

Historical Institutionalism and International Relations

Written by Daniel Nexon

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DANIEL NEXON, APR 16 2012

The April 2011 issue of *International Organization* included a very interesting review essay by Orfeo Fioretos entitled “Historical Institutionalism in International Relations.” The thrust of Fioretos’ argument, developed through a discussion of books ranging from John Ikenberry’s *After Victory* to Abe Newman’s *Protectors of Privacy*, is that international-relations scholarship would benefit from an historical-institutionalist turn.

Fioretos provides an erudite and persuasive call to bring historical institutionalism directly into international-relations theory. I agree that historical institutionalism has much to offer international-relations scholars, but I am concerned about aspects of his account of historical institutionalism and of its integration into international-relations theory. Fioretos overemphasizes the importance of specific microfoundations as a basis for differentiating historical institutionalism from its interlocutors. Historical institutionalism’s most important contributions to international-relations scholarship lie in its mid-range causal tools concerning context, embeddedness, and temporality. These tools depend not on any specific decision-theoretic logic, but derive from the approach’s key wager that institutions are historically specific, temporally embedded, and crucial in the translation of macro- and micro-level processes into outcomes. These tools—and the broader framework in which they reside—matter for enduring issues in the subfield, such as how to theorize endogenous change processes and how to understand the shifting relationship between domestic and international politics.

I start with Fioretos’ description of historical institutionalism’s microfoundations, which rely extensively on prospect theory and behavioral psychology. Although sympathetic to his goals, I argue that his framework fails to adequately distinguish historical institutionalism from rational and sociological institutionalism, as well as from historical sociology. I next provide an alternative account of the potential contributions of historical institutionalism to international-relations scholarship. Although I agree with many significant portions of Fioretos’ essay focused on issues of temporality, I contend that his understanding of historical institutionalism (1) skews his treatment of its mid-range causal tools such that they deal primarily with issues of preferences and institutional-design choice and (2) leads him to neglect important international-relations applications for these tools. I conclude with a call for a more pluralist vision of historical institutionalism.

Historical Institutionalism and the Question of Microfoundations

Fioretos argues that historical institutionalism adopts microfoundations that distinguishes it from rational institutionalism—with its use of straightforward expected-utility theory—and sociological institutionalism—with its focus on logics of appropriateness. Furthermore, historical institutionalism departs from historical sociology and its tendency to “highlight antecedent structural conditions when explaining continuity after critical historical juncture” rather than microlevel processes that shape actors’ willingness to maintain or alter institutional arrangements.[1]

Indeed, a significant strand of theorizing in historical institutionalism, has turned toward insights associated with prospect theory. But the adoption of these particular microfoundations remains limited among historical institutionalists. For example, Hall and Taylor contend that historical institutionalists “use both [‘calculus’ and ‘cultural’]” accounts of social action;[2] Thelen argues that historical institutionalism includes scholarship that uses

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rational-choice and norms-oriented approaches.^[3] More recently, Hall notes that it has been conducted from both “rationalist” and “sociological” perspectives and that this pluralism presents one of the major strengths of the tradition.^[4]

Thus, Fioretos’ essay is more than a simple call to bring historical institutionalism into the study of world politics. Proposing a distinctive theory of social action privileges a particular understanding of what *counts* as historical institutionalism—one that excludes a wide range of sociological and macro-structural scholarship usually treated as part of the historical-institutionalist tradition; this vision obscures a significant body of existing international-relations scholarship that takes inspiration from, or fits comfortably within, the research tradition.

I argue instead for the use of context-specific microfoundations or, when appropriate, an emphasis on processes and mechanisms at other levels of analysis. In fact, Fioretos presents a substantively weak case for his vision of historical-institutionalist microfoundations. It relies on elevating mere ‘tendencies’ within different institutionalisms to the level of ‘hard core’ propositions. These micro-foundations debates already receive significant attention within the sub-field; and thus Fioretos inadvertently suggests that historical institutionalism has less new to offer the field than it does.

