousseau's arguments about the ways in which the organization of the political process will influence the quality and justness of political decisions. Just as men's preferences are products of particular social and institutional environments, so too do political decisions emerge from a particular set of institutional procedures that may shape or distort those decisions. Depending on how individual wills are polled for collective decisions, the final results may reflect the common good, or they may be distorted.

Rousseau raises the problem of aggregating interests in his famous passage on the distinction between the general will and the will of all.

There is often a great deal of difference between the will of all and the general will; the latter considers only the common interest, while the former takes private interest into account, and is no more than a sum of particular wills: but take away from these same wills the pluses and minuses that cancel one another, and the general will remains as the sum of the differences.¹⁴

That is, Rousseau rejects the aggregation of interests as a means of determining what is in the public interest. The sum of the particular interests of individuals (or the “will of all”) is insufficient. To arrive at the general will or common good, one must use procedures other than the summation of individual preferences. Critically, Rousseau does not describe any particular content of the general will but relies instead on political procedures to lead us to the public interest.

How then is the general will to be ascertained? Rousseau's procedural instructions may be interpreted in various ways. His admonitions against "partial associations" and communication among the citizenry, as well as his preference that "each citizen should express only his own opinion," indicate a plebiscitary process by which citizens vote individually on issues, isolated from one another, and protected from political parties and interest groups.¹⁵ On the other hand, his image of the "sum of the differences" as being in some sense orthogonal to the pluses and minuses of particular wills, as well as his stress on unanimity—but a unanimity that requires political conflict¹⁶—indicate a deliberative or discursive process by which public discussion will allow citizens to find a common ground and reach consensus on the public good. In this second view, issues and interests are qualitatively transformed through discussion, allowing a mutual interest to emerge. Here, interests may be said to be integrated rather than aggregated.¹⁷

Nevertheless, while plausible cases for particular interpretations can be made, the fact remains that Rousseau's institutional formula is undeniably obscure. This is not merely a question of lack of clarity on Rousseau's part but is indicative of a fundamental problem of the institutionalist perspective. Institutional analysis focuses on showing how preferences and decisions are artifacts of institutions. Institutional rules and procedures distort preferences and decisions in various ways. But if preferences are distorted, what are the "true" preferences of individuals? Whereas the behaviorist tradition finesses this question by assuming that persons reveal their preferences through their behavior, the institutionalist tradition cannot accept this assumption. Avaricious behavior in a particular historical and social setting is for Rousseau no proof of man's avaricious nature. But in trying to reach back to find man's fundamental nature, he can make only a few hypothetical weak assumptions, assumptions that are in any case irrelevant for man's civilized state. Yet, one needs some such standard for judging how badly particular institutions distort political behaviors and political decisions and for deciding what steps are necessary to correct these distortions.

The institutional tradition's search for such a standard is thus made difficult because institutionalists eschew both behaviorist and social determinist approaches to making normative judgments about the quality of political preferences and outcomes. Behavioral approaches assume preferences to be subjective givens and then accept an equilibrium of interests as being just by definition, as long as minimal conditions are met.¹⁸ In other words, the fairness of the political process substitutes for any overarching judgment about the results; the behavioral approach adopts an a posteriori standard of justice. Social determinist approaches, by contrast, adopt standards of justice based on objective interests, such as those stemming from class, gender, or social position.¹⁹ Theories of social structure and social justice—such as marxism—provide a vantage point for critical scrutiny both of the preferences that come to be expressed in politics and of the outcomes that result from the political process, such as patterns in the class origins of elected

officials or class biases in their decisions.²⁰ In comparison with the behavioral approach, such theories are outcome rather than process oriented and invoke a priori rather than a posteriori standards.²¹

The institutionalist tradition rejects both approaches. Institutionalists criticize the behavioralists for accepting the expression of preferences and the aggregation of interests in politics at face value. But they are not willing to adopt the objective standards of the social determinists or marxists—or for that matter, any single a priori principle—as a basis for critiquing and improving current social and political arrangements. Instead, they attempt to “square the circle” between a priori and a posteriori standards by recommending formal procedures that can be used to define substantive justice. Tocqueville’s interest in local political institutions and participation as an antidote to despotism, and as a source of class harmony (or Weber’s interest in a working parliament that could serve as a counterweight to the bureaucracy and hence protect value rationality in a world of ever-increasing instrumental rationality), is an example of this normative emphasis of institutionalism.²² Rawls’s “veil of ignorance,” Habermas’s “ideal speech situation,” and Lowi’s “juridical democracy” constitute contemporary examples of the same basic approach—although, of course, the specific proposals are very different.²³

Analyses of existing procedures and their distortions provide guidelines for these institutional recommendations. But institutionalism cannot provide a positive theory of standards that can be used to evaluate political choices and outcomes. Eschewing both the simple aggregation of individual utilities on one hand, and essentialist theories of the social order on the other, as providing a standard for evaluating politics, institutionalists must search for ways to arrive at the “sum of the differences.” The vagueness of this concept is thus not a mere coincidence but rather a consequence of the central theoretical tenets of this approach. In relying on procedural standards, institutionalism remains within the liberal tradition. But in raising the problem of the representation of interests and in questioning the use of efficiency or other process-based standards for judging the quality of political processes and results, institutionalist theory constitutes a distinct subset of the liberal tradition. In opposition to other subsets—such as economic liberalism, utilitarianism, or behavioralism, which, despite their many important differences, hold in common a faith in the efficient summation of individual desires as the way to arrive at a definition of the public interest—the institutionalist tradition seeks transcendent or overarching norms to guide political behavior, yet at the same time it is not prepared to take the leap to a fully substantive view of politics.

V. RATIONAL CHOICE

The same basic theoretical assumptions and normative conundrum are present in contemporary institutionalist theories and projects. To demonstrate that this

Table 2
Institutional Approach Contrasted with Other Paradigms

	Liberal		
	Institutional	Behavioralist/ Utilitarian	Social Determinist/Marxist
Interests	Diverse sources of individual and collective interests; institutions influence their articulation and expression in politics	Subjective: preferences revealed through behavior; each individual best judges of his or her interests	Objective: social group/class based
Political process	Problem of aggregation; form of process affects quality and results of participation	Utility aggregation with efficient transmission of preferences (in politics, in market, in interest group market)	Correspond to social/class structure
Normative	Procedural democracy: substantive justice through formal procedure	Formal democracy: fairness of process guarantees justness of results: formally open access to markets/politics; competition protected	Substantive democracy: Social harmony-organic solidarity/end of class exploitation
Example	Rousseau, Kant, Montesquieu, Toqueville, (J. S. Mill), Weber, Habermas, Rawls, Theodore J. Lowi	Bentham, James Mill, Milton Friedman, David Truman, Robert Dahl ^a	Durkheim, Marx

a. Hobbes, Locke, and Smith share many elements but are more concerned with institutional issues.

common core can indeed be found in all three branches of the new institutionalism, I will consider rational choice, organizational theory, and historical institutionalism in turn.

The rational choice perspective can be defined as the analysis of the choices made by rational actors under conditions of interdependence. That is, it is the study of strategic action of rational actors, using tools such as game theory. Applied to political action, much of this theory—largely developed by William Riker and his students—has been focused on the implications of the Arrow impossibility theorem (or Condorcet Paradox). Because multidimensional preferences cannot be ordered in such a way as to result in stable political choices, majority rule is inherently flawed. Any proposition that can garner a majority of votes can be beaten by an alternative proposition with an alternative majority (unless very restrictive conditions are met).²⁴

How then should we understand and interpret political choices? Institutions, such as the rules that determine the sequence of congressional votes, or the

division of legislatures into jurisdictions, allow political choices to be made because they do not allow every conceivable political choice to be considered.²⁵ Moreover, because political actors are aware of the effects of these rules, they will attempt to cast their votes or to manipulate the rules in such a way as to achieve their most-preferred outcome. Consequently, voting—possibly the most studied of all political behaviors—expresses not the true preferences of voters but an indeterminate amalgam of honest and strategic voting. And the aggregation of these votes into a decision is not a simple sum of honest preferences but a result of the specific decision rules in play—as well as of the efforts of key players, such as agenda setters, to take advantage of these rules.

