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Institutional (Re)Turns and the Strategic-Relational Approach

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The institutional turn can be defined in very broad and loose terms as the more or less consistent elaboration of the intuition, hypothesis, or discovery that 'institutions matter' in one or more theoretical, empirical, or practical contexts where their existence and/or relevance had previously been overlooked, denied, or ignored. (1) This definition does not take us very far, however, because there can be many forms of institutional turn. There is wide variation in how institutions are defined, the respects in which they are held to matter, and the reasons for suggesting that they do. The institutional turn can also refer to the personal intellectual trajectories of individual scholars; to general developments within a particular approach regardless of individual proponents; and to changes in the relative weight of different approaches in a broader disciplinary field – or even in the social sciences more generally. Thus one can say that a scholar makes an institutional turn when she rejects her earlier, essentialist account of patriarchy and examines the institutional specificities and dynamics of different gender regimes; that neo-classical economics made an institutional turn when it adopted a transaction costs approach to explain the problematic existence of the firm as an economic institution; that political science as a discipline made an institutional turn when interest in individual or group political behaviour and/or structural functionalism began to lose favour with the growth of neo-institutionalism on the grounds that political choice occurs in specific institutional contexts and/or that functions are always institutionally mediated; and that the social sciences as a whole have grown more interested in institutions in the last two



decades. Accordingly, describing and evaluating the 'institutional turn' requires one to address a complex, polyvalent phenomenon with many different and contrary, if not actually contradictory, aspects.

Institutional turns can be seen as moments in the continuing self-organization of social scientific enquiries and also as moments in a new (or renewed) interest in institutional design in diverse policy fields. Thus they can be assessed in terms of the value that they add in the social sciences and/or their effectiveness in making and implementing policy. In the former regard, we can distinguish analytically among three forms of turn. The first, and simplest, can be called the *thematic turn*, i.e., the intuition, hypothesis, or discovery that various institutional aspects of social life should be included among the key themes of social enquiry. The second can be named a *methodological turn*, i.e., 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. And the third can be described as an *ontological turn*, i.e., the intuition, hypothesis, or discovery that institutions constitute the essential foundations of social existence. Not all of those who thematize institutions make a methodological turn; nor, of course, do all of those who make the latter affirm an ontological institutionalism.

This article discusses the three forms of turn in the social sciences. Specifically, while I argue that thematic turns are often theoretically trivial, I also indicate the heuristic value of a methodological turn. I then briefly affirm the importance of the ontological turn for some purposes but offer a broader, more developed 'strategic-relational' alternative. Next I consider whether other turns – linguistic, discursive, rhetorical, argumentative, cognitive, pragmatic, cultural, reflexive, and so on – might be useful and/or necessary additions to an institutional turn. Finally, without affirming all the claims advanced by institutionalists, I offer eight general conclusions about why institutions might matter.

1. Three Types of Institutional Turn

Since thematic institutionalism is widespread in the social sciences outside economics, the most interesting question about *thematic turns* is why they should ever be deemed necessary. Answers can often be found in the methodologies and/or ontologies that inform the earlier approach(es) of the scholars, schools, or disciplines making such a turn. These generally involve methodological and/or ontological individualism or their equivalent forms of holism. For individualists, the methodologically appropriate and/or ontologically irreducible micro-foundations of social life are located in the identities, interests, calculations, meaning systems, and actions of individual actors. In making a thematic turn, they seek to explain the emergence of institutions in terms of individualist micro-foundations in order to show the latter's explanatory power and/or to study how such emergent institutions react back on individual behaviour. In contrast, holists assume the primacy of wider cultural or societal dynamics and seek to interpret and explain lower order phenomena in terms of macro-level laws, logics, functional needs, or other macro-properties. Those holists who make a thematic institutional turn aim to show how such macro-properties affect institutions. In some cases individualist and holistic theorists have been prompted to take a thematic turn when institutional crisis, change, or design become major concerns in the real world and stimulate awareness of earlier neglect of institutions. Recent examples are the crisis of Fordism, the end of the Cold War, problems of multilevel institutional design in the European Union, and calls for a new international financial architecture after the so-called 'Asian crisis'.

A well-known example of a thematic turn from a methodological (and often ontological) individualist position is the attempt by neo-classical economics to explain institutions, such as the firm, in terms of transaction costs. This turn takes institutions seriously by recognizing and problematizing their existence – but then argues that institutions can be fully explained within the neo-classical paradigm. The firm is held to be an economically rational institution because it serves in certain circumstances to lower transaction costs as compared to operating in and through markets. Conversely, as firms face diminishing returns to organizational scale, there are many cases where the market will prove more efficient (see, classically, Coase 1937; and, for a review, Williamson 1994). However, whilst the transaction costs approach problematizes



the existence of the firm, the latter is usually seen as a dependent or, at best, an intervening variable. Indeed some rational choice theorists suggest that the survival of institutions can be explained in terms of an equilibrium in transaction costs because it is rational for almost all individuals to adhere to institutional prescriptions most of the time, given that nearly all others do so too (e.g., Calvert 1995: 60). Thus explanatory power remains rooted in the neo-classical micro-foundations so that this institutional turn changes nothing. The neo-classical paradigm sees institutional emergence and retention as rooted in the universality of economizing actions taken by pre-constituted rational individuals oriented to the price mechanism or, at least, measurable forms of utility maximization. It denies that economic identities, interests, and calculation are conditioned by how markets are inserted into institutional arrangements and socio-economic processes that shape information and conduct. Its thematic institutional turn changes nothing. In this sense, the neo-classical turn is trivial – even if it also marks a significant extension of the paradigm into new fields of enquiry.

