

Gender, Politics and Institutions

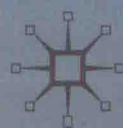
Towards a Feminist Institutionalism



GENDER AND POLITICS

Edited by

Mona Lena Krook and Fiona Mackay



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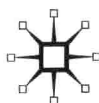
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Editorial matter, selection, introduction and conclusion © Mona Lena Krook and Fiona Mackay 2011

Foreword © Joni Lovenduski 2011

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First published 2011 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN: 978-0-230-24588-4 hardback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

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Foreword

Does institutionalism need a concept of gender? And does feminism need institutionalism? Probably the answers to these questions will turn on what we think is good social science. Good feminist social science is simply good social science; it is no more or less than good practice. It should concomitantly be impossible to imagine a good social science that ignores gender. Yet this is precisely what most political science does, and the new institutionalism, despite its concern with power relations in institutions, is no exception. Arguably, good institutionalists should realize the importance of gender relations to the configuration of institutions. But they do not. They need to be reminded, and feminist institutionalism, exemplified by the essays in this groundbreaking volume, is the reminder.

How does the incorporation of a feminist perspective change institutional approaches to the study of politics? To set the scene it is useful to ask what feminist scholars want from political science. Broadly there are two possibilities: the explanation of gendered outcomes, including the current order or state of play, and predictions of future developments in the gender regimes that are so identified. Both entail the specification of contexts, the collection and analysis of evidence, and the theorization of political relationships, but for feminists these are inevitably gendered in some way. They may be gender neutral or balanced in their configurations and effects. Gender may be defined simply as a scale of masculinity and femininity along which behaviour and attitudes may be ordered. This is evidenced by the presence of codes, norms, and behaviour that reflect accepted (but possibly changing) dimensions of masculinity and femininity. Gender is always present in social life. In short, institutions are gender regimes (Connell 1987, 1990) and feminists use institutionalist approaches to answer questions about power inequalities in public life. When feminists adopt institutionalist research strategies that include gender, they seek to illuminate and change the status of women. In this endeavour the crucial feminist contribution to institutionalism is the addition of concepts of gender. Feminism therefore genders institutionalism.

Why do feminists need new institutionalism? Probably the answer to this question starts with the politics of social science. Steinmo reminds us that the important battles in the social sciences are struggles over

the meaning of science defined in terms of its predictive capacity. But such a focus often distorts research and obscures the importance of explanation. In general institutionalists are more interested in explanation than in prediction (Steinmo 2008). I think the same is true of feminist institutionalists, and that preference is one of the bases of a scholarly affinity between the two approaches that I highlighted more than a decade ago (Lovenduski 1998). Both explanation and prediction require an ability to characterize the institutional context and environment in order to identify their most salient features. Feminist political scientists want to discover and explain gender effects in political life, a project that inevitably leads them to focus on how political institutions are formed and sustained and how gender is embedded in them. Many feminists are also interested in prediction but are unwilling to pay the high cost of overlooking the gendered dimensions of institutions – which is a risk when concentrating on prediction at the expense of explanation.

Institutions are the rules that structure political and social life. They are configurations of ideas and interests which are expressed as the 'formal rules, compliance procedures and standard operating practices that structure relationships between individuals in various units of the polity and the economy' (Hall 1986: 19–20). Political institutions express and necessarily contain a normative element – the norms, principles, and ideas that hold a given institutional structure together and provide the 'compass' for the assessments of attempts at change. This order consists of collectively constructed values and principles that are protected and maintained by accepted rules of the game. The rules take precise meaning through the actions of the individual organizations (parliaments, executives, and political parties) that they constitute, and they also structure, largely but imperfectly, the interactions that take place between and within these organisations (March and Olsen 1989: 107). March and Olsen, the founders of modern or 'new' institutional theory, provide the central insight that history is encoded into institutions. The 'new institutionalism' therefore permits a focus on process and offers a conceptual toolkit that includes formal and informal institutions, critical junctures, path dependence, feedback mechanisms, logics of appropriateness, and, more recently, institutional convergence and layering. It invites consideration of the roles of ideas in determining the interests of actors operating in a specific institutional context.

All social scientists make methodological choices that carry advantages and disadvantages. The advantages of new institutionalism are frequently set out as the expansion of definitions of institutions (usually

in relation to old institutionalism, in which institutions were narrowly defined in organizational terms) to include norms, values and ideas, incentive systems, and its ability to explain the persistence of social structures. The disadvantages turn around the problem of explaining change, a particular challenge for a feminist project to explain how changing gender relations might alter institutions. An equally important criticism is that institutionalists tend to underestimate agency because the repertoire of action is so constrained by the rules of the game that actors may be thought of as trapped by institutions. Critics regard institutionalism, and particularly historical institutionalism, as an approach that overprivileges stability, pointing to the frequency with which change is explained as an effect of an exogenous shock and the resulting crisis. This was once fair comment. Institutionalism has been a weak approach to explaining internally generated change because institutions are defined partly in terms of their capacity to inhibit change. But as Thelen points out, institutional stability may conceal considerable adaptation, rendering the differences between change and stability rather less stark. Moreover 'sometimes power begets power and institutions reinforce and magnify the position of their creators; but sometimes institutions provide interesting and unintended opportunities for marginal groups to exercise leverage well beyond their apparently meagre power resources' (Thelen 2003: 216).