Rational Institutionalism

Fioretos argues that in rational-choice theory, “the primary consideration in preference orders and what motivates action are end-point comparisons.” In historical institutionalism, actors make “point-to-point” comparisons: “individuals are thought to balance evaluations of the cost and benefits of adapting to new circumstances with the costs and benefits of maintaining or losing their investments in *past* arrangements.”

[R]ational choice models in which sunk costs and other legacy effects are immaterial in evaluating the benefits of adopting one of two prospective alternatives the degree of change from an historical reference point is a key factor in shaping preference orders in historical institutionalism. Such changes affect the extent to which people gain or lose access to the advantages or disadvantages they associate with past designs, including those that confer positions of privilege that translate into forms of enduring influence as well as those that generate increasing returns, positive externalities, and other benefits over time. By contrast to a rational choice model where the emergence of a marginally better alternative transforms preferences, this occurs in historical institutionalist models only when the benefits of a prospective alternative outweigh the losses associated with giving up access to past designs. Since the nature and understanding of such losses is contingent upon the institutional context in which individuals are embedded, exposure to the same external parameters typically generates diverse responses.

Such “point-to-point comparisons,” however, only raise difficulty for expected-utility theory under limited conditions, such as, when actors incorporate *genuine* sunk costs into their decision making and when institutions alter actors’ preferences via *framing effects*.

Standard treatments define sunk costs as those that are “irrevocably committed and cannot be recovered.”^[5] As rational actors make prospective judgments when evaluating the comparative utility of their choices, they should ignore sunk costs. For example, a couple that spends \$2500 on the design of an addition at t_0 should ignore that \$2500 when deciding whether or not to proceed with construction at t_1 . Such “prospective” evaluations have nothing, per se, to do with evaluating the utility derived from an existing institutional arrangement. In fact, expected-utility theory agrees that actors *should* abandon institutions only “when the benefits of a prospective alternative outweigh the losses associated with giving up access to past designs.” Thus, it is perfectly rational for our hypothetical couple to consider the costs of building over a beloved garden, losing an open floor plan, or altering their house’s architecture in ways that make it more difficult for them to monitor their teenager’s activities. The loss of “positions of influence,” foregoing access to “increasing returns,” and abandoning “positive externalities” that derive from existing institutional arrangements, involve similar *prospective* opportunity costs associated with institutional change.

Fioretos suggests that historical-institutionalist microfoundations depart from those of rational-institutionalism insofar as they incorporate framing effects: “since the nature (and understandings) of such losses is contingent upon the institutional context in which individuals are embedded, exposure to the same external parameters typically generate

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diverse responses.”^[6] Although the “nature” of such losses presents few problems for expected-utility approaches, the “understanding” of such losses might—if institutional contexts work by shifting reference points, and thus create situations in which “seemingly inconsequential changes in the formulation of choice problems [cause] significant shifts of preference.”^[7] But this amounts to a (parenthetical) subset of “microfoundational” differences between historical institutionalism and rationalist alternatives.

In the end, very little differentiates this set of microfoundations from those of rational institutionalism. In consequence, the methodological scope of this interpretation of “historical institutionalism” becomes exceedingly small: circumstances in which we need to take into account framing effects or the role of sunk costs in shaping preferences for institutional arrangements. Such differences become even less consequential given the ways in which self-described rational institutionalists now qualify their embrace of expected-utility theory by pointing toward the importance of norms, shared meanings, bounded rationality, and other factors usually considered inconsistent with strong forms of rational choice.^[8] To complicate matters, it isn’t terribly clear how a rational-actors-plus-framing-effects-plus-attention-to-sunk-costs approach resolves key problems historical institutionalists have long associated with rational institutionalism. For example, it runs up against the difficulty of simultaneously treating institutions as structural contexts (supplying frames, sunk costs, and preferences) *and* equilibria outcomes.^[9]