The second type of institutional turn is *methodological*. This can take several forms and is usually associated with the alleged mediating role of the institutional turn in regard to well-established and troublesome ontological antinomies, epistemological dualisms, and methodological dilemmas in the social sciences. Thus institutions have been endorsed as an excellent entry point for overcoming such ontological antinomies as

- structural determination and social agency (e.g., the structuration approach sees institutions as recursively reproduced sets of rules and resources that constrain and enable social action);
- holism and individualism (e.g., as emergent meso-level phenomena, institutions are said to provide a bridge between macro- and micro- phenomena or between macro-social logics and micro-social foundations).
- necessity and contingency (e.g., although institutions are not fully determinative of action, because they always need to be interpreted and re-negotiated, they do not permit any action whatsoever in an historically and sociologically amorphous, purely wilful contingency – hence they are sites of the necessarily contingent and the contingently necessary).

They are also recommended as entry points in resolving epistemological issues such as

- abstract-concrete (e.g., institutional analysis allows one to reveal the specificities of national capitalisms or stages of capitalism relative to the generic features of the capitalist mode of production before analyzing particular crises, conjunctures, etc.)
- simple-complex (e.g., analyses of the institutional embeddedness of economic activities provide a bridge between simple economic and more complex societal analyses)
- empirical description or grand theory (e.g., the claim that a series of middle-range institutional theories could be developed to make sense of fine-grained empirical data and later be combined to generate a general theory);
- idiographic vs nomothetic approaches (e.g., arguments for institutionally 'thick description' as a way to avoid simplistic empiricism and covering law models).

And they have also been proposed as resolutions for methodological dilemmas such as

- anascopic (bottom up) and katascopic (top-down) approaches to power (e.g., institutions are seen as the site for the strategic codification and mediation of power relations translating between the micro-physics of power and attempts to impose a more general strategic line on 'street level' or 'grass roots' politics);
- global and local approaches to spatial or scalar phenomena (e.g., institutions as mediating and articulating spatial and/or scalar divisions of labour or as shaping structural and cultural changes in the milieus of personal experience).

Such methodological turns are particularly common in comparative and/or historical analyses, in studies of crises and crisis-management, and in work on path-dependency and path-shaping. In these and other cases it is suggested that institutions matter in so far as they



provide the best entry point to understand social life, even if the search for understanding subsequently moves down towards micro-foundations or up to emergent macro-structural phenomena. In this context it is no surprise that a methodological institutional turn is often presented as one among several alternative entry points with the choice among them being pragmatically determined. Thus March and Olsen often present the 'exchange' and institutional models as alternative methodologies without committing themselves to one or other on ontological grounds (1984, 1996). A similar methodological pragmatism can be found in the 1980s proposal to 'bring the state back in' (the *locus classicus* here is Evans et al., 1985). And a recent comprehensive survey of rational choice, economic, sociological, and historical 'new institutionalisms' suggests that, despite obvious differences in their treatments of institutions, the origins of institutions, the relationship of institutions to individual behaviour, and so forth, they could nonetheless be synthesized with productive results (see Hall and Taylor 1996). This is echoed in DiMaggio's call for his new institutionalisms to search for 'common ground around particular ideas and approaches to obdurate problems' (1998: 699).

The third, and the most radical, type of institutional turn is ontological. It rests on the belief that institutions and institutionalization are the primary axis of collective life and social order. This approach presupposes the existence of an instituted, encompassing social order (or, at least, the primacy of tendencies for such an order to emerge and be reproduced) with little concern shown for the empirical conditions of its emergence and survival (Wagner 1994). Thus institutions matter because they are seen, inter alia, as the points of crystallization of social forms, as defining the rules and resources of social action, as defining opportunity structures and constraints on behaviour, as path-dependent path-defining complexes of social relations, as the macro-structural matrices of societies and social formations, and so on.

Emile Durkheim provides an early example of this ontological position in presenting his rules of sociological method and justifying them against individualistic or psychologistic perspectives. Thus he identifies the essence of social life in the externally constraining, collectively produced 'institutions' that every single individual must confront fully formed, unable to evade or change them (1938: lvi, cited in Wagner 1994: 270). Another good example is Karl Polanyi's analysis of the economy as an instituted process. This goes beyond thematic claims that economic institutions are interesting and methodological claims that they provide a useful entry point for studying economic activities. For Polanyi argues that it is in the nature of economic activities that they are instituted and cannot possibly be understood otherwise (Polanyi 1957). He elaborates this position as follows:

'[t]he instituting of the economic process vests that process with unity and stability; it produces a structure with a definite function in society; it shifts the place of the process in society, thus adding significance to its history; it centers interest on values, motives and policy. Unity and stability, structure and function, history and policy spell out operationally the content of our assertion that the human economy is an instituted process' (Polanyi 1957:34).

