

HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONALISM: BEYOND PIERSON AND SKOCPOL

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I apologise for the lack of references here. If anyone is interested in a particular reference, come to see me.

The genesis of the idea for this paper occurred when David Marsh attended a session on historical institutionalism at the American Political Science Association Conference three years ago. Paul Pierson and Theda Skocpol, two leading historical institutionalists, gave a paper, which was subsequently revised and published (Pierson and Skocpol, 2002), indeed this revised version is discussed at some length below. The conference paper seemed to Dave to be very poor; indeed in his intervention Dave afforded it only one cheer. Of course, the reception of the paper was sycophantic; a reception which is typical at these large US conferences where audiences for most sessions include a large number of friends and colleagues of the presenters. In the bar afterwards Dave talked to a number of UK academics who were at the session and all agreed that the paper was weak; in contrast, the US academics he spoke to about the paper were much more positive. This mixed response provoked an immediate question, actually two questions: Why? We need to deconstruct that question and rephrase it as having two elements: In what way was the paper poor? For what reason was it poor? In our view, answering those questions tells us much about historical institutionalism and American political science. Here, we shall address the first of these issues, although the second will also be considered in a later revision of this piece, but we need to begin by outlining Pierson and Skocpol's argument.

Pierson and Skocpol on Historical Institutionalism

The final version of Pierson and Skocpol's paper is considerably better than that presented at the APSA conference. It would be interesting, but perhaps a little unfair to trace those differences. Here however, we shall deal with the final article, which, while improved, exhibits many of the problems in the original piece.

Pierson and Skocpol argue that historical institutionalism sets itself up as an approach that overcomes the deficiencies of behaviouralist and rational choice approaches to social science analysis. In their view (2002, 5), there are three central tenets to historical institutionalism that enable it to claim superiority over the alternative rational choice and behaviouralist accounts:

- a) a focus on outcomes and puzzles ;
- b) a focus on macro contexts within which meso-level and macro-level social and political processes occur;
- c) these processes are traced over time – history matters.

a) Outcomes and Puzzles

The view here seems to be that other accounts make more assumptions about outcomes, processes and methods. So, they argue, rational choice accounts are driven by research agendas derived from problems generated by overarching theories (2002, 5). The focus is upon strategic action at the micro level. Subsequently, this leads rational choice analysts to focus upon strategic actors operating within political contexts, choices are assumed to be identifiable and pay-offs transparent (2002, 5). Yet, this approach is unable to account for later emerging preferences, or new actors (2002, 6). All in all, this is a fairly standard critique of rational choice theory (for a better one see Ward, 2002). In contrast, behaviouralism is criticised for its emphasis upon quantitative methodology that

can lead to the neglect of significant and substantive issues within the research agenda (2002, 5)

Pierson and Skocpol argue that historical institutionalism claims to overcome the deficiencies of both approaches; it offers a 'real-world' approach. In consequence, historical institutionalists have produced studies which, while seeking to explain a particular social phenomenon, locate the issue or event in an historical context. This leads the historical institutionalists to claim that: '(existing) historical and comparative-historical studies [have] served to refute some arguments, refine others, discover new lines of causal argument and extend findings across eras and continents' (2002, 4). This, Pierson and Skocpol claim, enables a significantly more comprehensive analysis to be achieved.

b) Macro Contexts.

Pierson and Skocpol argue that historical institutionalism claims that both behaviouralists and rational choice theorists ignore the overarching context in which social and political processes occur which is a significant dimension of social analysis.

They criticise behaviouralists, arguing that their emphasis on quantitative techniques leads to the assumption that the independent variables under analysis are causally linked to the behaviour (that is the dependent variable) they are utilised to explain (2002, 6). This means that the methods used inevitably fit with the outcomes; basic assumptions about behaviour lead to a particular method of analysis that fits those presumptions. In contrast, historical institutionalism stresses the importance of the broader social context and argues that alternative causal paths may lead to similar outcomes (2002, 7). While historical institutionalists claim to accept that any analysis should be consistent with plausible explanations of individual behaviour, they also acknowledge that there are patterns of resources and relationships that have both 'channelling and delimiting' effects on behaviour (2002, 7). Historical institutionalists aim to identify these patterns and 'trace their causal impacts' (2002, 7). Rather than focussing on a single institution, historical institutionalism claims to focus on patterns of relationships and resources as broad sets of institutions interact to shape processes and outcomes (2002, 7). It also emphasise the need for comparative analysis, because comparing cases allows more opportunity to theorise about why certain variables produce a given outcome in one setting, but do not necessarily combine in similar ways in another setting (2002, 8). As such, changes in the broader context may result in differing outcomes. This approach, historical institutionalists claim, represents a significant advance on both behavioural analyses, which tend to focus upon one point in time, or rational choice accounts, which focus on individual behaviour, or micro-level processes (2002, 8/9).

