A SHORT HISTORY OF STUDYING INCREMENTAL INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE: DOES EXPLAINING INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE PROVIDE ANY NEW EXPLANATIONS?

WORKING PAPER

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Abstract

Kathleen Thelen is one of the leading scholars studying incremental institutional change. In her early works from the 1990s, she introduced the conceptualisation of different modes of incremental change. These modes have the central attention in her recent co-edited book with James Mahoney, "Explaining Institutional Change" (2010). Compared with Thelen's earlier work, this book provides clearer definitions, addresses the explanatory factors of institutional change and discusses the patterns and sequences of gradual institutional change. The theory presented by Mahoney and Thelen, however, seems overambitious and subject to a need to be overly crisp and clear.

Key words

Policy change, punctuated equilibrium, incremental change, historical institutionalism, layering, drift, conversion, displacement

A short history of studying incremental institutional change: does *Explaining Institutional Change* provide any new explanations?

Introduction

When I was a small child my Saturday mornings were filled with a growing excitement. Around 1 p.m. the mailman would drop the Donald Duck weekly magazine into our mailbox. Because I had to share the magazine with my elder brother, I tended to get closer and closer to the mailbox when the hour of delivery drew nearer. He naturally did the same and by doing so intensified my excitement. It had been long since I had experienced such excitement. Yet, last year, early in 2009, when browsing the Internet, I hit upon an unpublished draft version of James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen's introduction chapter to their new book *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency and Power* (2010b). This chapter caught my attention and roused my excitement to read the book in entirety. I had to wait, however, for almost a year until the newly published book dropped into my mailbox (luckily I did not have to be afraid my brother would grasp it upon delivery since he is not into institutional change).

Why all this excitement for Mahoney and Thelen's new book? After reading the previous co-edited volume on incremental institutional change, Wolfgang Streeck and Thelen's *Beyond Continuity: Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economics* (2005a), I was surprised by the strength of the presented line of thought, which provides a helpful and convincing addition to the traditional view on institutional change, namely that long periods of stability are incidentally punctured as a result of exogenous shocks. As some scholars have discussed, such shocks do not always result in institutional change, and institutional change does not always come from exogenous shocks (for an excellent discussion of the various approaches to studying institutional change I refer to a recent special issue of the *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis*).¹ Streeck and Thelen's work focuses on institutional transformation without disruption and introduces a typology of models of incremental change (I will return to this in the following section). Mahoney and Thelen's new book might be considered *Beyond Continuity*'s successor. In between the two books, various authors have applied the theory and typology presented in Streeck and Thelen's book in their own works. These authors have provided insightful additions to Streeck and Thelen's work and drawn up a number of questions on the applicability of their theory and typology.

The aim of this review article is to find to what extent the new book provides an addition to its predecessor and to the literature on incremental change in general; or, in short, was the new book worth waiting for? To answer this question I first introduce the reader to what came before: what did we already know about incremental institutional change? This section looks back in time, with a strong focus on studying incremental institutional change before 2005. The question is relevant because Mahoney and Thelen start their book claiming that '[u]ntil recently, gradual institutional change had not been a central focus of explanation in the social sciences' (2010b, p. xi). Second, I provide a review of the new book: what does the new book add to what we already know? This section also looks back in time, with a strong focus on the period 2005–2010. Third, in the concluding

¹ *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis*, 2009, 11 (1):1–143

section I discuss the value of the new book and some issues that seem to remain unresolved. This section is more forward-looking.

What came before

In the preface to their book, Mahoney and Thelen suggest that there is a lack of attention paid to gradual institutional change in the social sciences. When analysing institutions, they continue, scholars traditionally tend to focus on institutional change as a result of exogenous shocks. Phrased differently, institutional scholarship traditionally focuses on stability versus change. In an early work, Thelen stated that ‘it is not so useful to draw a sharp line of institutional stability *versus* change’ (Thelen 2000, p. 106, original emphasis).² She finds that periods of institutional stability are often characterised by incremental change. This focus on gradual change in periods of stability questions the more traditional view on institutional change as a result of exogenous shocks. Over time Thelen and her co-authors have taken up this rethinking and distinguished at least five modes of incremental change: layering, conversion, drift, displacement and exhaustion. With the exemption of exhaustion, these modes are the focus of Mahoney and Thelen’s *Explaining Institutional Change*. In the new book, Mahoney and Thelen simply delineate (2010a) these modes from the book’s predecessor, Streeck and Thelen’s *Beyond Continuity* (2005a). They provide little background on the origins of the concepts. Notably, new, very brief definitions are introduced (Mahoney & Thelen 2010a, pp. 15–16):

- Layering: the introduction of new rules on top of or alongside existing ones.
- Conversion: the changed enactment of existing rules due to their strategic deployment.
- Drift: the changed impact of existing rules due to shifts in the environment.
- Displacement: the removal of existing rules and the introduction of new ones.