Other forms of institutional economics also adopt this ontological position. They insist that economic activities are irreducible to the actions of *homo economicus* but are mediated through institutions that socially embed and socially regularize behaviour. For example, rather than study economizing behaviour and formally rational calculation of opportunities for profit on the market, regulationists explore the differential constitution of economic rationality, the historical emergence and generalization of specific norms of production and consumption, the embeddedness of structural forms and economic practices in specific and changing institutions in particular times and places, how the development of these forms and practices is coupled to that of enviroing, embedding institutions, and how the latter assist in the 'reproduction-regularization' of the economy (for an introduction, Boyer 1990; for an encyclopaedic survey, Boyer and Saillard 1995).

Similar ontological claims are advanced by the new institutionalism in political science. Thus March and Olsen have often gone beyond a simple methodological turn to make the stronger ontological claim that '[i]ntentional, calculative action is embedded in rules and institutions that are constituted, sustained, and interpreted in a political system. ... Political actors act and organize themselves in accordance with rules and practices which are socially constructed, publicly known, anticipated and accepted. Actions of individuals and collectivities occur within



these shared meanings and practices, which can be called institutions and identities' (1996: 249; cf. March and Olsen 1984, 1989).

2. The Polymorphism and Polyvalence of Institutional Turns

Any of the three kinds of institutional turn can be undertaken from quite different initial positions or developmental paths. Since a turn is always relative to a previous position or path, it is unlikely that institutional turns will automatically promote convergence in and across specific theoretical approaches and general disciplinary trends or among individual scholars. Indeed their impact could just as easily produce divergence. This is quite evident from Hall and Taylor's recent review of the marked theoretical differences among three major versions of the 'new institutionalism' – rational choice, sociological, and historical – in political science (1996). There are similar divergences in other social sciences (e.g., Brinton and Nee 1998 on sociology, Powell and DiMaggio 1991 on organizational analysis, Ensminger 1998 on anthropology). DiMaggio also traces the origins of three forms of new institutionalism to different disciplines – arguing that the rational action, social constructionist, and institutionally 'mediated-conflict' approaches are grounded in economics, sociology, and political science respectively (1998: 696-7).

Ambiguity here

The meaning of 'turn' also varies with the context in which it occurs. Thus the phrase 'institutional turn' can be applied to conversions, ruptures, and reversals as well as to progressive or regressive modifications in a given approach. My own view is that there should be a significant element of continuity in discontinuity if 'turn' is to be used rather than paradigm shift, 'epistemological break', methodological breakthrough, and so forth. This applies particularly to developments within a given school or approach – where a turn would involve a reorientation that preserves the initial framework. In such contexts it could even involve a major thematic extension in an otherwise unchanged paradigm. It could involve a simple zig or zag, twist or turn, on a tacking trajectory as scholars seek to fill out relatively neglected areas within a shared paradigm – bending the stick this way or that as circumstances or fashion dictate. Or, again, it could involve a minor but permanent methodological adjustment in an established trajectory.

Given this broad (and by no means exhaustively presented) set of possibilities, the evolutionary mechanisms and personal reasons, if any, behind a given institutional turn are highly varied. They range from the relatively autonomous logic of social inquiry (e.g., apparent anomalies) through secular shifts in the real world (e.g., growing post-Cold war interest in comparative capitalisms) to the practical demands of policy-making (e.g., problems of institutional adjustment in the face of globalization). Accordingly such turns can have little meaning outside specific contexts and conjunctures. No institutional turn is good or bad in itself. Its significance depends on where those who undertake it are coming from, currently situated, and ultimately headed. All turns are also polyvalent – both materially and symbolically – as their significance can be modified by later turns.

Whether or not there is value-added in an institutional turn depends on one's trajectory or location beforehand and the context in which institutions are said to matter. Thus, a methodologically individualist rational choice theorist who goes beyond a thematic turn to an ontological one and considers how institutions help to shape modes of individuality and forms of calculation might well be thought to have progressed (Carver 1992). The same judgement might apply to an Althusserian Marxist who went beyond a structuralist view of capitalist reproduction to study the institutional mediations and accumulation strategies involved in regularizing capital as a social relation (cf. Lipietz 1993). Progress might also have occurred were a Foucauldian theorist to link the micro-physics of power to the state's role in the strategic codification of power relations (Foucault 1975: 92-96; Foucault 1980: 101, 122, 199-200). But what would one think of a 'plain Marxist' who no longer attempts to move in a critical realist fashion from abstract to concrete, and from simple to complex, in order to understand the contradictory nature of labour markets and engaged in a comparative institutional analysis of wage formation in the belief that it was only institutions that mattered? One might view this turn as regressive because it ignored the embeddedness of institutions in a broader macro-context. Or what would one think of an institutionalist theorist who felt that, where uncertainty,



complexity, and risk were predominant, institutions would be underdetermining – with the result that argumentation and rhetoric would be crucial to the social construction and determination of policy? One might rejoice that she had seen the limitations of the institutional turn and had embarked on an argumentative, narrative, or rhetorical turn (see Fischer and Forester 1993; Roe 1994; Throgmorton 1996).