Sociological Institutionalism

I agree that major statements of historical institutionalism criticize theories that treat actors as over-socialized enactors of “logics of appropriateness.” But many sociological institutionalist cash out the concept of norm-governed behavior in less deterministic ways. Actors routinely adjudicate among contradictory norms, face situations in which institutional norms cannot be put into practice, and translate normative expectations in ways that impact institutional stability and change.^[10] In fact, “with studies of regulative, normative, and cognitive structures and activities... sociological institutionalism is getting very close to its historical variant” just as historical institutionalist interest in “learning and mental constructions” also point toward convergence.^[11]

If all that separates historical institutionalism from rational institutionalism are the incorporation of sunk costs and framing effects, how can it be possible that “historical institutionalism acknowledges that ideas and processes of learning, persuasion, and socialization may play important roles in shaping preferences over institutional design”? For instance, Fioretos’ writes that historical institutionalists depart from their sociological cousins because they “give more attention to ideas as policy paradigms than as principled beliefs.” But these are not competing analytic categories, nor do sociological institutionalists assume that ideas matter primarily as principled beliefs. Indeed, the concept of policy paradigms goes far beyond framing effects, sunk costs, or mere “understandings” of the losses associated with institutional abandonment. As Hall argues:

More precisely, policymakers customarily work within a framework of ideas and standards that specifies *not only the goals of policy and the kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing*. Like a Gestalt, this framework is embedded in the very terminology through which policymakers communicate about their work, and it is influential precisely because so much of it is taken for granted and unamenable to scrutiny as a whole. I am going to call this interpretive framework a policy paradigm [emphasis added].^[12]

Claims that “historical institutionalism attributes a smaller role to social collectivities, including international organizations, in shaping the identities and preferences of domestic groups” also seem puzzling.^[13] If historical institutionalists do not believe that social collectivities play a significant role in shaping the preferences of domestic groups, then why should they concern themselves with making actors’ preferences endogenous to institutions?^[14] Thus, while many historical institutionalists eschew the strong culturalism and structuralism often associated (correctly or not) with their sociological brethren, scholars within the approach routinely rely on (qualified) logics of appropriateness as elements of their theories.^[15]

Historical Sociology

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Historical Sociology comprises an enormous and heterogeneous field. Historical sociologists utilize many different approaches, including rational-choice theory, social-network analysis, practice theory, relational realism, behavioral analysis, and a variety of Marxisms. These approaches involve disparate microfoundations; some de-emphasize microfoundations in favor of other levels of analysis.[16] Lawson's "map" of historical sociology for international-relations scholars captures this diversity; it treats historical institutionalism as one approach utilized by historical sociologists.[17]

Fioretos rejects Lawson's account. As he puts it, he "follows the more common practice of treating [them] as distinct traditions." [18] But the boundary between the two "traditions" is blurry. A number of prominent "historical institutionalists" are also prominent "historical sociologists," e.g., Skocpol and Mahoney. Although "historical sociology" and "historical institutionalism" do refer to distinctive "traditions," this stems from historical institutionalism's roots in the subfield of comparative politics and debates specific to political science. Much of the practical and theoretical analysis that takes place within historical institutionalism fits comfortably under the rubric of "historical sociology." [19]

This further demonstrates the problem with bringing historical institutionalism into international-relations scholarship on narrow terms. Fioretos writes that historical institutionalism "tends" to stress "the microlevel processes that create incentives for individuals to reproduce (or not) designs during and after [critical] junctures" while historical sociology "tends" toward "structural" and macro-structural forces. The latter is, of course, true of some, *but only some*, historical-sociological work. Moreover, such distinctions focuses attention on the role of individuals and obscures significant, and rather important, sensibilities at work in the historical-institutionalist project concerning the role of institutions *themselves*.