At question is what did we already know about these modes before Mahoney and Thelen’s new book? In this section, I will discuss the four modes of incremental policy change addressed on a mode-by-mode basis. For each mode I will first provide a brief description as can be found in Thelen’s (et al.) earlier works. I will then trace back potential – but not all established – theoretical antecedents to the modes and conclude by providing some insight into how the modes are taken up in contemporary literature. This section intends to provide the reader insight into earlier work on incremental institutional change; readers who are already familiar with Thelen’s (et al.) work might wish to move directly to the second part of this paper.

Layering

Layering refers to a situation of gradual institutional transformation through a process in which new elements are attached to existing institutions. It is essential to realise about layering that the new does not replace the old institutions, but rather is added to these and so gradually changes their status and structure (Thelen 2003, 2004; Streeck & Thelen 2005b).

² Note that Thelen works from a historical institutionalist point of view. Sociological and rational choice institutionalism provide other points of view. Peter Hall and Rosemary Taylor’s (1996) paper *Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms* provides a good overview.

Thelen finds inspiration in the work of Eric Schickler (2001). Schickler and Thelen's use of the concept are in line with authors using it *avant la lettre*. Over time these authors have conceptualised this mode of gradual institutional change as (a) 'the thickening of governance' to explain how, why and which layers of actors are added to existing governance regimes (e.g. Belisle 1944; Light 1995); (b) via 'the regulatory ratchet', to explain how, why and which layers of rules and regulations are added to regulatory regimes (e.g. Kreps 1966; Bardach & Kagan 1982); and (c) to the above discussed 'new arrangements on top of pre-existing structures', which can be understood as a combination of the two earlier approaches (e.g. Peck 1998; Smith 1983).

Layering is the most worked out mode of incremental change in Thelen's (et al.) work. It clearly differs from the punctuated equilibrium literature. It takes a clear stance that major changes might, and most likely will, result from layers of new policies, rules or agents that are added to an existing institution or policy. When zooming into a 'punctuation' deeply enough, one might be able to trace patterns of layering that caused the ultimate change.

Of the four modes of incremental change, layering has been picked up best in contemporary literature. Notably, contemporary scholarship on layering fits a comparable broad brush of categorisation similar to that of those using the concept *avant la lettre*. Nowadays, authors look at adding (a) agency – e.g. actors, organisations, layers of government – to existing institutions (e.g. Ackrill & Kay 2006); (b) structure – e.g. rules, laws, control modes – to existing institutions (e.g. Thatcher & Coen 2008) or (c) both agency and structure to existing institutions (e.g. Bruszt 2008).

Conversion

Conversion refers to a situation of the 'redeployment of old institutions to new purposes' (Streeck & Thelen 2005b, p. 31). The institutions themselves do not change but are harnessed to serve new ends (Thelen 2000, 2002, 2003). Again we see a difference to the punctuated equilibrium literature: the existing institution remains, although it is used in new ways or to new goals.

Thelen's first description of the mode conversion is from a 1992 work (Steinmo & Thelen 1992); it does, however, not use the term conversion. The term was suggested to Thelen by Streeck (Thelen 2000, 2002). Streeck had already used the term 'political conversion' in a book chapter titled *Beneficial Constraints: On the Economic Limits of Rational Voluntarism* (Streeck 1997, p. 203). Streeck addressed the question of how actors or organisations, under changing external conditions, might learn to use the new situation to their advantage.

Conversion, as a concept, seems to have less theoretical antecedents than layering. Ding (1994) might be considered one of these antecedents. Ding applies the concept to illustrate how in China the former communist regime loses control of certain institutions, which are then used for 'the expression of ideals, or mobilisation and co-ordination of interests against the party-state' (Ding 1994, pp. 298–299). Ding, however, frames this as institutional amphibiousness.