3. Why institutions matter

There is wide variation in how institutions are defined and the respects in which they are held to matter. Thus the returns from the institutional turn will depend largely on the proposed definition of institutions and on the respects in which they are held to matter. There are real problems here because definitions are often vague, diffuse, and mutually inconsistent and may even naturalize and reify institutions in the same way that neo-classical or rational choice theorists tend to reify human motivations. The conventional social scientific literature, for example, tends to regard institutions as social practices that are regularly and continuously repeated, that are sanctioned and maintained by social norms, and that have a major significance in the social structure (Abercrombie et al., 1994: 216; Eisenstadt 1968: 409; Wallis 1985: 399-401). Examples of institutions in this sense are the family, religion, property, markets, the state, education, sport, and medicine. Structuralists sometimes use the concept of 'structural forms' to describe such institutions; other theorists have called them apparatuses or *dispositifs*. Whatever nomenclature is preferred, however, institutions thus defined should certainly not be mistaken for their instantiation in particular cases nor confused with the existence of organizations. Thus, to take the list above, individual families, churches, commodities, transactions, cabinets, schools, athletic competitions, or hospitals would not count as institutions (2). An important alternative view regards institutions as organizations or social bodies that have major significance for the wider society and act in a quasi-corporate manner. Examples are the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government; transnational firms, banks, or the peak organizations of capital and labour; established religious faiths; or organizations more generally. This latter approach owes much to the economics and/or sociology of organizations (e.g., Williamson 1994; Arnason 1998). There are also disagreements within and across new institutionalist approaches about the role of informal as well as formal rules, norms, procedures, etc.; and about the significance of the cognitive as opposed to normative properties of institutions (for surveys, see Hall and Taylor 1996; DiMaggio 1998; Brinton and Nee 1998; Powell and diMaggio 1991).

Of course, all these approaches imply that institutions matter *ex definitione* – otherwise they would not have major social structural significance. Thus, if a scholar, school, or discipline undertakes more than a thematic institutional turn, it is because differences in individual institutional forms, inter-institutional configurations, institutional histories, or other properties of institutions make a difference in one or more other respects to the particular issue at hand. If so, this must be because such institutional variations function as independent or intervening variables in one or another causal chain. It follows that institutional turns must always be specified in relation to specific institutional properties, specific issues, and specific alternative ways of explaining the phenomenon in question. However, as Hall and Taylor (1996) note, whereas rational choice neo-institutionalists offer robust accounts of causality based on a thin conception of rationality, sociological and historical neo-institutionalists often fail to specify the causal connections between institutions and individual behaviour with much precision.

Even in these relatively simple terms, taking an institutional turn requires that institutions be put in their place. There are several steps involved in this. The first step is to define, locate, and thematize institutions; and the next is to understand how institutions operate and are reproduced through routine actions that 'do' or perform institutions. One might then look behind the naturalization of institutions to examine institutional emergence as a complex evolutionary phenomenon. Further steps on a research agenda might include questions about institutional embeddedness or about institutional governance, i.e., the governing of institutions and inter-institutional relations and their systemic environments. Finally, one might examine issues of institutional design and implementation – issues that would also require attention to the reflexive skills and capacities of actors. As one turns from single institutions to examine institutional ensembles, institutional interfaces, institutional design, inter-systemic relations, etc., more attention needs to be paid to the structural coupling and co-evolution of institutions



as well as to the attendant problems of their strategic coordination or guidance. This is where issues of path-dependency, path-shaping, and meta-governance are important (on the dialectic of path-dependent path-shaping, see Hausner et al., 1995; and, on meta-governance, Jessop 1998).

A more interesting account of institutions seems to be offered by Giddens's structuration approach. He treats institutions as sets of chronically reproduced, deeply sedimented rules and resources that constrain and facilitate social actions and that also bind social actions in time and space so that more or less systematic action patterns come to be generated and reproduced (Giddens 1984: 17-25). A similar approach can be found in Polanyi's view of the economy as an instituted process (see also Weber 1978). Giddens makes two key innovations: the explicit introduction of time and space into analyses of institutions; and, albeit less often noted in secondary commentaries on his approach, a stress on institutions' connection to specific forms of power and domination. But he does not develop the full critical potential of these innovations because he is actually more interested in individuals and their actions than in the nature and effectivity of structure. (3)

An alternative perspective that offers a means of advancing beyond structuration theory is the strategic-relational approach (or SRA). This was first developed to overcome the common division in Marxist analyses between capital- vs class-theoretical accounts of the capitalist state (Jessop 1990). Since this is just a special case of the structure-agency dualism, the same approach should be relevant to the latter (Jessop 1996).

Giddens insists on the duality of structure and agency and then brackets (temporarily ignores) one or other when examining its complementary moment in the duality (1984). But this treats structure at any given time in isolation from action and so implies that a given structure is equally constraining and/or enabling for all actors and all actions – simply serving (no more, but no less) as a set of rules and resources for action. Similarly, action at any given time is isolated from structure, since actors are seen to choose a course of action more or less freely and skillfully within these rules and resources. (4) The mutual theoretical isolation of these complementary moments *at any time given* (as expressed in the bracketing of one or other term) is resolved theoretically *over time* by claiming that specific structures get modified in and through the intended and unintended effects of action and inaction, thereby creating new sets of constraints and opportunities for action. However, even allowing for reflexive transformation of structure by agency (as proposed in Giddens's more recent work), there is little, if any, recognition (let alone adequate explanation) of the differential capacities of actors and their actions to change different structures.