The same problems of preferences and aggregation are a focus of game-theoretic models. The well-known prisoner's dilemma, for example, depicts graphically that the players cannot choose the outcome that would benefit them most (cooperation) but, because they can neither coordinate nor act unilaterally, they must opt instead for a suboptimal outcome (defection). Their behavior, in other words, neither expresses their true preferences, nor does the game aggregate their preferences into a coherent collective outcome. Further, if one would change the rules of the game—for example, allowing communication or repeating the game several times—the choices made by the players would be different. Thus, institutions—in this case, the rules of the game—significantly affect political choices.

Despite the decisive role that institutional rules are accorded in this branch of the new institutionalism, however, the rational choice perspective has not particularly emphasized the relative justness or unjustness of different institutional rules. Studies of the American Congress, for example, do not dwell on which interests are privileged by particular constitutional rules or on how congressional decision making could be improved. The analysis of political power tends to be restricted to purely institutional power—such as the power of committees or that of agenda setters. But it is not linked to substantive issues, such as redistributive justice, or even partisan ones, such as whether particular institutions privilege a particular political party or type of party (e.g., patronage vs. programmatic).²⁶ The relationship between the preference sets of congressional representatives and those of their constituents needs to be researched more intensively. Too much theorizing on the Congress assumes that the preferences of the representatives express those of their constituents. But this ignores the problems of aggregating interests that should be as, if not more, present at the level of the constituents. In addition, the view that institutions embody choice equilibria (“congealed tastes”) does not seem theoretically consistent, since if rules structure political choices, and hence could be viewed as being biased, then previous choices about institutions would logically reflect that bias.

Not only empirical rational choice studies but also explicitly normatively oriented works return to the focus on individual utilities as a standard for judging

political institutions and outcomes. Elster, for instance, says that rational choice theory

just tells us to do what will best promote our aims, whatever they are. The only part of the theory that is somewhat controversial from the normative viewpoint is that which deals with rational desires. Note, however, that it is hard to think of any other theory of what we ought to desire that is excluded by the idea that desires ought to be rational, in the sense of being satisfiable.²⁷

If this means that actors, squeezed by the rules of the game into making choices that deviate from their ideal preferences, should focus on changing the rules of the game, institutionalists can endorse this view. But this does not seem to be the emphasis of most rational choice theorists. Elster's view risks making the instrumental rationality of a particular institutional setting into a universal arbiter of justice. Or, to take a second example, Buchanan and Tullock promote unanimity as a decision rule, combined with the buying of votes, as an institutional setup that results in the most efficient maximization of individual utilities. It is not clear, however, if such thinking can really be applied to nondivisible or nonredistributive issues, and, more important, the reliance on utility maximization seems to constitute a return to the behavioralist perspective that the institutionalists set out to criticize.²⁸

William Riker, on the other hand, does not attempt to join his institutionalist critique with a utilitarian normative standard. Based on his analysis of distortions in the expression and aggregation of preferences, Riker argues that "democracy" cannot ascertain the true popular will. Instead, popular votes express a mixture of preferences, strategies, and institutional effects. Far from providing infallible guidelines for government action (that can then be used to "force us to be free"), this witches' brew must be held in check by institutional constraints that guarantee turnover in government and provide dissenters with many opportunities for political veto. Thus, in his normative conclusions, Riker returns to the impossibility theorem from which he set out.²⁹ While extremely consistent, however, the conclusion that the popular will is unfathomable means in effect abandoning the search for substantive standards and adopting an anti-interventionist political stance.

VI. ORGANIZATION THEORY

Organization theory is a broad tradition, but from the neo-institutionalist perspective, the Carnegie School's critique of rationality comprises the core.³⁰ Inherent limits on cognition—whether human, artificial, or organizational—preclude rational decision making. Time and information are not sufficiently abundant to allow individuals to calculate their preferences based on a full weighing of all alternatives and their consequences. Instead, the shortcuts of bounded rationality, such as reliance on standard operating procedures, allow individuals to make decisions. Thus, behavior does not express preferences but results instead from

Table 3
Institutionalism's Common Core

	Preferences	Aggregation	Normative
Institutionalism	Preferences problematic	Aggregation problematic	Rejects utilitarian standard (ΣX_i) Rejects social structural standard (S) Search for procedural standard (P)
Rational choice Institutions = decision rules	Strategic choice \neq Preference ordering	Cycling of preferences \rightarrow choice imposed by institutions Outcomes explained by rules Risk of no outcome, suboptimal outcomes	Impossibility (I) Utilitarian standard creeps back in (ΣX_i)
Organization theory Institutions = Information-processing routines and classification systems	Bounded rationality Interpretive frames	Standard operating procedures Garbage Can Scripts	I ΣX_i rejected P = organizational learning
Historical Institutionalism Institutions = rules, procedures, norms, legacies	Alternative rationalities Construction of interests	Representation of interests Contestation/power Contextual logics of causality Contingency	I ΣX_i rejected S creeps back in P = deliberation

the various coping devices that individuals adopt to overcome their cognitive limits. Not only are the same cognitive processes relevant for aggregating individual acts into organizational decisions, but they are central to understanding how coordinated action of anarchic individuals is even possible.

Over time, this school's critique of rationality became increasingly radical. Whereas the concept of bounded rationality introduced limits on choice procedures, the "garbage can model" went further by dropping all causal links between problems and solutions, viewing them as meeting randomly.³¹ Another step was taken with the concept of institutional scripts—actors retrospectively assign a rationale to their actions from sets of preexisting scenarios to understand what they have done.³²

Current accounts of the new institutionalism in organization theory accordingly stress the importance of symbolic codes and the role of institutions in generating meaning, as well as norms and "appropriateness" as a category of action.³³ Lynne Zucker, for example, shows how cultural categories, such as concepts of roles and hierarchy, influence perception and, therefore, behavior.³⁴ Neil Fligstein explains changes in management strategies not just as responses to changed economic environments but to changes in the perceptual lenses through which different generations of firm leaders interpreted these changes.³⁵

From this perspective, political decisions or any other decisions cannot be understood as macro-aggregations of individual preferences but instead result from cognitive and organizational procedures that produce decisions despite uncertainty. Thus, despite their very different conceptions of rationality, rational choice theorists and organization theorists are closer to one another in their understandings of preferences, behavior, and decisions than they are to the behavioralists.

Like the rational choice school, organization theory has not always stressed the normative implications of its critique of rational decision making. One notable exception is Charles Perrow, who urges that organization theory more explicitly concern itself with the ways in which organizational effects, such as bounded rationality and bureaucratic hierarchy, constitute mechanisms of domination.³⁶ The difficulty in using organization theory itself to follow this advice, however, brings us back to the “sum of the differences” problem. What standard should be used to measure domination—or to reduce it—when we do not have enough time and information to calculate our own interests, let alone those of others? Further, much of the appeal of organization theory is that its neutrality—inherent cognitive limits and operations produce bias, not human intention or social structure—which may impede an explicit emphasis on normative issues. Nevertheless, organization theory is more consistent than rational choice theory in rejecting utilitarian assumptions about the satisfaction of individual preferences and interests through collective decisions. And perhaps the stress on organizational learning may be viewed as organization theory’s solution to organizational bias, although more attention could be devoted to fleshing out the normative implications.