In contemporary literature on policy change conversion, as discussed by Thelen, this is less applied than layering.³ Those who study the concept often do so alongside layering (e.g. Barnes 2008; Boas 2007; Hacker 2004; Thatcher & Coen 2008).

Drift

Drift refers to a situation of changed impact on existing institutions because of shifts in the institution's environment and a lack of adjustment to them (Streeck & Thelen 2005b; Thelen 2004). This mode seems to be related to modes described in the punctuated equilibrium literature: exogenous effects result in institutional change. However, this mode differs because the exogenous effects do not come as a shock, but rise or intensify over time.

Readers familiar with diffusion as a mechanism of institutional change might expect a link with diffusion literature here (e.g. Grübler 1996; Loch & Huberman 1999). That link is, however, not established in Thelen's (et al.) work. Diffusion addresses the spread and acceptance of, to keep to the wording used throughout this paper, new actors or policies in an existing context. The more spread and the more accepted the new, the more likely the old is replaced. In particular, the intensification of the new over time is addressed in such literature. One could argue that swift intensification results in a punctuated equilibrium, whereas slow and steady intensification results in gradual change (Loch & Huberman 1999).

The earlier discussed modes, layering and conversion, are most developed in Thelen's work. The mode drift is less worked out. Thelen introduces the term drift in a footnote (Thelen 2003, note 29), in which she refers to the work of Steven Vogel (1996), but does not elaborate on this point in later work.⁴ Thelen strongly leans on Jacob Hacker's (2004) work on drift, who deserves credit for developing the mode alongside conversion and layering. Hacker considers drift as a situation of 'changes in the operation or effect of policies that occur without significant changes in those policies' structure' (Hacker 2004, p. 246). Hacker considers drift, like layering and conversion, as processes of adaptation (Hacker 2005, p. 41). Drift can be an active strategy for some actors: 'it might be the result of active attempts to block adaptation of institutions to changing circumstances' (Hacker 2004, p. 248).⁵

In contemporary literature on policy change, drift is less applied than layering or conversion. Moreover, like conversion, it is often studied alongside layering (e.g. Barnes 2008; Thatcher & Coen 2008).

Displacement

Displacement refers to a situation in which 'new models emerge and diffuse which call into question existing, previously taken-for-granted organisational forms and practices' (Streeck & Thelen 2005b, p. 19). Displacement differs from the punctuated equilibrium literature in that the new institution is introduced in competition with the existing institution, rather than immediately displacing it. It also differs from layering since under this mode the new

³ Note: to find the theoretical antecedents to Thelen's work I only analysed journal articles by browsing JSTOR, ISI web of knowledge and Google Scholar archives. I have not included books in my analysis. Different books co-edited by Thelen hold chapters on conversion (e.g. Streeck & Thelen 2005a; Mahoney & Thelen 2010b).

⁴ Note that her reference to 'wage drift' in early works (e.g. Thelen 1991) is different from the modes of 'institutional drift' discussed here.

⁵ Hacker (2004) refers to Douglas Rae (1975) as his source of inspiration.

institution eventually supplements the old. As with drift, the mode displacement is less worked out in Thelen's (et al.) work than layering and conversion. Note that displacement differs from layering, conversion and drift in that under these three modes existing institutions remain in place partly, fully or symbolically. With displacement the existing institution ultimately is replaced.

Thelen used the term displacement in her earlier works, but did not elaborate on it (Thelen 1999). In her later works, the mode also receives limited attention. Furthermore, Thelen believes that displacement is 'rare in the politics of reform in contemporary advanced capitalist economies' (Thelen 2009, p. 488). Thelen refers to the work of Meyer (1987), DiMaggio and Powell (1991), Dobbin (1994) and Heimer (1999) as her sources of inspiration (Thelen 1999). These authors seem to hold a different view on the 'limited occurrence' of displacement since it is the main topic of many of their works. Displacement, as discussed by Thelen, is hardly applied in other scholarly works, perhaps because of the more popular application of the mechanism by Thelen's sources of inspiration.