One way to go beyond the duality of structuration theory is to examine structure in relation to action, action in relation to structure, rather than bracketing one of them. Structures are thereby treated analytically as strategic in their form, content, and operation; and actions are thereby treated analytically as structured, more or less context-sensitive, and structuring. Applying this approach involves examining how a

Figure 1: A Strategic-Relational Approach to Structure and Agency: Not Currently available for downloading

given structure may privilege some actors, some identities, some strategies, some spatial and temporal horizons, some actions over others; and the ways, if any, in which actors (individual and/or collective) take account of this differential privileging through "strategic-context" analysis when choosing a course of action. (5) In other words it involves studying structures in terms of their structurally-inscribed strategic selectivities and actions in terms of (differentially reflexive) structurally-oriented strategic calculation.

A strategic-relational analysis can be taken further yet if we allow for self-reflection on the part of individual and collective actors about the identities and interests that orient their strategies. Individuals and organizations can be reflexive, can reformulate within limits their own identities, and can engage in strategic calculation about the 'objective' interests that flow from these identities in particular conjunctures. And if we examine how specific structures and structural configurations selectively reinforce specific forms of action and discourage others. Combining these concerns leads one to examine the continuing interaction between the reflexive reorganization of strategic selectivities and the recursive selection and retention (or



evolutionary stabilization) of specific strategies and tactics oriented to those selectivities. In some circumstances this interaction can result in a relatively durable degree of "structured coherence" (or stability) in a given institutional complex.

Some accounts of discourse adopt a similar approach to the ways in which discursive paradigms privilege some interlocutors, some discursive identities/positionings, some discursive strategies and tactics, and some discursive statements over others (for example, Hay 1996; Jenson 1995). Combining structural and discursive foci in a more inclusive SRA would help develop a reflexive analysis (concerned with extra-discursive and discursive structures, transformative and self-transformative capacities, and individual and collective learning) well suited to the study of structurally-inscribed selectivities in different fields of action. Similar points could be made in relation to the linguistic, rhetorical, and argumentative turns as potentially fruitful complements to the institutional turn (see below).

The strategic-relational approach proposed here is similar in certain respects to the methodological relationalism advocated by Bourdieu. Thus

'based on a non-Cartesian social ontology that refuses to split object and subject, intention and cause, materiality and symbolic representation, Bourdieu seeks to overcome the debilitating reduction of sociology to either an objectivist physics of material structures or a constructivist phenomenology of cognitive forms by means of a genetic structuralism capable of subsuming both. He does this by systematically developing not a theory *stricto sensu* (*sic*) so much as a sociological *method* consisting essentially in a manner of posing problems, in a parsimonious set of conceptual tools and procedures for constructing objects and for transferring knowledge gleaned in one area of inquiry into another' (Wacquant 1996: 5).

It is also similar to the methodological situationism of the 'new French institutionalism', which takes a self-described 'pragmatic turn' to overcome such familiar oppositions as individualism-collectivism and atomism-holism. It 'aspires to make the elements of similarity visible, below the apparent irreducibility of the methodological opposition between explanations of "individual" conduct and explanations of "collective" behaviour' (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991: 43). It does so by emphasizing how individuals produce social order in different ways in different situations and how society can be understood as the emergent product of multiple agreements – and persistent disagreements – rather than as an encompassing social order (see also Wagner 1994: 174).

Adopting a strategic-relational approach (or an equivalent) has several implications for how to take/make an institutional turn. First, institutions never exist outside of specific action contexts. They do not matter as such but in terms of their structurally-inscribed strategic selectivity: institutions select behaviours. This institutional framing role is now recognized, for example, within rational choice theories; but it is also conceded that institutions do not fully and precisely determine the course of action (see the discussion in March and Olsen 1996: 251-55). Instead actors have some freedom of manoeuvre more or less skillfully and reflexively to choose a path of action. Second, actors not only engage in action within a given institutional matrix but, in certain circumstances, can reflexively reconstitute institutions and their resulting matrix. Their capacity to do so depends both on the changing selectivities of given institutions and on their own changing opportunities to engage in strategic action.

Thus the spaces in figure 1 could easily be re-named to take account of the different forms of institutional turn. For, apart from the crudest neo-classical or rational choice institutionalists, those who have made the institutional turn also reject the dichotomy of external constraints and universal modes of rational action. On the structural side of the dichotomy, for example, they have argue at the least for analyses of emergent 'rules of the game', including laws, inherited organizational structures, and formal and informal norms and sanctions. Likewise, on its action side, they have noted at the least the role of bounded rationality, context-bound forms of rationality, cognitive habits, selective attention, the logic(s) of appropriateness, how atomized individuals' are transformed into molecular groups through their embeddedness in an inherently social world with socially determined preferences and ideologies, and so forth. Some institutionalists have also moved to the third level by emphasizing asset specificity, rigidities in transaction costs, the differential dynamics of organizational ecology, path



dependency, differentiated and competitive institutional environments, 'structural holes', and other forms of structural selectivity; and/or by noting the scope for deliberative rather than automatic cognition, the key role of strategic choices, agenda control, gatekeeping, sequencing, strategic interaction, coalition formation, or various forms of entrepreneurship. Yet others have approached the fourth level by examining how institutions come to be reproduced and regularized through their co-evolution with distinctive forms of appropriate conduct so that temporary equilibria are achieved in an otherwise turbulent environment. In short, in proposing a strategic-relational (or equivalent) approach, I am not rejecting the returns from institutional turns. Instead I am offering a more general model that may serve to locate different types of institutional turn and to highlight the limitations of approaches that are one-sided and/or fail to move from dualisms or dualities to genuine recursive-reflexive dialectical analyses (for further discussion, see Jessop 1996).