VII. HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONALISM

Structural-Power Antecedents

As DiMaggio and Powell point out, organization theory is intertwined with the sociological tradition.³⁷ Durkheim first proposed the sociological variant of the idea that categories of thought precede thought and that these categories are social or cultural constructs.³⁸ And Max Weber, of course, was one of the first to theorize about the importance of organizational structures in his theory of political domination. The historical institutionalists draw on the same sociological tradition and, in particular, on the work of Weber. But whereas organization theorists stress cognitive limits on rationality and the ways in which organizational rules and procedures coordinate the action of independent individuals, the historical institutionalists focus more squarely on the themes of power and interests.

Renewed interest in Weber—or, more accurately, in rediscovering particular aspects of his thought, as many scholars in the behavioralist period, such as Talcott Parsons, were equally interested in his works—was a response both to the

dominance of behavioralism and structural functionalism in American political and social science in the 1950s and 1960s and to the upsurge of academic marxism in the late 1960s and early 1970s.³⁹ In comparison to the rational choice and organization theorists, forerunners of the historical institutionalists tended to take a more macro-sociological and power-oriented view, which focused on the relations between politics, state, and society in various countries and historical periods. Debates on the “Kapitalistate,” on the transition from feudalism to capitalism, on corporatism and other forms of interest intermediation, and on “bringing the state back in” resulted in a relatively coherent counterview to pluralism and modernization theory that emphasized structural power of various sorts.⁴⁰

Citizens’ preferences are not, as the pluralists thought, efficiently transmitted to political leaders via interest groups and political parties; instead, the representation of interests is shaped by collective actors and institutions that bear traces of their own history. Constitutions and political institutions, state structures, state interest group relations, and policy networks all structure the political process. Consequently, political demands and public policies are not shaped by the neutral and convergent exigencies of modernization. Rather, political economies—like political systems—are structured by dense interactions among economic, social, and political actors that work according to different logics in different contexts. Theodore J. Lowi’s *The End of Liberalism* uses this analytic perspective to make a normative argument about American government that has striking parallels to Weber’s critique of German parliamentarism.⁴¹

In sum, the political demands that come to be expressed in politics are not an exact reflection of the preferences of individuals but rather deviate considerably from this potential “raw material” of politics. Various institutional factors influence the political processes that adjudicate among conflicting interests and may hence privilege some interests at the expense of others. Thus, the structural-power consensus conforms quite neatly to the institutionalist critique of behavioralism, which it shares with the rational choice and organization theory perspectives.

Recent Historical Institutionalism

More recent historical institutionalist work, influenced by the interpretative turn in the social sciences, aims to remedy some deficiencies in this structuralist approach and to join to it more constructivist or “postmodern” elements. As a corrective to structuralism, methodological individualism is used even by scholars who analyze collective actors; human agency is better integrated with structural factors; and the role of ideas has been given greater weight.⁴² As a reaction to a greater interest in interpretation, three themes have become ever more central in this work. All three can be traced to Weber and, more important for our purposes, all three can be termed *historicist* because they emphasize limits on human rationality and knowledge that can be redressed only by examining history.

Table 4
Types of “New” Institutionalists: Similarities and Differences

	Rational Choice	Organization Theory	Historical Institutionalism
Interests	Strategic factors cause rational actors to choose suboptimal equilibria (e.g., prisoner’s dilemma, tragedy of the commons)	Actors do not know their interests, limits of time and information cause them to rely on sequencing and other processing rules (bounded rationality)	Actors’ interpretations of their interests shaped by collective organizations and institutions that bear traces of own history
Political process	Without rules for ordering, cannot arrive at public interest; rules for sequence of congressional votes, partitioning into jurisdictions, etc., affects outcomes	Inter- and intraorganizational processes shape outcomes, as in garbage can model, efforts to achieve administrative reorganization, and policy implementation	Political process structured by constitutions and political institutions, state structures, state-interest group relations, policy networks, contingencies of timing
Normative	<i>Elster</i> : substantively rational ends are useless without formally rational means; <i>Buchanan and Tullock</i> : maximize efficiency through unanimity rule and buying votes; <i>Riker</i> : popular will unfathomable, democracy to be restrained by checks and balances	<i>Perrow</i> : implications of bureaucratic power and bounded rationality	<i>Lowi</i> : juridical democracy based on strengthening of congress, deliberation on rules, not particular outcomes, need for public philosophy
Actors	Rational	Cognitively bounded	Self-reflective (social, cultural, and historical norms, but reinvention of tradition)
Power	Ability to act unilaterally	Depends on position in organizational hierarchy	Depends on recognition by state, access to decision making, political representation, and mental constructs
Institutional mechanisms	Structuring of options through rules (reliance on norms controversial)	Structuring of options and calculations of interest through procedures, routines, scripts, frames (implies norms)	Structuring of options, calculation of interests, and formation of goals by rules, structures, norms, and ideas

First, these scholars are interested in “alternative” rationalities. Individuals and collectivities may develop interpretations of their interests and goals—worldviews—that deviate from those predicted by means-ends rationality (as in the case of the worldly asceticism of the Calvinist). But, more radically, the Weberian perspective claims that instrumental rationality itself is the product of particular historical developments and that it must be constructed and supported by particular sets of institutions and beliefs, such as double-entry bookkeeping, Roman law, and Protestant individualism. On this view, it is somewhat reductionist—and at this point, rather disingenuous—to call these alternative rationalities “norms” and to insist that Western instrumental rationality is not itself a norm.⁴³

Second, historical institutionalists view causality as being contextual. That is, they tend to see complex configurations of factors as being causally significant. These configurations become apparent through historical-comparative observation, and it may be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to break such models down into causally independent variables. Not only are there often too many variables in relation to the number of cases, but it may be the constellation of variables that is causally significant. Mental constructs, economic and social institutions, and politics interact to channel economic development along different paths, for instance, without one necessarily being able to determine which of these elements is causally primary or even to know whether the same combination would produce the same results if repeated at a later point in time. Because human actors have the capacity to learn from history, it is indeed very unlikely that even the precise levels of unemployment and inflation of, say, the thirties would produce identical fascist movements today. Drawn from Weber's notion of elective affinities, this type of analysis is very sensitive to context and sets severe limits to the generalizability of models across cases.⁴⁴ Aware of these limits, historical institutionalists nevertheless aim to test hypotheses and have moved away from Weber's static typologies of ideal types.⁴⁵

Third, this group emphasizes the contingencies of history. Our understanding of particular events and developments is constrained by the large role played by chance. Quirks of fate are responsible for accidental combinations of factors that may nevertheless have lasting effects. In addition, self-conscious political actors, reflecting on their pasts and futures, can divert the supposedly ineluctable march of progress onto unexpected paths. Such contingent developments stand beyond logic and can only be grasped through historical analysis. Moreover, this break with "the efficiency of history" allows one to look to the past as a source of alternatives for the future.⁴⁶

In seeking to strengthen these interpretivist elements, these historical institutionalists are going beyond using history as a "method" and are turning to history as a "theory" or philosophy. That is, they emphasize the irregularities rather than the regularities of history and demonstrate the limits of universal causal models. While this turn to interpretation has enriched the work of the historical institutionalists, it also creates a conflict between their role as social scientists and as interpreters. In the final sections of this essay, these themes will be illustrated with reference to a number of comparative historical studies of public policy. The selection of texts is arbitrary and meant to explicate more fully the logic of particular features of this approach, rather than to provide an exhaustive review. This discussion will show why historical research is necessary for the theoretical arguments being made, but it will also show how these authors have been influenced by the interpretative aspects of history, or the "idea of history," as Collingwood called it.⁴⁷ Indeed, the opposing pulls of these two views of history—history as a "method" and history as a "theory" (or, more aptly,

Table 5
Historical Institutionalism: Some Characteristic Features and Examples

	Preference Construction	Contextual Causality	Contingent Development
Structural	Steinmo	Moe	Katznelson Skocpol
Interpretive	Hattam Lehmbruch	Hall Thelen/Locke	Weir Sabel/Zeitlin/Herrigel

anti-theory)—create strong tensions for the historical institutionalists, ones that I doubt can be resolved.