As Katznelson wrote fifteen years ago, historical institutionalism treats institutions as "ligatures fastening sites, relationships, and large-scale processes to each other. What came to distinguish historical institutionalism was an insistence that these bonds... are configured distinctively in particular locations." Thus, while Katznelson argues that the "turn to microfoundations" in historical institutionalism "is particularly heartening," he invokes studies that rely on rather different *kinds* of microfoundations—from rational-choice theory, to bounded rationality, to those located in the microstructures of social relations rather than heuristics of decision-making.[20]

Indeed, other calls for historical institutionalism in international-relations scholarship stress using institutions as "ligatures" to correct overly macro-structural accounts of international change.[21] A wide variety of accounts of political change often associated with "historical sociology" take this route: they study how institutions translate macro-level processes and micro-level decisions into historically variable outcomes, how they mediate between different macrostructural domains, and otherwise serve as useful focal-point for the analysis of stability and change. In doing so, they pay attention to sequencing, path-dependent processes, and other tools associated with historical institutionalism.[22]

Historical Institutionalism: Contextual, Dynamic, and Embedded

One of historical institutionalism's central aims is to take temporality and context seriously. This extends to microfoundations. By arguing that historical institutionalism rests upon an *invariant* account of human decision-making processes, Fioretos eschews the research program's sensitivity to variation across spatio-temporal context.[23] As Steinmo argues, for historical institutionalists:

human beings are both norm abiding rule followers and self-interested rational actors. How one behaves depends on the *individual, on the context, and on the rule*. While this statement may seem rather obvious, it has huge implications for how we should study politics. If all three of these variables (individuals, context and rules) are important in choice situations, then there can be no a priori way of knowing what one should study when trying to explain political outcomes. *A historical institutionalist does not believe that humans are simple rule followers or that they are simply strategic actors who use rules to maximize their interests. A historical institutionalist can even be*

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rather agnostic to these issues [emphasis added].[24]

Such a focus on temporality and context does not entail a wholesale rejection of generalizability in favor of ideography; historical-institutionalist wagers cash out in a set of mid-range analytic bets. Historical institutionalism develops a toolkit for grappling with the dynamic nature of causal processes and their embeddedness within specific socio-historical contexts. For international-relations scholars, these tools should help overcome the limits of one-shot empirical observations and static models that offer invariant explanations across time and space.

Historical institutionalists underscore the temporal nature of institutional-change processes and the role of institutions as “ligatures.” Consider three analytic tools: sequencing, variant causal speed, and endogenous feedback loops.[25] Fioretos also stresses this toolkit, but he pays less attention to temporal variation in causal processes, and little to the use of institutions as analytical focal points for translating processes at different scales and in different domains into historically specific outcomes. This last omission may stem his emphasis on applying a specific decision-theoretic framework to institutional choice, rather than on more varied mechanisms that account for institutional reproduction and transformation.

Sequencing is likely the most familiar of these mid-range tools to international-relations scholars. In brief, events occurring at t_0 influence the outcomes at t_1 , such that t_1 should not be studied in isolation. Sequencing effects arise in different ways. For example, the range of policy options available to actors narrow over time because they make increasing investments in a particular institutional structure.[26] Alternatively, the lack of certain institutional scaffoldings when a particular problem emerges precludes options that may be available at earlier or later historical moments. This form of sequencing likely matters a great deal for international-relations scholars engaged in debates about globalization, which involves the interaction of polities with different institutional structures as well as the reconfiguration of existing institutional arrangements.

Researchers have begun to develop the concept of “cross-national sequencing” that places sequencing dynamics in systemic settings. Instead of the traditional historical institutionalist focus on comparative-institutional trajectories *across* countries, cross-national sequencing recognizes that the institutional choices in one jurisdiction, as opposed to another, shape a range of outcomes *in addition* to preference dynamics such as agenda setting or bargaining strength.[27] The timing, for example, of regulatory institution building in two markets vis-à-vis each other and the timing of interdependence, shapes the ability of actors to defend a set of market rules internationally.[28] Here the micro-foundations debate takes a back seat to the ligatures metaphor.