4. The Temporality and Spatiality of Institutions

A strategic-relational approach implies that institutions are inherently spatio-temporal. It rejects the neo-classical account of general equilibrium that discounts the role of time (among other reasons on the grounds that individuals have perfect knowledge about the future) and that regards any temporal development as essentially reversible (permitting return to any status quo ante). It goes beyond the trite claim that institutions exist in time and space or that attempts to transform them must be coordinated over time and space. It goes beyond the rational choice argument that institutional variations emerge, get selected, and are retained because they are efficient in a given environment. It goes beyond the institutionalist argument that selection and retention are not quick, precise, frictionless, and path-independent (March and Olsen 1996: 255). And it even goes beyond the neo-institutionalist claim that institutions and their environments co-evolve as environments are modified by institutions as well as vice versa. For the SRA implies that the structurally-inscribed strategic selectivities of institutions are spatio-temporal.

This is so for two reasons. First, all structures (and, a fortiori, all institutions) have a definite spatio-temporal extension. They emerge in specific places and at specific times, operate on one or more particular scales and with specific temporal horizons of action, have their own specific capacities to stretch social relations and/to compress events in space and time, (6) and have their own specific spatial and temporal rhythms. Second, all structures (and, a fortiori, institutions) privilege the adoption of certain spatial and temporal horizons of action by those seeking to access the state, influence it from a distance, or transform its structural selectivities. Thus the spatio-temporal selectivity of an institution(al ensemble) involves the diverse modalities in and through which spatial and temporal horizons of action in different fields are produced, spatial and temporal rhythms are created, and some practices and strategies are privileged and others made more difficult to realize according to how they "match" the temporal and spatial patterns inscribed in the structures in question. Spatio-temporal matrices are always differentially distanced and differentially compressed; and strategies and tactics can be oriented to

Figure 2: A Strategic-Relational Approach to Spatio-Temporal Selectivities: Not Currently available on for downloading

the most appropriate spatio-temporal horizons, to changing the forms of chronotopic governance, the reflexive narration of past and present to change the future, and so on.

It is in this context that one can study the spatio-temporal dialectics involved in strategy and tactics and the spatio-temporal dialectics of path-dependency and path-shaping. On the former, for example, de Certeau suggests that, whereas

'strategies pin their hopes on the resistance that the *establishment of a place* offers to the erosion of time; tactics on a clever *utilization of time*, of the opportunities it presents and also of the play that it introduces into the foundations of power. ... the two ways of acting can be distinguished according to whether they bet on place or on time' (de Certeau 1985: 38-39).

This can be linked to the dialectic of path-dependency insofar as this is the product of reflexive path-shaping. Path-dependency implies that an institution's prior development



shapes current and future trajectories. It suggests that institutional legacies limit current possibilities or options in institutional innovation. History makes a difference. But this need not imply fatalism. For social forces could intervene in current conjunctures and actively re-articulate them so that new trajectories become possible. Reflexivity involves second-order observation of one's situation, actions, and its repercussions on one's own identity and interests. Applied in a strategic-relational context, it involves reflexively reorganized spatio-temporal matrices and recursively selected strategies and tactics.

Historicity is a particular case of reflexivity. It refers to the reflexive use of history to make history – or, more precisely, of 'history-as-account' to make 'history-as-event' (Gosden 1994). Thus a well-developed sense of history or temporality would involve strategically reflexive temporally oriented actors who manage relationships between different time horizons and who take account of the ways in which specific social forms (e.g., specific organizations or institutions) privilege actions oriented to certain temporal horizons over actions oriented to other such horizons. (7) Historicity is especially relevant during crises or other exceptional periods that disrupt established routines and habits (cf. Debray 1973).

A strategic-relational institutional analysis also provides the basis for distinguishing chronologies from periodization. A chronology offers a simple narrative account of the succession of historical events. A periodization attempts to relate one or more series of historical events to other significant events or interests and to explain them in a non-narrative manner. These two forms of historical analysis can be contrasted in three respects. First, a chronology is essentially one-dimensional in its time-scale, ordering actions and events in unilinear time according to clock time (ranging from nano-seconds through calendrical to glacial time and beyond) or some other relevant marker (such as business cycles or intervals between elections). Conversely, a periodization operates with several time scales. It orders actions and events in terms of multiple time horizons (e.g., the event, trends, the *longue durée*; the time frame of economic calculation vs the time frame of political cycles; or past futures, present pasts, and the future present). Second, its narrative classifies actions and events into successive stages according to their occurrence in one or another time period. A periodization focuses on conjunctures. It classifies actions and events into stages according to their conjunctural implications (as specific combinations of constraints and opportunities) for different social forces over different time horizons and/or for different sites of social action. And, third, the sort of historical explanation given in a chronology is a simple narrative, i.e., the emphasis falls on the simple temporal succession or coincidence of a single series of actions and events. This narrative may be idiographic (i.e., concerned with the unique unfolding of events) or nomothetic (i.e., based on causal connections that require one set of events to follow another). In contrast, a periodization presupposes an explanatory framework oriented to the contingent necessities generated by more than one series of events. A concern with multiple time horizons and conjunctures leads to consideration of how diverse actions and events are generated as the result of multiple determinations or overdeterminations. In this sense it operates with an explanatory framework which can provide the basis for a complex narrative (cf. Jessop et al., 1988).