The Political Construction of Interests

Much confusion has been caused by the efforts of historical institutionalists to endogenize the political construction of interests to their models. This does not mean that institutions radically resocialize citizens in a revived version of social determinism or that norms dictate to actors what should be their behavior. Even when individuals adopt new collective identities,⁴⁸ moreover, they do not lose their ability to perceive conflicts between their identity and interests as individuals and their commitment to their collectivity. Instead, institutions—be they the formal rules of political arenas, channels of communication, language codes, or the logics of strategic situations—act as filters that selectively favor particular interpretations either of the goals toward which political actors strive or of the best means to achieve these ends.

Political institutions and government policies, for example, may facilitate the organization of interests by recognizing particular interest groups and/or delegating government functions to them (as discussed in the literatures on private interest government, interest group liberalism, and corporatism).⁴⁹ More fundamentally, government actions may encourage (or discourage) the mobilization of interests by recognizing the legitimacy of particular claims or even by providing these persons with the opportunity to voice their complaints. Tocqueville, for instance, argues that by allowing—and even encouraging—the collection of the *cahiers*, the Monarchy actually mobilized the Third Estate.⁵⁰ Not just government, but culture, language, and symbols may provide interpretive frames that facilitate political mobilization. Along these lines, Tocqueville notes the importance of a new language provided by the Philosophes for the expression of grievances, with even Louis XIV speaking of natural law and the rights of man.⁵¹ Similarly, McAdam emphasizes that Franklin D. Roosevelt’s acknowledgment that “lynching was murder” tremendously encouraged civil rights activists in the early 1940s, a step that he sees as critical for the “cognitive liberation” of both leaders and participants in the civil rights struggle. These individuals and the people that they were able to mobilize all knew that they hated segregation; what changed was

their perception of the possibilities for change and, hence, their assessment of the best course of action.⁵²

Not only may political institutions, political authorities, and political culture play a critical role in the definition, mobilization, and organization of interests, but the structure of political opportunities will shape the strategies of organized interests and their beliefs regarding the efficacy of different types of political action. Sven Steinmo, for example, shows how the constitutional structures left in place by different processes of democratization in the United States, Sweden, and Britain continue to exert strong effects on tax policy. Political actors in these three countries shared a preference for lower taxes but behaved differently because the logics of the political systems made different political strategies more likely to achieve success. Institutions, writes Steinmo, “provide the context in which individuals interpret their self-interest and thereby define their policy preferences. . . . And any rational actor will behave differently in different institutional contexts.”⁵³ In this case, the logic of these political systems influenced the means but not the ends of political action.

Victoria Hattam uses a similar comparative historical strategy to show the relation between institutions and the goals of political actors.⁵⁴ In her account, two factors are critical in explaining the development of “business unionism” or “voluntarism” in the United States. Over the course of the nineteenth century, working men’s associations changed their conception of self from a vision of themselves as “producers”—aligned with other productive classes such as skilled craftsmen and manufacturers, against “nonproducing” bankers, lawyers, and land speculators—to a new collective identity as workers. With this shift, the labor movement turned its energies toward improving labor legislation, employing political strategies, and seeking to achieve political goals that were quite similar to the strategies and goals of the British labor movement. Although both movements achieved similar legislative gains, however, the American victories were nullified as the courts overturned the decisions made by state legislatures. Consequently, American labor leaders concluded that political action was not a promising strategy and focused their energies almost exclusively on shop-floor bargaining and collective action. Thus, institutional differences can explain why the similarly constructed interests of the two labor movements ultimately diverged.

Gerhard Lehmbruch’s work on the German reunification uses a historical approach to explain which interests among variously articulated alternatives actually win out.⁵⁵ He compares the ease with which West German institutional arrangements were transferred to the East in different economic sectors. Interestingly, in most cases that he studies, there were potentially viable, innovative alternatives to the simple imposition of West German practices to the East, and there were often even East-West coalitions of actors that supported these changes. Purely coincidental factors—such as the legalization of the property rights of

members of collective farms shortly before the unification—explain why a one-way transfer was blocked in the agricultural sector but not in communications or health. Lehbruch argues that such contextual factors (*situative Bedingungen*) are critical for transformation politics, even though such factors cannot be theorized in the general way that a theory of, say, market competition might be. Continuing in this historicist vein, he explains what did actually happen in the other sectors in terms of long-standing, historically constructed conceptions of interests and power equilibria.⁵⁶

Contextual Logics of Causality

The role of historically generated context in explaining actors' interests and their power relations is typical of a second general characteristic of the historical genre. Many institutionalists, perhaps most prominently the late Douglas Ashford, have stressed the importance of context in explaining the workings and meanings of institutions.⁵⁷ Institutions themselves may provide a context for political action that determines the relevance of specific variables across cases (union density or corporatism, for example). Further, contextual factors may affect the functioning and salience of institutions.

On this basis, Richard Locke and Kathleen Thelen argue for “contextualized comparisons.” Using the example of labor politics, they show that although globalization has unleashed international pressures for “decentralization” and “flexibility,” the particular institutions that have come under attack, as well as their significance for the labor movement, vary considerably. Consequently, to assess accurately the ability of various labor movements to weather the challenges of industrial restructuring and the like, Locke and Thelen call for comparisons based on different issue areas (selected according to their meaning for a particular case rather than being standardized across the cases) and for more attention to be paid to ideational as well as structural issues.⁵⁸

Terry Moe also analyzes the ways in which historical context, institutional practices, and the balance of power among social and political actors interact.⁵⁹ His study of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) shows how a system of informal rules regarding the nominations process developed as a reaction to a congressional stalemate in the 1950s. After several rounds of failed nominations, Democrats and Republicans—at that time evenly matched in Congress—agreed to abstain from blocking, respectively, all pro-business and pro-labor candidates and adopted a norm of parity representation. These rules of the game were maintained even after the potential power of labor (as measured by union membership, and links between the AFL-CIO and the Democratic Party) significantly declined, thus outliving the fit between power and institutions that had been established in the previous historical context. In contrast to the predictions of “capture” or other behavioralist theories, this mismatch between social interests

and institutional practices survived intact until radicals in the Carter and Reagan administrations repoliticized the nominations process.

Peter Hall's study of the change from Keynesianism to monetarism under Thatcher shows how the construction of a new political actor changed the context for British executive institutions and, thereby, the balance of power between prime minister and treasury.⁶⁰ As part of a series of financial deregulation measures, interest rates were allowed to fluctuate more widely, inadvertently affecting the market for government debt (the gilt market) and, in the process, its political consequences. Investors began to buy and sell in a more coordinated manner and developed an interest in being able to predict interest rate fluctuations. This interest stimulated the founding of new economic research institutes, newsletters, and other forms of communication within this community. This new informational network disseminated monetarist ideas and, more important, created a new collective actor, the "City"—or at least rejuvenated an old one—and gave individual investors a new role as part of a community with new institutional anchors. These developments helped to effect a shift in the balance of power, aiding Thatcher in her efforts to override the treasury (which had always championed Keynesianism in the past) by allowing her to legitimize her own support for monetarism with the interests of the City. This analysis of the emergence of such a distended, nonformally organized collective actor is not only extremely innovative but provides a model that can be followed in trying to understand the increasingly important impact of market actors.