c) Historical Processes – History Matters

The historical institutionalists emphasise the need for temporal analysis (2002, 9), in order to avoid missing dimensions, which, in the short term may be insignificant, but in the long term may impact upon, and potentially be causally related to, the phenomenon under investigation. They justify this methodologically in three ways:

- i) Introducing a temporal dimension means more cases are available and means that there is likely to be more variation in outcomes (2002, 10);
- ii) Tracing historical sequences can uncover causal relationships – including an historical dimension can make a real contribution to supporting or challenging claims of social causation (2002, 10);
- iii) There is an increased sensitivity to period effects, which may be missed in analyses based upon a short-time span (2002, 10).

Pierson and Skocpol also argue that there are distinct temporal dimensions to social and political processes:

- i) The concept of path dependence is used to suggest that, once actors have gone so far down a particular course of action, it becomes difficult to reverse that course, so previously available potential alternatives become lost (2002, 10). The idea of path dependence can be used to explain institutional inertia and change and the way in which relationships of power become embedded in institutions. Path dependence makes a contribution also by adding a temporal dimension to the analysis (2002, 11).
- ii) In addition, the approach points attention to the fact that the sequence of events is important to the overall outcome.
- iii) It also draws attention to lengthy, large-scale, slow moving social processes (p12), which, again, may be missed by analyses that focus upon a narrow time frame.
- iv) To theorise the development of processes over time also enables a ‘richer and more realistic’ account of ‘institutional and organizational change’ (2002, 13).

Overall then, Pierson and Skocpol argue that historical institutionalists claim to offer a more comprehensive analysis of social stability and change. An historical approach enables the introduction of a temporal element at both macro and meso levels of institutional analysis. This means that elements, such as incremental change over significant periods of time, which may impact upon institutions, are acknowledged. They claim that historical institutionalism overcomes the difficulties of both behavioural analyses, which focus on single points in time and which they equate with quantitative methods, and rational choice accounts which, again, they claim elevate the role of the individual without accounting for the institutions, or the macro-level context, in which the individuals make decisions.

Beyond Pierson and Skocpol

The rest of this draft engages with Pierson and Skocpol by offering a fuller discussion of the literature on historical institutionalism, leading to a different characterization of its core, which sees it as most appropriately located in a critical realist epistemological position – among other things, this also leads us to side with Hay and Wincott against Hall and Taylor. In the next version of this paper, we shall continue to argue that the pluralism of Hall and Taylor, particularly, but also Pierson and Skocpol, reflects the failure of US political science fully to confront the rational choice paradigm that dominates their profession.

Whilst it is widely accepted that historical institutionalism is a facet of ‘new institutionalism’, its distinctiveness and coherence has been open to dispute. Here, we offer a brief overview of the new institutionalist literature to support two arguments: first, that the contested nature of new institutionalism underpins some of the controversy over the ‘historical’ variant; and, second, drawing on Jessop, the current interest in institutions has been developed at three different levels- thematic, methodological and ontological. We begin with a consideration of new institutionalism more broadly, before focusing on what we see as the key issues in relation to historical institutionalism.

1) New Institutionalism?

Two aspects of ‘New Institutionalism’ are widely agreed upon; firstly, it is argued that it reflected a response to the perceived excesses of both the ‘behaviouralist revolution’ and rational choice theory – this view is clear in Pierson and Skocpol’s discussion; secondly, proponents of such an approach would argue that institutions matter or, to put it another way, that the ‘organisation of political life makes a difference’ (March and Olsen, 1984:747). Beyond these two, rather bland, observations, both the novelty and coherence of new institutionalism have been contested.