5. Concluding Remarks

Eight main lessons can be drawn from this review of the institutional turn in the social sciences. First, and most obviously, there is actually no such thing as *the* institutional turn in the sense of a generic turn that is made wherever and whenever a scholar, school, or discipline adopts some version of the new institutionalism. There are only specific institutional turns in particular contexts made for specific purposes and, perhaps, the chaotic sum of all such institutional turns. Thus the actual meaning and significance of a given institutional turn depends on the nature of the turn (thematic, methodological, or ontological), the position or path from which the turn is made (micro-macro, idiographic-nomothetic, anascopic-katascopic, etc.), the particular theoretical or disciplinary framework within which it is made, and the extent to which institutions are reified and naturalized or, alternatively, analyzed in strategic-relational (or equivalent) terms. This implies that an institutional turn has no value in itself. Its descriptive and explanatory returns, if any, depend on how it is integrated into a continuing research programme – and on the willingness of its originator(s) or follower(s) to make further turns or, even, ruptures where necessary or appropriate. In short, institutional



turns (and new institutionalisms in general) should be seen as one moment in a more complex process of scientific enquiry that proceeds in a dialectical rather than unilinear fashion.

Second, a major problem in many early institutional turns is that institutions were taken-for-granted, reified, or naturalized. A strategic relational approach suggests they should be analyzed as complex, emergent phenomena the reproduction of which is incomplete, provisional, and unstable and which co-evolve with a range of other complex, emergent phenomena. Institutions must be deconstructed rather than reified. In particular, they have histories. They are path-dependent, emergent phenomena, recursively reproduced through specific forms of action. Institutionalization involves not only the conduct of agents and their conditions of action but also the very constitution of agents, identities, interests, and strategies. In this institutionalization co-constitutes institutions as action contexts and actors as their institutional supports. This co-constitution is always deeply problematic. Thus neo-institutionalists should examine the many and varied struggles over the constitution of institutions, competing strategies, tactics, and techniques of institutionalization, and the contingently necessary incompleteness, provisional nature, and instability of attempts to govern or guide them. Precisely because institutions are never fully constituted and this creates space for competing institutional projects and designs and ensures that the future remains pregnant with a surplus of possibilities. The new institutionalism in economics and rational choice institutionalism do not do justice to this set of issues. But many versions of sociological and historical new institutionalisms do take explicit account of them.

Third, institutions have both micro-foundations and macro-contexts. They are sustained and instantiated in individual, organizational, and inter-organizational activities but also embedded in functionally differentiated institutional orders (especially those that can be interpreted as autopoietic subsystems) (8) in a complex, de-centred societal formation (cf. Jessop 1997). This is where the historical institutionalist approach has some real merits. Nonetheless analyses that do not attempt to locate institutions within broader contexts have problems addressing the limitations of institutional design or institutional change. A useful illustration of this is found in the contradictions of capitalism and institutions' role in transforming the forms in and through which these contradictions appear. Institutional analyses certainly permit distinctions among different forms or stages of capitalism and facilitate historical and comparative studies of capitalist societies. But such analyses cannot explain the generic features of capitalism and ignore the generic constraints imposed by the self-organizing dynamic and 'ecological dominance' (9) of capitalism in favour of more middle-range analyses. This is a potential weakness, for example, in the regulation approach. Although its interest in structural forms (institutions) enabled it to develop historically specific analyses of accumulation regimes and the ways in which modes of regulation embodied specific institutionalized class compromises, more recent regulationist analyses have tended to ignore the inherent limitations, contradictions, and dilemmas of any and all accumulation regimes and their modes of regulation. This is reflected in problems with some recent regulationist analyses of the neo-liberal forms of globalization and post-Fordism (see Jessop 1999).

Fourth, institutions cannot be meaningfully or productively analyzed without locating actors, identities, interests, strategies, or tactics in a wider strategic-relational context. At any given point in time, institutional analysis is prior to action – even if the latter then proves transformative. Interrelated constraints matter because actors cannot change all the conditions of action at once. In this sense 'explanation of the rules of the game and the focal points that attract [strategic] actors rests on the sort of institutional analysis provided by sociology' (Nee and Strang 1998: 713-714). Social scientific explanations must be formally adequate in the sense that they explain all the effects included within the explanandum (which will not, of course, include every conceivable aspect of the phenomenon in question); and they must also be socially adequate in so far as they explain the discursive (intentional, meaningful, subjective, interpretive, etc.) features involved in the social mediation of the chain of events which produce the explanandum. Social constructionist forms of institutionalism are particularly useful in this regard.