*Contingent Relations between
Explanatory Elements*

Almost every one of the studies mentioned so far leaves some scope for historical contingency. Rather than following a logical and efficient trajectory, history is marked by accidents of timing and circumstance. These may leave lasting legacies, but such legacies are equally vulnerable to unexpected change. Ira Katznelson's analysis of American working-class formation in the nineteenth century posits a structural gap that arose because political parties organized on the basis of neighborhoods, while unions organized at the workplace, which, because of the scattered patterns of settlement in the United States, were often far removed from residences. This coincidence of the effects of early democratization on political parties and the effects of residential and industrial zoning and settlement patterns on union organizing caused the politics of class at the workplace to be completely severed from party politics. This effectively impeded the emergence of social democratic political parties and created an urban politics that was constructed on issues of ethnicity rather than class.⁶¹

Sequence and contingency have also been emphasized in many studies of the welfare state. Drawing on Shefter's analysis of the impact of the relative sequence

of democratization and bureaucratization on political parties (producing patronage parties where democratization was first, as in the United States, and programmatic parties where bureaucratization was first, as in Germany), Skocpol and Orloff argue that these differences in “state structure” can explain differences in welfare state development between the United States and Britain.⁶² In her more recent work, Skocpol has developed the historicist perspective even further, arguing that when viewed from its own frame of reference, the American welfare state does not appear as a “laggard” of the European social democratic model but as a unique configuration of programs and agencies forged from political struggles within particular political institutions.⁶³

Several other recent studies break with mono-causal and determinist theories about the welfare state, stressing instead unique and contingent developments that cannot be consistently compared across cases. Peter Baldwin has demonstrated that the “working-class power” (or “laborist,” as he calls it) interpretation of the welfare state does not do justice to the complexity of the politics of the welfare state.⁶⁴ Frank Nullmeier and Friedbert Rüb have argued that the Catholic tradition has played a larger role in German pension policy than has been previously recognized.⁶⁵ Margaret Weir has shown how U.S. unemployment policy was shaped by rare moments of political opportunity in which ideas, interests, and political coalitions crystallized around what she calls “policy packages.” Once the policy ideas and political coalitions (such as the link between the “war on poverty” with Democratic Party efforts to reach African American voters to balance defecting Southern Democrats) were joined, however, their fusion outlived their political usefulness, impeding future efforts at reform.⁶⁶ Similarly, Susan Pedersen has stressed the fit between ideas and political opportunities in explaining the different trajectories of British and French family policy.⁶⁷

Charles Sabel and Jonathan Zeitlin, as well as Gary Herrigel, have developed one of the most consistent perspectives on historical contingency. Reexamining the history of industrialization, Sabel and Zeitlin have found evidence for widespread experimentation with industrial districts, which they define as craft-based alternatives to mass production, organized around cooperative networks of small firms employing highly skilled workers. In some cases, these experiments failed for lack of nerve, given producers’ imagined certainty that mass production was the wave of the future; in others, they were eliminated only by national industrial policies, equally based on assumptions rather than proof of the direction of future technological progress. Sabel and Zeitlin therefore argue that the eventual dominance of mass production should be viewed not as the result of technological and market imperatives but as the consequence of political struggle, that is, as the “result of some implicit collective choice, arrived at in the obscurity of unaccountable small conflicts,” which they summarize as “accidents of the struggle for power.”⁶⁸ Herrigel applies this perspective to the German case, deconstructing the Gerschenkronian interpretation of the “German model” and marshalling evidence

for a “decentralized industrial order,” characterized by decentralized, quality production through networks and institutions of cooperation rather than vertically integrated firms organized for mass production.⁶⁹

More important than any particular findings of these studies is the view of the relationship between actors and structures that these authors invoke. Economic, social, and political actors do not simply maximize their self-interest within given constraints. Instead, these actors are viewed as trying to hedge their bets in an uncertain world, strategizing as to how best to proceed without knowing exactly how the economy will develop, at the same time capable of trying to shape their surroundings to improve their future chances and, in fact, constituting their identities and interests, as well as the context for their future actions, by the choices that they make.

VIII. DISCUSSION

This essay has tried to make the point that, for all their differences, the several varieties of new institutionalists address a common set of problems from a unified perspective. All are concerned with the difficulties of ascertaining what human actors want when the preferences expressed in politics are so radically affected by the institutional contexts in which these preferences are voiced. Rather than tackling this question by probing individual psychology, these scholars have turned to analyzing the effects of rules and procedures for aggregating individual wishes into collective decisions—whether these rules and procedures are those of formal political institutions, voluntary associations, firms, or even cognitive or interpretive frameworks.

Since the common research interest is the black box between potential political demands and ultimate outcomes, it does not make sense to predefine the contents of this box. A standard definition of “institution” is thus not desirable; the common research agenda is the study of institutional effects wherever, or however, they occur.

How well, then, does the historical institutionalism address this theoretical core? All of the examples show in various ways that historical work can provide answers to institutionalist questions. By tracing changing definitions of interests through time and across cultures, the impact of institutions on the construction of interests can be studied without imposing arbitrary, “objective” definitions of interests. That is, the discrepancy between “potential” and “expressed” preferences can be addressed without inventing a theory of the actors’ “true” interests. In this way, artifacts of representation and biases of political institutions can be discussed and criticized.

The historical approach thus provides a fruitful avenue for a return to the normative issues central to the institutionalist paradigm. Public policy is not assumed to be an efficient outcome of the aggregation of individual preferences, technological progress and market forces, a free-for-all of ideas, or even of the

“vested” interests. Political decisions emerge from highly complex combinations of factors that include both systematic features of political regimes and “accidents of the struggle for power.” Further, because historical institutionalists never assume that power and institutions have reached an equilibrium, explaining institutional change does not present a problem. Institutions do not determine behavior, they simply provide a context for action that helps us to understand why actors make the choices that they do. Facing the same sets of institutional hurdles, self-reflective actors can make creative decisions about how to proceed. Thus, institutions—even when defined in the broadest sense—neither mold human perceptions to such an extent that individuals are incapable of recognizing competing definitions of identity and interest nor do they force human action along a single track.

Not just the historical method but the philosophy of history is quite helpful for addressing institutionalist concerns. Historical research requires proof (through citation of primary sources) that the actors in question saw the world in the terms proposed by the analyst. Consequently, representation of interests is important to the historical institutionalist tradition in a double sense. First, political demands and political results are viewed not as resultants of preferences but as consequences of different representations of interests. Interests that are articulated in politics are many steps removed from the preferences of citizens, and even those initial preferences may be recursively formed by politics and, hence, by the many institutional effects of the political sphere. Second, as researchers, historians are always aware that their data are a representation, not only because they examine fragments left behind by subjective individuals but also because they themselves interrogate these artifacts. As Collingwood wrote, “History proceeds by the interpretation of evidence: where evidence is a collective name for things which singly are called documents, and a document is a thing existing here and now, of such a kind that the historian, by thinking about it, can get answers to the questions he asks about past events.” Further, “The history of thought, and therefore all history, is the re-enactment of past thought in the historian’s own mind.”⁷⁰

Nevertheless, the embrace of history’s insistence on particularism, context, and contingency has some drawbacks. It calls into question the enterprise of systematic comparison. Determinations of causality are questionable if not out-and-out *hubristic*. And the constructivist impulse risks distracting the historical institutionalists from areas where I believe we can make the strongest contribution.

Three issues of historical institutionalism are particularly troubling to me. The first is the problem of falsifiability. Almost any construction of interests or contextual causal model will appear to be only explainable through history, until one has hit on a more general explanation. Many studies of health politics, for instance, have offered historical interpretations for policy proposals and medical association reactions. But from a comparative perspective, the heavy hand of

history seems less compelling. Most socialists throughout Europe and North America (and all state socialist regimes) came up with the idea of socializing medicine, regardless of their histories. And most doctors' associations feared being employed by government or social security monopsonies. Whether any of these actors knew their objective interests is not the point—they may equally well have been guided by a common narrative of the Manichean struggle between capitalism and socialism. But the nationally specific historical explanations are damaged by the cross-national evidence, nevertheless. Without a sufficiently broad comparative perspective, historical institutionalists risk overstating the uniqueness of their case. Furthermore, it is difficult to see how such historical narratives can ever be proved wrong.