This point is easily supported by a brief consideration of the different classificatory schema proposed to categorise sub-types of new institutionalism. To take just a few examples: Hall and Taylor identify four forms of new institutionalism (historical, sociological, rational choice and new institutionalism in economics¹); by contrast, Peters develops a sevenfold typology (normative rational choice historical empirical sociological, institutions of interest representation and international institutionalism; Blyth focuses on two methodological traditions – historical and organisational; whilst Lowndes refers to international historical and empirical forms in order to interrogate the dichotomisation of rational choice and normative approaches. Whatismore, the problem of differential categorisations is exacerbated by the way theorists classify their own work. For example, whilst Sikkink sees her work as ‘interpretive institutionalism’ it is frequently viewed as historical institutionalist by others. We aren’t interested here in adjudicating between these classificatory schema. Rather, we shall focus upon two key tensions within the literature, which affect any consideration of historical institutionalism: the specification of new institutionalism’s other; and the debate about levels of institutionalism.

a) New Institutionalism’s Other

The notion of ‘new’ institutionalism immediately invokes a comparison with ‘old’ institutionalism and it is important briefly to note that the nature and extent of the divergence between the two remains contested. In crude terms, one can point to four interrelated differences between new and old institutionalism². First, political institutions in new institutionalism are not reducible to political organisations, as they tended to be in old institutionalism, rather they are understood more broadly. Second, the concern with formal constitutions and organisations of old institutionalism has been supplemented with

¹ Although this last category was not included in the final article.

² Although Rhodes (1995) rightly points out that new institutionalism’s characterisation of old institutionalism is partial in both senses of the word.

an interest in more informal conventions. Third, an initial concern with the constraints that institutional design places on behaviour in institutions has been supplemented by a newer concern with the ways in which power is embodied in institutions. Fourth, there is a growing concern in new institutionalism with the interaction between individuals and institutions.

These shifts have been accompanied by two changes in the methodological focus of institutional work. The previous focus on descriptive method and the associated 'disdain for theory' has given way to an increased use of quantitative analysis and an explicit concern with theory development. Crucially, these changes are usually viewed as a response to the behavioural revolution. As such, March and Olsen claim that it would: 'probably be more accurate to describe recent thinking ['new institutionalism'] as blending elements of an old institutionalism into the non institutionalist styles of recent theories of politics'.

On the basis of these characterizations of the difference between new and old institutionalism, it is widely accepted that different forms of new institutionalism result from different non-institutionalist theories of politics and this point will be developed below. First though, two interrelated arguments need to be noted. Firstly, there is a tension between conceptualising new institutionalism as a response to 'old institutionalism' and conceptualising it as a corrective to 'non-institutionalism'. The suggestion here is that, in either case, new institutionalism is mutually constructed with its specified other. However, if one acknowledges that an understanding of institutionalism is, in part, affected by which other is specified, then we also have to accept that, from the outset, there will be diffuse readings of new institutionalism. This is particularly evident in March and Olsen's claim that, whilst new institutionalism can be presented and discussed as an epistemological perspective of profound importance to social science, they are more concerned with it as a: 'narrow collection of challenges to contemporary theoretical thinking in political science'. As such, the relative absence of theorisation in the old institutionalism literature left a space in which a new institutionalism could be developed. However, conceptualising new institutionalism as rational choice or behaviouralisms other meant that its concerns were circumscribed from the outset.

b) Levels of Institutionalism³:

While acknowledging the potential for considerable variation in both the reach and the grasp of new institutionalism, as Jessop argues, it is also important to differentiate between different levels of new institutionalist analysis. Jessop develops a threefold categorisation of institutional turns: thematic; methodological; and ontological. The thematic turn emphasises the belief that institutions are important. The methodological turn focuses on the: 'the intuition, hypothesis, or discovery that the institutional aspects of social life provide a fruitful – or even, indeed, the most productive – entry point for exploring and explaining the social world even if the ensuing research is extended later to include other themes or explanatory factors'. Finally, the ontological turn involves the

³ In positing different levels of institutionalism the space is opened up to look at the interplay between them. Of course, the role of discourse and construction of narratives would be crucial in this respect.

intuition, hypothesis, or discovery that institutions constitute the essential foundations of social existence. Jessop utilises this distinction to develop two further arguments. First, he claims that not all those engaging in institutional analysis take the methodological or ontological understanding; many authors are content with the bland observation that institutions matter. Secondly, he suggests that to speak of a turn, rather than a paradigm shift, a particular line of institutional analysis must focus on continuity, rather than change; an argument developed in a different way by Peters, as we shall see below.