What the new book adds

The above discussion provided some insight into the development of the four modes of gradual institutional change in Mahoney and Thelen's *Explaining Institutional Change*. It showed that contrary to Mahoney and Thelen's claim that '[u]ntil recently, gradual institutional change had not been a central focus of explanation in the social sciences' (2010b, p. xi), one could argue that there is a long tradition of studying incremental institutional change – it was just not framed as such. However, Thelen (et al.) should be credited for bringing together the modes of gradual change discussed by the various authors. The discussion also raised important questions: what does the new book add to what was already known? Does the book really offer a theory, as promised in its preface and is this theory usable? In other words (Ostrom 2007), does it provide the assumptions necessary to analyse a phenomenon, explain its processes and predict its outcomes?

To answer these questions and guide my review of Mahoney and Thelen's book, I take three issues that have been repeatedly raised by authors who applied Thelen's (et al.) reasoning and typology between 2005 and 2010. First, the boundaries of the different modes introduced are not sufficiently defined (Duit 2007). Second, the usefulness of the theory and typology in explaining the factors and direction of institutional change is unclear (Béland 2007). Third, the lack of attention paid to the patterns or sequences of the modes of gradual change to analyse and explain institutional change (Barnes 2008).

Institutional context and actors

To address the issue of the definition of the boundaries of the modes, I will first focus on the second issue: what factors explain institutional change? Whereas Streeck and Thelen's (2005b) typology of modes lacked a clear foundation of factors that might result in institutional change, Mahoney and Thelen's does not. Mahoney and Thelen discuss three factors: the characteristics of the political context, the characteristics of the institution and the type of dominant change agents (Figure 1). This needs some explanation.

Figure 1 – Mahoney and Thelen’s framework for explaining institutional change

Source: Mahoney and Thelen, 2010a, p. 15, Figure 1.1

The characteristics of the political context can be traced back to balance-of-power shifts (Mahoney & Thelen 2010a, pp. 7–10). The success of attempts to incrementally change an institution strongly depends on the strength of its defenders’ blocking powers. Mahoney and Thelen look at these defenders’ veto possibilities as possible factors of institutional change: the stronger the veto possibilities of those defending the status quo, the less chance change agents have to make major changes to the institution. In Mahoney and Thelen’s work, the political context is defined by strong and weak veto possibilities. Note that in earlier diffusion literature a comparable dimension was highlighted as a cause for institutional change: opposition to change (Grübler 1996).

The characteristics of the institution can be traced back to exercising discretion in applying the rules underlying the institution or enforcing these rules (Mahoney and Thelen 2010a). This is a new addition to Thelen’s (et al.) earlier work and an addition that might attract the attention of regulatory scholarship. Mahoney and Thelen’s argument is as follows. Institutions have formal or informal codified rule systems. Yet, such rules can never be unambiguously defined. On the one hand, actors’ rationality to do so is cognitively limited. As a result, flaws arise that need later mending. On the other hand, rules and institutions are imbedded in implicit assumptions. Such assumptions will be prone to different interpretations: a certain level of discretion in rule interpretation is needed. Even more, such discretion might be exploited by change agents by systematically undermining rules and stretching their interpretations. The same goes for enforcing the rules underlying the institution. Enforcement is needed to guarantee an institution’s survival and stabilise its outcomes. Yet, enforcement is complicated because of the room provided for the interpretation of the rules. Furthermore, rules are often not enforced by those who design them, which results in different interpretations. In short, bounded rationality in rule making, implicit assumptions on rule meaning, the difficulty of rule enforcement and the fact that rule enforcers are often not those who design rules are the seeds for institutional change in institutions. In Mahoney and Thelen’s work, an institution is defined by a high and low level of discretion in rule interpretation and/or enforcement.

The combined characteristics of the political context and characteristics of the institution are possible explanans of institutional change. But besides these characteristics of structure, Mahoney and Thelen also address characteristics of agency as possible explanans of institutional change: change agents (Mahoney & Thelen 2010a). Again, this is a new

addition to Thelen's (et al.) earlier work. Change agents are the actors behind institutional change. Mahoney and Thelen define these actors by focusing on their wish to preserve institutional rules (yes/no) and their abiding to the institutional rules (yes/no). Together these two dichotomies result in four types of change agents:

- *Insurrectionaries*. These change agents seek to eliminate existing institutions. 'They reject the institutional status quo and do not always abide by its regulation' (Mahoney & Thelen 2010a, p. 23). Insurrectionaries are linked to displacement because they favour new rules to the status quo.
- *Symbionts*. These change agents come in two kinds: a parasitic and mutualistic variety. Symbionts, of both kinds, seek to preserve and exploit the existing institution for private gain. The parasitic variety does so by using the rules in novel ways to exploit gaps in enforcement. The mutualistic type does so by 'violat[ing] the letter of the rule to support and sustain its spirit'. Parasitic symbionts are linked to drift, as their behavior undermines the institution as a result of 'slippage between rule and practices on the ground'. Mutualistic symbionts are not linked with drift, but with 'contributing to the robustness of institutions' (Mahoney & Thelen 2010a, pp. 24–25).
- *Subversives*. These change agents 'seek to displace an institution, but in pursuing this goal they do not themselves break the rules of the institution'. Subversives are especially linked with layering, as they seek to bring change to the edges of an institution, which 'make their way to the center' (Mahoney & Thelen 2010a, pp. 25–26).
- *Opportunists*. These change agents can both seek to preserve and change the institution. Furthermore, they do so by either following or breaking the rules. Opportunists 'have ambiguous preferences about institutional continuity (...) [they] exploit whatever possibilities exist within the prevailing system to achieve their ends'. Opportunists are linked to conversion since 'ambiguities in the interpretation or implementation of existing rules provide the space for them to redeploy these rules in ways unanticipated for by their designers' (Mahoney & Thelen 2010a, pp. 26–27).

Both the characteristics of structure and agency are linked to institutional change according to Mahoney and Thelen. They refer to this as, respectively, link I and link II between the explanandum (institutional change) and explanans. Mahoney and Thelen hypothesise a third link, link III, between the characteristics of structure and agency. I will return to this later. The three links result in assumptions between characteristics of structure and agency and change actors as visualised in Figure 2.

Figure 2 – Contextual and institutional sources and change agents

		Characteristics of targeted institution	
		Low level of discretion in interpretation/enforcement	High level of discretion in interpretation/enforcement
Characteristics of political context	Strong veto possibilities	Layering (subversives)	Drift (parasitic symbionts)
	Weak veto possibilities	Displacement (insurrectionaries)	Conversion (opportunists)

Source: Mahoney and Thelen, 2010a, p. 28, Table 1.4 (slightly adapted, the original Table 1.4 first mentions change agents and then modes of change in brackets).

Definitions and boundaries of the modes

Whereas the explanatory factors are discussed in some length, the backgrounds of the four modes of gradual change are not. The four modes are taken for granted in the new book. They are directly taken from *Beyond Continuity* and seem to have been brought in line with the explanatory factors in *Explaining Institutional Change*. Without being nitpicky on the unaccounted absence of ‘exhaustion’ as a mode of institutional change (Streeck & Thelen 2005b), I wish to critique this approach.

Mahoney and Thelen pose two broad questions in associating the characteristics of structure to a certain mode of institutional change (2010a, p. 19): ‘Does the political context afford defenders of the status quo strong or weak veto possibilities?’ and ‘Does the targeted institution afford actors opportunities for exercising discretion in the interpretation of enforcement?’ Given the characteristics of structure – strong/weak veto possibilities and low/high level of discretion – these seem plausible questions. However, the link between the answers of the questions and the mode of institutional change strikes me as somewhat peculiar. Instead of clearly explaining what outcome might be expected to be associated with what characteristic, Mahoney and Thelen build their argument the other way around: in a context with strong veto possibilities, displacement and conversion are ‘unlikely’ to happen, whereas in a context with high veto possibilities layering and drift are ‘more promising strategies’ because veto powers are ‘often insufficient to prevent’ indirect changes. Then, conversion and drift are ‘less likely’ when there is a low level of discretion in enforcement and layering and displacement ‘do not rely on exploiting the ambiguities in the rules themselves’. In plain English, it seems that Mahoney and Thelen do not clarify how explanans and explanandum are associated, but how they are most likely *not* associated. This results in the peculiar situation that, when closely reading their theory and two-by-two diagrams, the combination of, for instance, a low level of discretion and strong veto possibilities is most likely to be associated with layering (I dare not use the word ‘related’).