Second, historical institutionalists profit somewhat unfairly from the positive models that they criticize. This is particularly true of marxism and other sociological theories of interests. Following the example set by Weber's *Protestant Ethic*, many historical institutionalist works organize their arguments as an attack on a dominant model, such as a system of class relations restricted to the objective categories of capital and labor, the marxist theory of revolution, the Smithian account of the division of labor and the rise of capitalism, and so forth. It is certainly legitimate to knock down a dominant model by showing where the facts do not fit and providing a superior interpretation. But these interpretations are not always exposed to similar critical competition because they are formulated to be inextricable from their original context. In addition, from a normative perspective, this leaves the historical institutionalists wavering between the moral anarchy of postmodernism—this branch of the new institutionalism's version of the impossibility theorem—and falling back into the social determinists' reduction of social justice to the coordinates of the social structure.

Third, in eschewing systematization, the historical institutionalists undercut the cumulative impact of their work. To be sure, the eclecticism and diffuseness of the historical institutionalist school are, to an extent, unavoidable. Many studies have been motivated by substantive issues rather than a narrow theoretical program. Furthermore, the historicist stress on indeterminacy and uniqueness mitigates against theory building. Nevertheless, it would be a shame to overlook important areas where knowledge has indeed been cumulative. Charles Tilly's demolition of the relative deprivation view has changed the dominant assumptions that not just historical institutionalists, but nearly all scholars of social movements, bring to the study of collective action.⁷¹ Theda Skocpol's analysis of revolutions as breakdowns in state structures is a similarly paradigmatic work.⁷² Suzanne Berger's *Peasants against Politics* sets forth theoretical and methodological guidelines for a more constructivist view.⁷³ Notably, the potential for articulating a more positive theoretical profile is rooted in the structural-power legacy of this group. The historical institutionalists should remember that this tradition's emphasis on power is as important as its sensitivity to interpretation.

But to develop the historical institutionalist analysis of power, we will have to do more than attack essentialist and determinist conceptions.

Accomplishing this aim, however, requires a second “squaring of the circle.” It is not at all clear how one can go about developing a nondeterminist concept of power. But I think it is worth the effort. For while history is filled with examples of those that “beat the odds,” escaping from constraint and reforging their destinies, we nevertheless maintain an intuitive sense of the odds. Social analysis should be able to refine our capacity to evaluate differences in power. Weber’s emphasis on multiple dimensions of power can provide a starting point. And, ironically, so can some behavioralist efforts. In assessing the ability of French workers to defy the state, for instance, calculations of strike capacities (which implies an analysis of production, not merely counting the numbers of workers enrolled in unions), the strength of the parliamentary majority, and the reaction of the public would strengthen a historical institutionalist analysis without implying a claim to predict the future. Some ability to assess the potential power of actors, apart from the strategic position in which they happen to be situated (as in a rational choice game) or their own perceptions and symbolic communication (as in a purely interpretivist analysis), would, in my view, be useful.

Without attending to these problems, we historical institutionalists will contribute to a bifurcation that is already taking place. The terrain of institutionalist analysis—and, for that matter, of comparative politics—is being carved up in terms of two orientations: rational choice versus interpretation, or a “calculus” versus a “cultural” approach, as Hall and Taylor put it.⁷⁴ Much discussion now focuses on the potential for border crossing, with the historical institutionalists left betwixt and between, straddling the fence between these perspectives. As I argue that there is a common theoretical core to these approaches, I can certainly endorse the potential for the fruitful combination of elements of rational choice, organization theory (or sociological institutionalism), and historical institutionalism. At the same time, however, I urge historical institutionalists to reclaim analytic and normative space for issues of power and justice. The power-centered view needs to make itself an equal competitor to calculus and culture.

NOTES

1. For important reviews, see James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, *Rediscovering Institutions: The Organizational Basis of Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1989); Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, eds., *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Sven Steinmo, Kathleen Thelen, and Frank Longstreth, eds., *Structuring Politics: Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). See also Robert H. Bates, “Contra Contractarianism: Some Reflections on the New Institutionalism,” *Politics and Society* 16, no. 2-3 (June-September 1988): 387-401; G. John Ikenberry, “Conclusion: An Institutional Approach to American Foreign Economic Policy,” *International Organization* 42, no. 1 (winter 1988): 219-43; David Brian Robertson, “The Return to History and the New Institutionalism in American Political Science,” *Social Science History* 17, no. 1 (spring

1993): 1-36; W. Richard Scott, "The Adolescence of Institutional Theory," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 32 (December 1987): 59-89; R. Kent Weaver and Bert A. Rockman, "Assessing the Effects of Institutions," in R. Kent Weaver and Bert A. Rockman, eds., *Do Institutions Matter? Government Capabilities in the United States and Abroad* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1993), 1-41. I thank Kathy Thelen for bringing to my attention the more recent discussions in Peter A. Hall and Rosemary C. R. Taylor, "Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms," *Political Studies* 44, no. 5 (1996): 936-57; Barry R. Weingast, "Rational Choice Perspectives on Institutions," in Robert E. Goodin and Hans-Dieter Klingemann, eds., *A New Handbook of Political Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming); Robert H. Bates and Barry R. Weingast, "Rationality and Interpretation: The Politics of Transition," working paper, Hoover Institution, Stanford University (1995). For a critical view, see Gunnar Grendstad and Per Selle, "Cultural Theory and the New Institutionalism," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 7, no. 1 (1995): 5-27.

2. David Truman's paradigmatic work, *The Governmental Process*, for example, certainly discusses the impact of institutions on group processes and political outcomes at length. The institutionalists' disagreement with his argument concerns his conclusion—despite this lengthy discussion—that all acts of government may then be interpreted as a "protean complex of crisscrossing relationships that change in strength and direction with alterations in the power and standing of interests, organized and unorganized." *The Governmental Process: Political Interests and Public Opinion*, 2d ed. (New York: Knopf, 1971), 508.

3. See Carl Böhret, Werner Jann, and Eva Kronenwett's contrast of Harold Laski and Ernst Fraenkel's acknowledgment of the role of the state with Truman's insistence that an interest group balance is superior to autonomous governmental decision making, *Innenpolitik und politische Theorie*, 3d ed. (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1988), 173-4.

4. Robert A. Dahl, "The Behavioral Approach in Political Science: Epitaph for a Monument to a Successful Protest," *American Political Science Review* 55, no. 4 (December 1961): 766-7. This characterization is strikingly similar to Robertson's comment that the new institutionalism is "more a persuasion or an emphasis than a fixed blueprint for political analysis." "The Return to History," 2.

5. David Truman, "The Implications of Political Behavior Research," Social Science Research Council, *Items* (December 1951): 37-9, cited in Dahl, "Behavioral Approach," 767.

6. *Ibid.*, 767, Dahl's emphasis.

7. This basic point is implicit in all new institutionalist writings. For one discussion, see Jon Elster, "The Market and the Forum," in Elster and Aanund Hylland, eds., *Foundations of Social Choice Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 106-7.

8. Dahl, "Behavioral Approach," 770.

9. For critiques of behavioral assumptions of the efficient transmission of political demands, see Suzanne Berger, "Introduction," in Berger, ed., *Organizing Interests in Western Europe: Pluralism, Corporatism, and the Transformation of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1-23; and Terry M. Moe, "Interests, Institutions and Positive Theory: The Politics of the NLRB," *Studies in American Political Development* 2 (1987): 236-99.