Jessop's account can be utilized in relation to our preceding argument about mutual construction. If new institutionalism is understood as a limited response to the excesses of behaviouralism, then it is best seen as a methodological institutionalism, circumscribed by the underpinning ontological commitments of the approach in which it is grounded. In contrast, if new institutionalism is constructed in opposition to old institutionalism, this conceptualisation is, arguably, more accommodating to an ontological understanding because space remains for the elucidation of, previously bypassed, ontological and epistemological premises.

Nevertheless, two clarifications of Jessop's argument should be made. First, as Hay and Wincott point out, and this issue is discussed at more length below, it is clear that the ontological and methodological are closely related in all varieties of new institutionalism, whether or not this is acknowledged. Secondly, institutions and institutionalisms can't be viewed as exclusively ontological concepts. Rather, they need to be located within a broader meta-theoretical framework; one informed by critical realism and seeing the relationship between structure and agency and the material and the ideational as dialectical. Indeed, this will be the core argument of this piece; that the future of historical institutionalism should lie in such an approach.

2) The Core of Historical Institutionalism?

We aim to substantiate that last claim by examining four key issues in the literature on historical institutionalism: the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the various varieties of institutionalism; the approach to the structure/ agency problem; the role of ideas, institutions and material relations; and the problem path dependency and whether historical institutionalism can explain change as well as stability.

a) On Ontology and Epistemology

Actually, we don't need to dwell too long on this point, because much of our argument has already been made by Hay and Wincott. Actually, we want to make three points here. First, many of the critics of historical institutionalism base their critique on positivist understanding of political science which is at odds with the position that many, if not most, historical institutionalists adopt. Second, and this is the core of Hay and Wincott's argument against Hall and Taylor, different types of institutionalism are rooted in different epistemological positions and, as such, it is difficult, if not impossible simply to integrate work from the different schools of new institutionalism. Third, and with think this argument follows from the last, historical institutionalism is likely to have most value if it is rooted in a realist, more specifically a critical realist, epistemology. Each of these points deserves some attention.

i) Positivist Arrogance

There is a problem in political science that there are some positivists who feel that there is only one way to do political science: their way (for an exposition of the two views here see Dowding 2001 and Marsh and Smith, 2002). This position is evident in the literature on historical institutionalism in the work of Peters.

Peters argues that historical institutionalism, and more specifically the idea of path dependency, cannot explain change; a fairly common critique which we shall return to below. More importantly here, he contends that: 'to uncover the explanations for the changes... we are forced to move outside the approach itself ... There appears to be no such dynamic element in the theory itself, unless one accepts the dysfunctions of initial design as a sufficient cause'. Peters extends this critique suggesting that the methodology of historical institutionalism is problematic because the position is non-falsifiable; so, to Peters, it is unclear how much deviation from an inertial path is needed to argue that an historicist explanation was not effective in a particular case. Moreover, he suggests that historical institutionalism contains no basic premise from which prediction about behaviour can be made. As such, Peters points to a functionalism (and structuralism) in historical institutionalism. In light of these considerations, Peters contends that historical institutionalism may be better conceived of as a variant of March and Olsen's normative institutionalism, because non-falsifiability prevents it being an empirical theory.

Of course, these criticisms are problematic in two central respects. Firstly, they are premised upon a static understanding of historical institutionalism that few would advance; this is another point to which we return below when we stress the dialectical nature of the best historical institutionalist analysis. Secondly, Peters is invoking a positivist understanding of political science, as though it was incontestable and uncontested. In our view most of the best historical institutionalist work is not grounded in this epistemology.

ii) Two Cheers for Hay and Wincott

Hall and Taylor (1996, p. 957), as have others (see Lowndes, 2002) distinguish between three variants of new institutionalism: rational choice, sociological and historical. They argue that, while any 'crude synthesis' between them is not 'immediately practical or desirable (p.957)', a dialogue between them is essential and possible. This view, to an extent, also informs Pierson and Skocpol's position.