Now, I understand that this sounds like splitting hairs, but my point is not trivial. Presenting two-by-two diagrams and providing a scheme in which an arrow from the explanans to explanandum visualises a link between the two, as Mahoney and Thelen do,

gives the illusion of explaining causality. The authors, however, present a complicated combination of induction and deduction⁶ to confirm their association between explanans and explanandum – link I – which, in my opinion, leaves too much room for discussion. At best, this framework seems to provide a guide to what type of incremental change could be expected, but only when we already know the incremental change that has occurred and only when veto power and flexibility of implementation are considered.

A second point relates to linking change agents with the characteristics of structure – link III. Here, it seems that change agents are not logically associated with a certain mode of change. Take, for example, insurrectionaries. According to Mahoney and Thelen, these are characterised by *not* seeking to preserve the institution and *not* following the institutional rules. As one would expect, these change agents who wish to change the institution are associated with a mode that is associated with low veto possibilities – either displacement or conversion. Indeed, the goal of insurrectionaries, major institutional change, might be most achievable when actors in the political context face difficulties blocking these change agents' strategies. This is in line with Mahoney and Thelen's reasoning. However, contrary to what one would expect, insurrectionaries are not associated with a mode characterised by a high level of discretion in rule enforcement – either drift or conversion. For such change agents who do not follow the rules, the link to high level discretion would be more logical, in my opinion, than low level discretion. After all, under low level discretion their violations would stand out more clearly, thereby giving these change agents less chance to be successful in achieving their goals. To my surprise, however, insurrectionaries are associated with displacement, which Mahoney and Thelen characterise by a low level of discretion in enforcement. This gives me the feeling that Mahoney and Thelen have pushed their wish to present crisp and clear models and figures just a bit too far.

It follows that this slippage also raises questions about this latter link between change agents and modes of change – link II. After all, if their theoretical framework is sound, the three links should follow simple logic: if the characteristics of structure are associated with a certain mode of change (link I), and if a certain type of change agents is associated with that certain mode of change (link II), then those characteristics of structure should be associated with that type of change agent (link III).

Patterns and sequences

The final issue relates to the attention paid to the patterns or sequences of the modes of gradual change to analyse and explain institutional change. Mahoney and Thelen do not discuss this topic in such terms. Furthermore, given the somewhat technocratic approach to linking modes of change to the characteristics of the political context and the targeted institution it seems that all but one mode can be linked to just one set of structure characteristics. Following Figure 1 this would also imply that only one type of change agent is linked to one set of structure characteristics. Yet, when closely reading the different contributions in their edited book, a variety of patterns and sequences can be traced.

⁶ In more abstract terms, Mahoney and Thelen's argument seems to be as follows. These are the four modes of institutional change: mode a, mode b, mode c and mode d. The four modes are characterized by characteristics A and B, which can be 'high' or 'low'. If characteristic A is 'strong' then NOT mode a or mode b AND if characteristic B is 'low' then NOT mode b or mode d. Thereby if 'A=strong' and 'B=low' AND if there is change, then it should be mode c.

Furthermore, we learn that various change agents can operate within a single institution in a single policy context. We also learn that change agents sometimes aim for different modes of change. Let me provide two of the many examples from the book.

First, in the second chapter Tulia Falleti (2010) discusses *The Evolution of Health Care Reforms in Brazil, 1964–1988*. In Falleti's contribution, we see an example of layering by subversives, which ultimately results in conversion: leftist health care reformers first seek to 'make changes at the margins [of the military-led health care system], which pushed the system in directions more consistent with their own ideology and goals' (Falleti 2010, p. 56). This provided these change agents a certain power base. Later, social reforms were advanced by the military to co-opt with these now strong change agents. However, these change agents 'seized those opportunities and reoriented the reforms toward new goals' (p. 57).

Second, an example that goes the other way around – conversion resulting in layering – is provided in Chapter 6 by Adam Sheingate (2010) who discusses *Creativity and Constraint in the U.S. House of Representatives*. In this contribution, we see that ambiguity in a rule, in this case a constitutional requirement for a majority of representatives to be present to constitute a quorum, results in the abuse of that rule. 'House practice held that a quorum was a majority of the members voting, rather than a majority of the members actually being present' (Sheingate 2010, p. 189). Thus, refusing to vote could halt the business in the House. This resulted in a situation in which the ambiguity of the rule was often used: 'the "disappearing quorum" became a powerful instrument of minority obstruction' (p. 189). Such minority obstruction is a clear case of conversion: a rule is strategically deployed and in doing so changes its enactment. As this new practice became well established it also became a danger for those holding majority power in the House. Through a remarkable piece of action (which I leave you to find out) the Republican Reed in 1889 finds the opportunity to change this practice, by implementing the "Reed's Rules" – an example of layering. These rules put an end to the disappearing quorum.