Fifth, although time and space are important dimensions of institutions at micro- and macro-levels, they are often neglected in institutional analyses. These must go beyond reference to



time and space as external parameters of institutions and/or action. They should pay careful attention both to (a) the temporalities and spatialities inscribed in (and reproduced through) specific institutional forms and to (b) the differential temporal and spatial horizons of various actors and their capacities to shift horizons, modify temporalities and spatialities, jump scales, and so forth. Institutions provide a framework in which relevant actors can reach and consolidate agreements over (albeit possibly differential) spatial and temporal horizons of action vis-à-vis their environment. They may also stabilize the cognitive and normative expectations of these actors by shaping and promoting a common 'worldview' as well as developing adequate solutions to sequencing problems, i.e., predictably ordering various actions, policies, or processes over time, especially where they have different temporal logics. (10)

Sixth, a strategic-relational analysis would examine reflexivity as well as recursivity. In other words, it would address agents' capacity to engage in learning and to reflect on institutional context, institutional design, etc.. This suggests the importance of adding a reflexive turn to the institutional turn in order to take account of actors' capacity to monitor their own actions; to integrate social science knowledge into their activities; and to programme their own development (producing evolution in the modes of evolution).

Seventh, if institutions matter, then the institutional turn is justified. But we must also ask what else matters. There are other turns that can – and perhaps should– be made. This is especially necessary where institutions are reified and naturalized. Further shifts could include discursive turns (or sub-species such as the rhetorical, argumentative, and narrative turns) and these too could be thematic, methodological, or ontological. For example, Somers notes that 'it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities. ... all of us become to *be* who we *are* (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives *rarely of our own making*' (Somers 1994: 606; italics in original). The argumentative turn could prove useful where uncertainty, risk, social polarization, or contradictions among institutions mean that the latter underdetermine behaviour and thus open a major space for argumentation, rhetoric, etc. (Fischer and Forester 1993; Throgmorton 1996). The institutional turn could also be supplemented by a pragmatic turn. This would imply that '(n)o further efforts are made to isolate individual actions analytically and to ask for the intentions and rationalities in them, on the one hand, nor for the accepted norms and applied rules, on the other. In the centre of interest, instead, we find the *situation* its temporality, the individual's *uncertainty* about the identification of the situation and the *interpretative effort* that is required to determine, together with others, the situation as a shared and common one' (Wagner 1994: 274, italics in original). Whether or not these turns occur will depend, of course, on the development of particular research agendas, paradigms, or disciplines.

Eighth, and finally, it would be useful to make a self-reflexive turn. This means that social theorists must be reflexive about nature of their work and its implications, including its repercussions on what is studied. A common problem with the institutional turn is the lack of reflexivity on the part of its theorists on its nature – and thus of its possible limits. Applying the strategic-relational approach to the institutional turn would suggest that it is itself path-dependent as well as path-shaping – that it is not only generated by specific problems but also shaped by the available resources to resolve such problems. This could explain the too easy rapprochement between neo-classical and rational choice paradigms and the general search to show how and why institutions matter. But the differential openness of disciplines to the new institutionalism (with the new economics of organization and American political science being more open, for example, than anthropology) (11) suggests that the institutional turn itself needs to be studied in institutional terms.

Endnotes

(1) In writing this paper I have benefitted from discussions with Terrell Carver, Bülent Diken, Henrik Bang, Gordon MacLeod, Andrew Sayer, and Ngai-Ling Sum.

(2) Goffman (1961) applied the concept of 'total institution' to mental institutions, prisons, etc.; but his analysis actually identified features of a distinctive class of organizations.



(3) Thus Giddens treats agency and structure asymmetrically – privileging agency and displacing much of what is conventionally considered as 'structure' into a thin account of 'systems'; analyzes agency more deeply and extensively than structure – having more ontological strata and more concepts for discussing agency than structures; gives an ontological primacy to the knowledgeable social actor; shows an exaggerated concern for individual agents/identities at the cost of collective agents and organizational identities and learning; and has a limited view of power and resources (cf. Archer 1990; Boyne 1991).

(4) From a strategic-relational viewpoint, this 'freedom' exists only in relation to a given structure. It does not mean that actors have free will -- their choices within the range of freedom permitted by a given structure are typically constrained by other factors.

(5) On strategic context analysis, see Stone (1994).

(6) Implied here is a distinction between space-time distantiation (the stretching of social relations over time and space) and space-time compression (the conquest of space by time through increased velocity of movement and the social 'production' of more events within a given time period). They provide different bases for the exercise of power and should not be confused. For further discussion, see Jessop 1999.

(7) An example of the temporal selectivity of social forms is the contrast between the 'short-termism' favoured by UK financial institutions with the 'long-termism' favoured by the German industrial-financial system.

(8) Autopoiesis is a condition of radical autonomy secured through self-organization. It emerges when a system defines its own boundaries relative to its environment, develops its own operational code, implements its own programmes, reproduces its own elements in a closed circuit, and obeys its own laws of motion.

(9) Ecological dominance exists to the extent that other systems are obliged to adapt more to a given system than the latter is to them: in this sense they assume a dominant role in shaping the co-evolution of the ecological system as a whole. It has been argued that the economy is the ecologically dominant system in the modern world.

(10) A good example comes from the speed and sequencing of reforms in and across different social domains in post-communist transition (cf. Hausner, Jessop, and Nielsen 1995).

(11) Compare Hall and Taylor 1996 with Ensminger 1998.

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