In contrast, Hay and Wincott (1998, p.951) argue that such a dialogue is difficult because rational choice and sociological institutionalism are rooted in mutually incompatible ontologies. To put it simply, rational choice institutionalism is based in a foundationalist ontological position and sociological institutionalism in an anti-foundationalist one (for an introduction to these arguments see Marsh and Furlong, 2002). Hay and Wincott go further however and claim that historical institutionalism can and should develop a separate ontology; although they are a trifle coy about giving this alternative position a name. In contrast, we have no such qualms advocating a critical realist alternative to positivism and interpretivism.

Certainly, however we would endorse Hay and Wincott's view that rational choice theory, which is most often foundationalist in ontological terms and positivist in epistemological terms, and sociological institutionalism, which is most often anti-foundationalist in ontological terms and interpretivist in epistemological terms, cannot be integrated because their basic assumptions are so different. Of course, that does not mean that work conducted from within one ontological and epistemological framework cannot be used within another, but that has to be done very carefully, with full acknowledgement of the ontological and epistemological issues. Ontological and epistemological positions are more akin to a skin, than a sweater; they cannot be put on and taken off at will.

iii) Three Cheers for Critical Realism

Both Pierson and Skocpol and Hall and Taylor avoid a discussion of their ontological and epistemological positions, perhaps because this would involve opening a confrontation with the rational choice theorists who dominate US Political Science. In contrast, Hay and Wincott assert the need for historical institutionalism to develop an alternative ontology.

To Hall and Taylor historical institutionalism is divided between *calculus* and *cultural* approaches and reconciling these two approaches offers a way forward. We agree with Hay and Wincott's criticism of this position on a number of grounds. First, as we argued earlier, in our view this is an inadequate characterisation of the historical institutionalist literature. Second, as Hay and Wincott emphasise, calculus and cultural approaches are what characterise respectively, rational choice and sociological institutionalism; so, Hall and Taylor are trying to square a circle. These positions reflect different ontologies and epistemologies which cannot simply be reconciled to produce a distinctive historical institutionalism. Third, and most important, critical realism does offer an alternative ontology and epistemology which can underpin a distinctive historical institutionalist approach to the structure/agency problem and the relationship between ideas and institutions which form the building blocks of any explanation of social stability and change.

What is critical realism? Cruickshank (2003, pp.1-2) argues that in ontological terms it is foundationalist:

This view of knowledge holds that there is an objective reality, and instead of hoping one day we will somehow have absolute knowledge, the expectation is that knowledge claims will continue to be better interpretations of reality. As knowledge claims are fallible, the best we can do is improve our interpretations of reality, rather than seek a definitive, finished 'Truth'.

As such, in epistemological terms the view is that our access to reality is mediated by theory, and theories are fallible. Thus, as Cruickshank (2003, 2) continues: 'research (is) from the very start influenced by assumptions.' It is: 'about gaining knowledge of a reality that exists independently of our representations of it' (Cruickshank, 2003, p. 3). However, that knowledge is interpreted through the theoretical lens of the researcher.

Of course, much more could be said about critical realism and indeed there are many contentious issues among its supporters. However, the key point here is that it is both a distinct position that takes issue with positivism and interpretivism and a position which fits happily with the basic concerns and contentions of historical institutionalism, as we will see below.

b) Structure and Agency

In claiming that ‘institutional analysis... allows us to examine the relationship between political actors as objects and as agents of history’, Thelan and Steinmo point to the centrality of issues of structure and agency to institutionalism in general. This concern is picked up by Peters who argues that historical institutionalism is based upon the uninterrogated assumption that individuals who choose to participate in an institution will simply accept the constraints that institutional membership impose. He also contends that scant attention is given to how individuals may have shaped institutions at the point of inception. Consequently, Peters concludes that historical institutionalists are: ‘not particularly concerned with how individuals relate to the institutions within which they function’. As such, Peters is rehearsing a common criticism of historical institutionalism, that it is structuralist.

Two points need to be made here. Firstly, Peters ignores the fact that, to an extent, new institutionalism developed as a response to more agency-centred behavioural and rational choice accounts, so it is unsurprising that some authors stress the extent to which structures constrain or facilitate agents⁴. Secondly, Peters’ reading, rooted as it is in his positivism, fails to recognise that historical institutionalism can, and some historical institutionalists do, develop a more dynamic approach to the relationship between structure and agency.