10. See discussion in Kenneth A. Shepsle, "Institutional Equilibrium and Equilibrium Institutions," in Herbert F. Weisberg, ed., *The Science of Politics* (New York: Agathon, 1986), 51-81; and Anthony Downs, "An Economic Theory of Political Action in a Democracy," in Tom Ferguson and Joel Rogers, eds., *The Political Economy* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1984), 12-26.

11. “The philosophers, who have inquired into the foundations of society, have all felt the necessity of going back to a state of nature; but not one of them has got there. . . . Every one of them, in short, constantly dwelling on wants, avidity, oppression, desires, and pride, has transferred to the state of nature ideas which were acquired in society; so that, in speaking of the savage, they described the social man.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality,” in *The Social Contract and Discourses*, trans. G.D.H. Cole (London: Everyman, 1993 [1755]), 50.

12. *Ibid.*, 97, 99.

13. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “The Social Contract” in *The Social Contract and Discourses*, trans. G.D.H. Cole (London: Everyman, 1993 [1762]), 191.

14. *Ibid.*, 203.

15. *Ibid.*, 203, 204.

16. “[T]he agreement of all interests is formed by opposition to that of each. If there were no different interests, the common interest would be barely felt, as it would encounter no obstacle; all would go on of its own accord, and politics would cease to be an art.” *Ibid.*, 203.

17. See James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, “Popular Sovereignty and the Search for Appropriate Institutions,” *Journal of Public Policy* 6, no. 4 (October-December 1986): 341-70; and Elster, “The Market and the Forum.”

18. Truman’s concept of interest group balance as being not only empirically but normatively the best possible determinant of government policy—as long as multiple memberships and potential interests protect the rules of the game—is a paradigmatic example of this approach. See *The Governmental Process*, particularly chap. 16.

19. For a discussion of subjective and objective interests that has influenced the point of view presented here, see Isaac D. Balbus, “The Concept of Interest in Pluralist and Marxian Analysis,” *Politics and Society* 1 (1971): 151-77.

20. The essence of the Poulantzas-Miliband debate was an argument about whether the capitalist state should be analyzed by looking at the class origins of politicians and bureaucrats or at the impact of their decisions on the various classes that make up the capitalist system. Both theorists were united, however, in their criticism of liberal and pluralist approaches that (a) accept preferences as subjective givens without analyzing these preferences in terms of objective class interests and (b) accept the results of the political process as engendering a just equilibrium of these individual, subjective preferences rather than scrutinizing political outcomes for class bias. Nicos Poulantzas and Ralph Miliband, “The Problem of the Capitalist State,” in Robin Blackburn, ed., *Ideology in Social Science* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 238-62.

21. For a discussion, see Ernst Fraenkel, *Deutschland und die westlichen Demokratien*, 3d ed. (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1964), 165-89. Normative principles, rather than objective theories of interests, can also, of course, serve as the basis for a priori theories. Here, however, I concentrate on the divisions that have been most relevant for empirical work (as opposed to normative theory) in the past thirty years.

22. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1955 [1856]), 97-98, 204-5. Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 5th ed., ed. Johannes Winkelmann (Tübingen: JCB Mohr Paul Siebeck, 1980 [1922]), 851-68. English translation: *Economy and Society*, 2 vols., ed. and trans. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 1381-1462.

23. Of Jürgen Habermas’s works, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1962) is perhaps most easily linked to this institutionalist debate. John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971) is unusual in this regard because he provides

not only a procedural approach but makes claims about the substantive content of the rules of justice that would emerge from the original position. Granted, the “equal basic rights” and “difference” principles are still in a sense procedural, but Rawls goes further than most institutionalists in specifying outcomes. Now that I have mentioned Rawls, I should clarify that, although there is an obvious overlap between these institutionalist themes and the debate between “liberals” and “communitarians,” the correspondence is not exact. The development of theory through empirical research has brought the institutionalists along a different trajectory since individuals viewed empirically cannot be separated from their communities, and existing political results produced by various procedures can be evaluated using substantive standards. On the “communitarians” see, for example, Michael Walzer, “The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism,” *Political Theory* 18, no. 1 (1990): 6-23. On juridical democracy, see Theodore J. Lowi, *The End of Liberalism: The Second Republic of the United States*, 2d ed. (New York: Norton, 1979).

24. William H. Riker, “Implications from the Disequilibrium of Majority Rule for the Study of Institutions,” *American Political Science Review* 74, no. 2 (June 1980): 432-47.

25. Shepsle, “Institutional Equilibrium and Equilibrium Institutions.”

26. Exceptions that include societal interests in rational choice analyses are John Mark Hansen, “Choosing Sides: The Creation of an Agricultural Policy Network in Congress, 1919-1932,” *Studies in American Political Development* 2 (1987): 183-229; Daniel Verdier, “The Politics of Trade Preference Formation: The United States from the Civil War to the New Deal,” *Politics and Society* 3, no. 4 (December 1993): 365-92; Jack Knight, *Institutions and Social Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

27. Elster, “Introduction,” 22.

28. James M. Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, *The Calculus of Consent: Logical Foundations of Constitutional Democracy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962). For a critique of rational choice theory along these lines, see Rogers Smith, “Political Jurisprudence, the ‘New Institutionalism,’ and the Future of Public Law,” *American Political Science Review* 82, no. 1 (March 1988): 89-108.

29. William H. Riker, *Liberalism against Populism: A Confrontation between the Theory of Democracy and the Theory of Social Choice* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1982), 233-53.

30. Herbert A. Simon, *Administrative Behavior: A Study of Decision-Making Processes in Administrative Organization*, 2d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1957 [1945]); James G. March and Herbert A. Simon, *Organizations* (New York: John Wiley, 1958).

31. Michael P. Cohen, James G. March, and Johan P. Olsen, “A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice,” in James G. March, ed., *Decisions and Organizations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988 [1972]), 294-334.

32. Michael D. Cohen and James G. March, *Leadership and Ambiguity: The American College President*, 2d ed. (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1974), 81.

33. March and Olsen, *Rediscovering Institutions*; Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, “Introduction,” in Powell and DiMaggio, eds., *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 1-38; Roger Friedland and Robert R. Alford, “Bringing Society Back In: Symbols, Practices, and Institutional Contradictions,” in Powell and DiMaggio, eds., *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, 232-63.

34. Lynne G. Zucker, “The Role of Institutionalism in Cultural Persistence,” in Powell and DiMaggio, eds., *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, 83-107.

35. Neil Fligstein, “The Structural Transformation of American Industry: An Institutional Account of the Causes of Diversification in the Largest Firms, 1919-1979,” in Powell and DiMaggio, eds., *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, 311-36.

36. Charles Perrow, *Complex Organizations: A Critical Essay*, 3d ed. (New York: Random House, 1986), esp. chap. 8.

37. DiMaggio and Powell, "Introduction."

38. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. J. W. Swain (New York: Free Press), 13-33.

39. For more extended discussions, see Kathleen Thelen and Sven Steinmo, "Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics," in Steinmo, Thelen, and Longstreth, eds., *Structuring Politics*, 1-32; and Robertson, "The Return to History."

40. This literature is too well known (and too extensive) to be adequately handled in a footnote, but some important works are Barrington Moore Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon, 1966); Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso Editions, 1974); Robert R. Alford and Roger Friedland, "Political Participation and Public Policy," *Annual Review of Sociology* 1 (1975): 429-79; Charles Tilly, ed., *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975); Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *Between Power and Plenty: Foreign Economic Policies of Advanced Industrial States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978); Philippe C. Schmitter and Gerhard Lehmbruch, eds., *Trends towards Corporatist Intermediation* (London: Sage, 1979); Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Berger, *Organizing Interests in Western Europe*; Stephen D. Krasner, "Approaches to the State: Alternative Conceptions and Historical Dynamics," *Comparative Politics* 16, no. 2 (January 1984): 223-46; Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Ira Katznelson and Aristide R. Zolberg, eds., *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986). The *States and Social Structures Newsletter*, sponsored by the Social Science Research Council, was an effort to provide a forum for scholars working along these lines.