Fioretos’ discussion of sequencing focuses on sunk costs and framing and thus limits its application primarily to issues of preference formation. Firms might, for example, support a particular international agreement because it is compatible with previous domestic institutional investments in a particular variety of capitalism. But sequencing effects may also result from the routinization of institutional practices, ‘straightforward’ dynamics associated with expected-utility theory, the analysis of fields and habitus, the network-structures of institutional arrangements, relational mechanisms, and so on. A broad range of existing international-relations scholarship uses these kinds of analytic building blocks to construct explanations that are historical-institutionalist in character.[29]

Historical institutionalism also emphasizes the contingent nature of change processes. Fioretos stresses the connection among historical institutionalism, arguments about path dependency, and increasing-returns phenomena. He correctly notes that historical institutionalists invoke a number of different mechanisms to account for path dependency. But he pays less attention to issues more novel to international-relations theorists. A considerable literature within the historical-institutionalist perspective argues for the variable nature of change processes.. Pierson, for example, distinguishes between four ideal typical macrosocial change processes in which the causal and outcome time horizons vary. In the punctuated equilibrium model associated with path dependency, quick causal processes—typically exogenous shocks—yield long-term changes in policy trajectories that build as increasing returns processes reinforce institutional equilibrium.[30] More recent work has emphasized the opposite dynamic in which long-term causal processes layered incrementally can have sudden and widespread consequences. The later incremental-layering dynamic appears in international-relations research to better understand a host of critical theoretical puzzles such as diffusion and norm lifecycles.[31] Variation in *macrosocial* dynamics, then, plays a key

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role in understanding the types, speed, and quality of transformative processes.

Finally, a variety of scholars turn to historical-institutionalist arguments to understand endogenous change. Here, as Fierros notes, policy-feedback loops are perhaps the best-known example. Public policy creates a set of incentives that shape group identities and interests. Depending on the positive or negative effects of such feedbacks, group identities and interests can either reinforce or undermine a particular institutional setting.[32] In the quintessential example of positive-feedback loops, Social Security unified and organized a disparate group of individuals as a powerful lobby that has mobilized for the further expansion of the welfare state.[33] Decentralization efforts in France during the 1990s showcase negative-feedback processes. The French state's centralized role in economic planning during the immediate post-war period gutted many of the proto-civil society organizations that could have facilitated the decentralization agenda. By the time, the French state attempted to decentralize authority, no partners existed at the local level. As with sequencing and path-dependent processes, these feedback stories often encompass *abroad range* of micro-foundations ranging from material interest calculations, to issues of identity formation, to the structure of political relations.[34] As the French decentralization example suggests, moreover, feedbacks extend beyond endogenous preference formation, shaping institutional capacities and in turn compliance and implementation. Scholarship on international regulation has increasingly employed similar arguments to understand the state's relative ability to mobilize non-state actors in defense of a particular regulatory regime.[35] Feedbacks, then, not only shape actor preferences but also the relative ability of actors to access and enforce the policy process.

Historical institutionalism also privileges socio-historical context. Inspired by the wide range of second-image-reversed responses to economic interdependence, comparativists in the historical-institutionalist tradition look to differences in historical context to explain persistent policy diversity. The varieties of capitalism literature typifies such arguments. Dating back to Schonfeld, research has highlighted how particular historical constraints influence economic governance institutions and in turn help explain differential responses to economic interdependence.[36] Consider scholarship on "institutional complementarities." Institutions involved in, for example, private sector financing, public education, and welfare programs are rarely constructed from a blank slate; they grow, interact, and intertwine. The institutional bundle can prevent rapid-change processes—or magnify and reverberate the effect of longer-term incremental shifts. International-relations scholars deploy such complementarities to understand differential access to and representation in international organizations. Buthe and Mattli argue, for instance, that the relative ability for national expert groups to influence international standards organizations depends on the fit between the historically-contingent design of domestic standard setters and the participatory rules of international organizations.[37]

Conclusion: Pluralism and a Pluralist Historical Institutionalism

Historical Institutionalism offers an important tool kit—one well positioned to answer a number of outstanding theoretical and empirical debates in international-relations scholarship. It provides important mid-range causal mechanisms, such as sequencing and feedbacks, that address issues of endogenous change and the interaction between the domestic and the international. In stressing temporality and context, it highlights issues often overlooked in standard analyses of world politics.