Hall and Taylor (1996) offer a limited response to the structure/agency problem based on their division of historical institutionalism into calculus and cultural approaches. In their view, calculus approaches embrace the notion of strategic action and centre on the ways in which institutions: ‘affect individual action by altering the expectations an actor has about the actions are likely to take in response to or simultaneously with his own action’. Cultural explanations stress that individuals are not just strategic but, rather, are bound by their own world view; institutions thus provide moral or cognitive templates for interpretation and action. However, this view is strongly contested by Hay and Wincott who claim that dividing historical institutionalist approaches along these lines is a ‘considerable disservice’ to the approach. In contrast, Hay and Wincott contend that historical institutionalism has the potential to transcend sociological and rational choice institutionalism and develop a distinctive sociological ontology based on the strategic

⁴ Hay and Wincott (1998, p. 952), following Ward (1995) among others, argue that rational choice theory presents a structuralist position, because it: ‘strips away all distinctive features of individuality, replacing political subjects with calculating automatons’. To an extent this is right because, once preferences are assumed and the agent’s decision making scheme is specified, then agents are expected to act in a pre-defined way. Nevertheless, this is a different idea of structure than that adopted, for example, by Marxists, who see structures as ontologically separate from agents.

interaction of agents and institutions. From this perspective, actors are strategic in seeking to realise contingent, and often changing, goals in a context which they perceive as favouring some strategies over others. Hay and Wincott thus share Peters' view that ideas have a key role explaining action. However, whereas Peters focuses on the capacity of institutions to sell ideas, Hay and Wincott see ideas as affecting action, first, by shaping agents' perceptions of the context within which they operate and, second, because the dominance of certain discourses leads to a discursive selectivity, in which some strategies are favoured over others.

The main point here is that an institutionalist position that privileges structure or agency is limited. As such, we need an approach that sees the relationship between structure and agency as dialectical, that is interactive and iterative. This is an approach which is axiomatic within critical realism. Structures facilitate and constrain agents. However, agents interpret structures, in large part as mediated by discourse. In acting, agents can change the structure and that changed structure provides the new structure that constrains and facilitates agents, providing the context within which they act.

Of course, all we have suggested is that the relationship between structure and agency is best seen as dialectical and that critical realism privileges such an approach. We have said nothing in detail about how that dialectical relationship should be conceptualised or studied. Indeed, that is beyond our concerns here. Suffice it to emphasise that there are at least three, more or less well-developed, dialectical approaches to the structure/agency problem: Giddens' structuration theory; Jessop's strategic relational theory; and Archer's morphogenesis theory. Each could provide an important element of an historical institutionalist approach.

c) Institutions and Ideas and the Material and the Ideational?

Hall and Taylor contend that historical institutionalists are: 'especially concerned to integrate institutional analysis with the contribution that other kinds of factors, such as ideas, can make to political outcomes'. Hay and Wincott similarly emphasise the: 'crucial space granted to ideas within this formulation [historical institutionalism]' (see also Blyth and Campbell). However, the apparent agreement that ideas are important in historical institutionalism should not detract from two points of contention. Firstly, the perceived role of ideas varies between different 'historical institutionalist' accounts. So, Hall and Sikkink largely share a similar conceptualisation of ideas; Hall sees them as policy paradigms (templates guiding policy), while Sikkink focuses upon the ideas held by groups, and both argue that ideas should be understood as part of a broader discourse. Nevertheless differences remain even here; so, Sikkink espouses a more overtly phenomenological position from a more individualistic perspective, in contrast to Hall's paradigms. Secondly, the conceptualisation of the role of ideas in individual accounts is often flawed. As Campbell notes, ideas are often poorly conceptualised – whilst many analysts point to an analytic distinction between ideas and institutions, the meaning of ideas has varied considerably. Moreover, Campbell suggests authors rarely demonstrate that ideas exercise an influence that is clearly independent of material interests. As such Campbell, contends that historical institutionalism has a materialist basis, whereby the: 'material interests of political and economic actors motivated politics and that these

interests were institutionally determined.’ A similar point is made by Blyth who suggests that, whilst historical institutionalists may indicate that ideas redefine political boundaries, dominant set of ideas etc, the ideas are not adequately theorised. Moreover, he suggests that the ‘ontological priority (given) to institutions keeps insights as mere insights.