Was it worth waiting for?

The new book answers 'old' questions, raises relevant new ones and provides original insights. Mahoney and Thelen have brought Thelen's (et al.) earlier work and the literature on incremental change another step forward. Moreover, especially the contributions by the various authors, tap into earlier questions on the patterns or sequences of the modes of institutional change. Although not directly answering such questions, these contributions draw our attention once more to this barely explored topic. Another promising trail of research is provided in Chapter 4 on *Institutional Development in the U.S. Social Security Program* by Alan Jacobs (2010). Jacobs shows that if a policy's outcome echoes its goals, it does not necessarily mean that there is a direct connection between the two. In Chapter 4, there is a story of an evolutionary path towards reaching these goals, resulting in an institution that was not intentionally designed the way it turned out to be, but which fulfils the initial goals (Jacobs 2010). This chapter once more stresses the need to look closely at incremental institutional change, even when it seems a "cold case" of policy success.

By contrast, the introduced framework can hardly be considered theory when assessed on its power to predict the extent to which gradual institutional change might

occur under certain circumstances – leaving aside the question of whether it is possible and desirable to come up with such theories in the social sciences. It does provide language and tools to, in hindsight, describe how and why a certain mode of change occurred. This explanatory focus meets the aim of Mahoney and Thelen as stated in the preface of their book. Furthermore, as the different contributions in the edited volume show, the framework seems usable for that purpose: explaining gradual institutional change. I stress again, however, that introducing theory using the types of figures Mahoney and Thelen do creates the expectation that they actually focus on predictive causality. This expectation is not met.

Where to next?

When comparing various approaches to studying policy or institutional change a number of issues stand out (Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis 2009). One's perspective (e.g. a rationalist model, historical institutionalism or sociological institutionalism) and focus (structure or agency, endogenous or exogenous variables, revolution or evolution, output or process, intended or unintended change, incremental or radical and swift change) limits one's findings and thereby one's understanding of what is going on (Capano & Howlett 2009). The challenge in theories on institutional change is not so much to show what has changed, but how, when and why this change occurred and what this change really means (Capano 2009).

To better understand the underlying mechanisms of change we need to focus on the causal chains of explanatory variables. Mahoney and Thelen's work is valuable here because it provides hands-on tools and language to describe processes of change with a focus on explanatory variables (i.e. change agents, veto power and rule discretion). One might question the variables Mahoney and Thelen have chosen to explain institutional change. To regulatory scholarship the book might be of special interest exactly because of the inclusion of rule and enforcement discretion in Mahoney and Thelen's framework. To others the focus chosen might limit the applicability of Mahoney and Thelen's framework in their work.

Nevertheless, *the* promising addition to our current and future thinking on change lays in the inclusion of change agents and institutional context. It is here that dichotomies between perspectives (e.g. studying structure *or* agency, endogenous *or* exogenous variables, or process *or* outcome) might be overcome. Combining perspectives is one of the key factors to actually understanding what change really means. At the same time, the framework could bridge the gap between rational choice institutionalism, historical institutionalism and sociological institutionalism exactly because of the inclusion of agency and institutional context (Hall 2010).

Furthermore, as shown by various authors, in Mahoney and Thelen's edited volume and other works change can be a driver for future change (i.e. change is not an end-point, but an event in a chain of events). Mahoney and Thelen's notion that rules and institutions inevitably hold the seeds of their own change provides a necessary topic on our research agenda, which might more strongly connect policymaking and policy implementation studies. In particular, a focus on the patterns or sequences of the modes of change would add to our understanding of institutional change and could provide insight into when and where we might expect change.

To conclude, notwithstanding some questions imperfections in the theory, this book is a worthy successor of Streeck and Thelen's *Beyond Continuity* and a valuable addition to the literature on incremental change. I look forward to the application of Mahoney and Thelen's work in future scholarship and seeing their work develop and incrementally change by this application, which hopefully results in another valuable edited volume by Thelen and her co-authors in some years from now. I will certainly be waiting by my mailbox for it.

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