Fioretos provides a crucial first step toward developing a self-conscious historical institutionalism in international relations. But Fioretos insistence on ascribing to historical institutionalism a distinctive 'hard core' seems odd given the general trend in international-relations scholarship *away* from paradigmism.^[38] Indeed, historical institutionalism includes rationalist and sociological variants; different combinations of macrolevel, mesolevel, and microlevel analysis; and studies that are methodologically agnostic about the dispositions and motivations of actors.

Rather than describing historical institutionalism writ large, Fioretos emphasizes a particular strand of theories within comparative politics and therefore unnecessarily excludes work that generally is, and should be, considered part of the tradition. We should not limit historical institutionalism to a particular decision-making logic as it relates to preference formation and institutional choice. Instead, we should embrace the full variety of historical-institutionalist

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theories and concerns, including those of representation, bargaining strength, agenda setting, the development and consequences of repertoires and routines, and multi-dimensional power relations.

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[1] Fioretos 2011, 375.

[2] Hall and Taylor 1996, 940.

^[3] Thelen 1999.

^[4] Hall 2009, 219-220.

^[5] Wang and Yang 2001, 179.

[6] Fioretos 2011, 375.

^[7] Tversky and Kahneman 1981, 457.

^[8] See, e.g., Bates et al. 1998.

^[9] See Abbott, 1996; author. Note that the analytical problem of how to handle change when institutional stability is a result of self-enforcing equilibria drives many to adopt punctuated-equilibria models in which exogenous shocks become the source of change. See Mahoney and Thelen, 2009, 6.

[10] See Brunsson 1989.

[11] Jørgensen 2002, 21.

^[12] Hall 1993, 279.

^[13] Fioretos 2011, 375.

^[14] The pioneering work of Suzanne Berger (1993) demonstrates the central role that social collectives can play in historical institutionalist work.

[15] See, e.g., Steinmo 2008.

[16] See, e.g., Bearman 1993; Dannreuther and Kennedy, 2007; Fourcarde 2010; Hobson, 1998; Kiser and Hechter, 1998; Seabrooke, 2007; Skocpol 1984; Smith 1991; Sommers 1998; Wallerstein 2004.

[17] Lawson 2007; Lawson 2006.

[18] Fioretos 2011, 375 n28.

[19] Amenta and Ramsey 2010, 21-22; Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003, 11.

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[20] Katznelson 1997, 103, 106-107.

[21] Author.

[22] E.g., Downing 1992; Ertman 1997; Hui 2005; Spruyt 1994; Tilly 1992.

[23] See Sommers, 1998.

[24] Steinmo 2008, 126.

[25] See Farrell and Newman 2010; Buthe 2002.

[26] Pierson 2004.

[27] Mattli and Buthe 2003; Posner 2010.

[28] Bach and Newman 2010; Newman 2008.

[29] See, e.g., Blyth 2002; Carpenter, 2007; Goddard, 2009; Goddard, 2006; Hopf, 2010; Jackson 2006; Neumann and Pouliot, 2011; Pouliot 2010.

[30] Pierson 2004.

[31] Posner 2009; Sandholtz 2007.

[32] Pierson 1993.

[33] Campbell 2003.

[34] Levy 1999.

[35] Sell 2010; Buthe and Mattli 2011.

[36] Zysman 1994; Hall and Soskice 2001.

[37] Buthe and Mattli 2011.

^[38] See author; Katzenstein and Sil 2010.