Once again, we would suggest that the different conceptualisations of ideas and their role reflect different understandings of historical institutionalism. The concern with the role of ideas in historical institutionalism is relatively new and is largely absent from earlier formulations. Peters argues that advocates of a historical institution: ‘must be capable of explaining why ideas are institutional and are not at least in principle independent of institutions. Institutions may adopt and embody ideas, but it is not clear that they actually determine the nature of the institutions’. Again Peters’ position reflects a static understanding of historical institutionalism and a limited conceptualisation of institutionalist ontology. In contrast, Campbell and Blyth’s attack on the materialist tendencies of historical institutionalism take us back to its structuralist origins. These critiques suggest that historical institutionalism affords ontological primacy either to institutions or to structures, but that isn’t true in the case of many authors, and it certainly isn’t inevitable.

Hay and Wincott argue that historical institutionalism can potentially to offer a more adequate theorisation of the relationships between institutions and ideas and the material and the ideational. They don’t develop this point, but for a critical realist the way forward is evident. Once again, we need to conceptualise the relationship between both institutions and ideas and the material and the ideational as dialectical. So, institutions provide a key context within which ideas develop and are shaped, however, ideas clearly change institutions.⁵ Similarly, while material factors underpin ideas and discourses, discourses affect behaviour that changes the material world.⁶

d) Path Dependency and Change:

Whilst, the centrality of path dependency and associated concern with contingency and unintended consequences to historical institutionalism is widely accepted (Hall and Taylor, Hay and Wincott, Peters etc.) the perceived implications of this vary considerably. The contention here is that, although such approaches share nominally similar understandings of ‘path dependency’, they diverge in terms of the way in which this fits with a conception of change as this is circumscribed by fundamental differences in the levels at which such accounts operate.

⁵ Here, we would take strong issue with Blyth’s argument (2002) that institutions underpin stability and ideas drive change.

⁶ Here, we agree with Hay’s view that discourses of globalisation have real affects (on policy and then the material world), but also contend that the material realities of globalisation affect the resonance of discourse of globalisation.

Peters contends that: ‘the entire analytical framework [of historical institutionalism] appears to be premised upon the enduring effects of institutional and policy choices made at the initiation of a structure’. As such, he contends it is ill-equipped to deal with change. Hall and Taylor’s treatment of change in historical institutionalism is circumscribed by their separation of calculus from cultural approaches. In their view, the cultural approach can accommodate change, because it both offers a means through which one can explore the way in which institutions structure the vision(s) of those contemplating reform, and recognises that a different institutional practice may be adopted in order to enhance social legitimacy. In contrast, the calculus approach, because of the centrality it gives to quasi-contractual processes, negates the scope for change. As such, only the cultural approach offers potential space to theorise change or develop a more thorough understanding of path dependency. Here then, change can only be explained by an appeal to sociological institutionalism.

Once again, a critical realist approach offer a way forward. Here, path dependency is a tendency, not an inevitability. In addition, stability and change would not be treated as it seems to us to be in most of the literature as a dualism; what one might call the last dualism. Structures and institutions may under stability, but so can ideas. More specifically, they may underpin certain elements of a system that are stable, while others are changing. At other times, ideas may drive change, but so can institutions. The key point is that, in order to explain stability or change, we inevitably appeal to one of the other dualities – structure/agency, the material/ideational and institutions and ideas. Yet, if each of these is conceptualised as a duality, involving a dialectical relationship, as we have suggested, then two points surely follow. First, the relationship between stability and change must also be recognised as a dialectical one; and, second, the approach directly attempts to understand explain both stability and change.

In Conclusion

This paper has had three main aims. First, we have argued that Pierson and Skocpol’s representation of historical institutionalism is problematic because it makes far too many concessions to rational choice theory and presents a bland account of the strengths of historical institutionalism. Second, we presented an analysis of the historical institutionalist position to show that it is diverse, with people operating with quite different views as to the content, purpose and role of historical institutionalism. In particular, we suggest that historical institutionalism needs to be clear about its ontological and epistemological position and its conceptualisation of the relationships between structure and agency, the material and the ideational and institutions and ideas. Finally, we argue that the best way forward is to adopt a critical realist epistemology, which recognises that the relationship between structure/agency etc, should not be seen as a dualism, but rather as a duality, or as we put it a dialectical relationship, interactive and iterative. Adopting this position would mean that historical institutionalism would become a more distinctive position and one which can help explain both stability and change.