41. Theodore J. Lowi, *The End of Liberalism*. In *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), Steven Skowronek develops this argument further by focusing more deeply on the historical roots of America's constitutional dilemma regarding the expansion of executive power.

42. This is also one of the key emphases of Renate Mayntz and Fritz W. Scharpf's research program for the Max-Planck-Institut für Gesellschaftsforschung in Cologne. See their essay, "Der Ansatz des akteurzentrierten Institutionalismus," in Mayntz and Scharpf, eds., *Gesellschaftliche Selbstregulierung und politische Steuerung* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1995), 39-72.

43. Max Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik: Eine Aufsatzsammlung*, ed. J. Winckelmann (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr/Paul Siebeck, 1965 [1920]). Anthropological approaches have been very influential in encouraging this relativistic approach to rationality. See, in particular, Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976). For criticisms, see Elster, "Introduction," 23-24, and Samuel Popkin, "The Political Economy of Peasant Society," 197-247, in Elster, *Rational Choice*.

44. Weber's economic analyses are good examples of such contextual models. See *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, ed. M. Weber (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr/Paul Siebeck, 1988 [1924]). For efforts to develop research methods that treat these problems, see Charles Ragin, *The Comparative Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Andrew Abbott, "Conceptions of Time and Events in Social

Science Methods: Causal and Narrative Approaches,” *Historical Methods* 23, no. 4 (fall 1990): 140-50; and Abbott, “From Causes to Events: Notes on Narrative Positivism,” *Sociological Methods and Research* 20, no. 4 (May 1992): 428-55.

45. Günther Roth argues that Weber’s typologies were always meant as concepts to be used in an active analysis of a particular case. If one accepts his reading, the continuity of the historical institutionalists with Weber is even stronger. “Introduction,” in Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, 2 vols., ed. Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978 [1968]), xxxviii.

46. On the efficiency of history, March and Olsen, *Rediscovering Institutions*, 7-8. On past possibilities and alternatives for the future, see Michael J. Piore and Charles F. Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide: Possibilities for Prosperity* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Perrow, *Complex Organizations*, 273-78.

47. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993 [1946]).

48. The concept of “identity” was first coined by Alessandro Pizzorno, “Political Exchange and Collective Identity in Industrial Conflict,” in Colin Crouch and Pizzorno, eds., *The Resurgence of Class Conflict in Western Europe Since 1968* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 277-98. See also Craig Calhoun, “The Problem of Identity in Collective Action,” in Joan Huber, ed., *Macro-Micro Linkages in Sociology* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991), 51-75; Margaret R. Somers and Gloria D. Gibson, “Reclaiming the Epistemological ‘Other’: Narrative and the Social Constitution of Identity,” in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 37-99.

49. Grant McConnell, *Private Power and American Democracy* (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1966); Lowi, *End of Liberalism*; Schmitter and Lehbruch, *Trends towards Corporatist Intermediation*; Berger, *Organizing Interests in Western Europe*.

50. Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, 144-47.

51. *Ibid.*, 147.

52. Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency 1930-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 109.

53. Sven Steinmo, *Taxation and Democracy: Swedish, British and American Approaches to Financing the Modern State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 7. I make a similar argument in *Health Politics: Interests and Institutions in Western Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

54. Victoria C. Hattam, *Labor Visions and State Power: The Origins of Business Unionism in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993). See also Victoria C. Hattam, “Institutions and Political Change: Working-Class Formation in England and the United States, 1820-1896,” in Steinmo, Thelen, and Longstreth, eds., *Structuring Politics*, 155-87.

55. Gerhard Lehbruch, “Sektorale Variationen in der Transformationsdynamik der politischen Ökonomie Ostdeutschlands und ihre situativen und institutionellen Bedingungen,” in Wolfgang Seibel and Arthur Benz, eds., *Regierungssystem und Verwaltungspolitik: Beiträge zu Ehren von Thomas Ellwein* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1995), 180-215.

56. Bo Rothstein uses a similar argument with regard to Swedish corporatism. Trust between business and labor associations was built up over time through mutual cooperation in the system of employment exchanges. *Den korporativa staten: Interesseorganisationer och statsförvaltning i svensk politik* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1992). The English translation (*The Corporatist State*) is forthcoming from Pittsburgh University Press. See also his article, “Labor Market Institutions and Working-Class Strength,” in Steinmo, Thelen, and Longstreth, eds., *Structuring Politics*, 33-56.

57. Douglas E. Ashford, "The British and French Social Security Systems: Welfare State by Intent and by Default," in Ashford and E. W. Kelley, eds., *Nationalizing Social Security* (Greenwich, CT: JAI, 1986), 96-122.
58. Richard M. Locke and Kathleen Thelen, "Apples and Oranges Revisited: Contextualized Comparisons and the Study of Comparative Labor Politics," *Politics and Society* 23, no. 3 (September 1995): 337-67.
59. Terry Moe, "Institutions, Interests and Positive Theory: The Politics of the NLRB," *Studies in American Political Development* 2 (1987): 236-99.
60. Peter A. Hall, "The Movement from Keynesianism to Monetarism: Institutional Analysis and British Economic Policy in the 1970s," in Steinmo, Thelen, and Longstreth, eds., *Structuring Politics*, 90-113.
61. Ira Katznelson, *City Trenches: Urban Politics and the Patterning of Class in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
62. Ann Shola Orloff and Theda Skocpol, "Why Not Equal Protection? Explaining the Politics of Public Social Spending in Britain, 1900-1911, and the United States, 1880s-1920," *American Sociological Review* 49, no. 6 (December 1984): 726-50.
63. Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992).
64. Peter Baldwin, *The Politics of Social Solidarity and the Bourgeois Origins of the European Welfare State, 1875-1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
65. Frank Nullmeier and Friedbert W. Rüb, *Die Transformation der Sozialpolitik: Vom Sozialstaat zum Sicherungsstaat* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1993).
66. Margaret Weir, *Politics and Jobs: The Boundaries of Employment Policy in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992). See also her "Ideas and the Politics of Bounded Innovation," in Steinmo, Thelen, and Longstreth, eds., *Structuring Politics*, 188-216.
67. Susan Pedersen, *Family, Dependence, and the Origins of the Welfare State: Britain and France, 1914-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
68. Charles Sabel and Jonathan Zeitlin, "Historical Alternatives to Mass Production: Politics, Markets and Technology in Nineteenth-Century Industrialization," *Past and Present* 108 (August 1985): 134, 139. See also their "Stories, Strategies, Structures: Rethinking Historical Alternatives to Mass Production," in Sabel and Zeitlin, eds., *Worlds of Possibility: Flexibility and Mass Production in Western Industrialization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press/Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, forthcoming).
69. Gary B. Herrigel, *Industrial Constructions: The Sources of German Industrial Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). For a similar constructivist view on political economy, see Colleen A. Dunlavy, *Politics and Industrialization: Early Railroads in the United States and Prussia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).
70. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 9-10, 215.
71. Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978).
72. Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*.
73. Suzanne Berger, *Peasants against Politics: Rural Organization in Brittany, 1911-1967* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972).
74. Hall and Taylor, "Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms," 955-56. See also Bates and Weingast, "Rationality and Interpretation"; Ira Katznelson, "Structure and Configuration in Comparative Politics," in Mark I. Lichbach and Alan S. Zuckerman, eds., *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture, and Structure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Atul Kohli, "Introduction," *World Politics* 48 (October 1995): 1-2.