Feminist institutionalists recognize that political explanation is about ideas, interests, and institutions, which are intertwined. In common with their colleagues they want better scholarship and better explanation. The proponents of feminist and institutionalist political science share a desire to answer real-world questions. But the shared interest in how institutions work in general has not to date extended to a common interest in how that working is gendered. While feminist and institutionalists agree that such answers require empirical investigations of institutions and their effects on political decisions and outcomes, for feminists those institutions are gendered in various ways. For the most part new institutionalists do not use a gendered approach, and feminist studies of institutions so far available, if acknowledged at all, are rarely engaged by them. The exclusion of consideration of gender risks crucial elements of ideas, interests, rules and processes, portents and causes of change, and instances of agency being ignored, and hence impairs the institutionalist project. If a central question of institutionalism is what it means to maximize power in a given situation then the institutionalist researcher is required to provide a detailed and complete account of the aspects of the political environment that frame the choices and

strategies of the political actors who operate within it. They must also have an understanding of the perceptions of political actors, of their interests and their (ideas about) environment, and have an understanding of both internally generated change and the agency of institutional actors. In making gender a central concern and conceptualizing institutions as, *inter alia*, gender regimes, feminism contributes to each part of the institutionalist project.

Feminist institutionalists think that changing gender relations are an important source of both internally and externally generated change. They investigate these components of institutions for the ideas they express about women and men, femininity and masculinity. Mapping the formal architecture and informal networks, connections, conventions, rules, and norms of institutions is the first step in constructing an institutional analysis. The way the analyses then proceeds depends on which of at least four different strands of new institutionalism is adopted: historical, sociological, rational choice, or discursive (Mackay and Waylen 2009).¹ Each suggests a slightly different map of gendered processes. There is considerable common ground among the different kinds of institutionalists. They all see institutions as rules that structure behaviour. Where they differ is about the nature of those beings whose behaviour is being structured (Steinmo 2008: 126). While all of the new institutionalisms have something to offer feminist scholarship, historical institutionalism is especially adaptable to the concerns of feminist political scientists who seek to explain gendered outcomes in different contexts. Historical institutionalists think that human beings are both norm-abiding rule followers and self-interested rational actors whose behaviour depends on which rules and which contexts obtain. These are all matters for empirical investigation. To gender historical institutionalism it is necessary first to identify and record differences in the effects of the rules and the nature of interests among and between women and men. Next the researcher must construct an account of processes through which these differences came to be present. Finally their impact on gender relations in the institution should be assessed. The feminist sociological institutionalist would identify the social norms and explicate their gendered effects, producing an account of the mutually constitutive character of the gender regime of the institution they are studying. For example they might explore how logics of appropriateness may support or undermine gender stereotypes of performance in a legislature. In a feminist rational choice institutionalist analysis, gender relations would form part of the account of the context in which individuals calculated costs and benefits of their actions. Differences in the

decisions between and among women and men would be recorded and explained in terms of the differences in their calculations that might, in turn, depend on gendered labour markets. Finally feminist discursive institutionalists consider the gender ideologies found in the institutional discourses focusing on how ideas about women and men and masculinity and femininity are present in its rules. They echo the initial insight of Schattschneider (1960) that control of the definition of a problem determines its solution, recasting this idea in the language of discourse analysis. Hence conflict over meaning is termed an interpretive struggle. Notably, discursive institutionalism explains change in institutions as the result of changes in ideas; hence changes in ideas about gender relations are predicted to change institutions. Inevitably the foundations of feminist institutionalist analysis are fine-grained descriptions of gendered environments accompanied by explanations of how gender constrains or enhances agency and affects stability and change. This might take the form of consideration of the options not discussed, actors marginalized, or micro-political economies not identified because they are obscured by unexamined assumptions about gender relations.

In short, feminist institutionalism both enhances analysis and makes for more effective explanation. Feminists bring to the study of institutions a specific lens that makes visible constitutive, gendered power relations and the processes that support and undermine them. In identifying changing gender relations as a potential cause of institutional change feminism increases the capacity of 'new' institutionalists to model causality. There is now a foundational body of feminist research that offers gendered institutional analysis (see Lovenduski 1998). Since 2006 the Feminist Institutional International Network (FIIN) has explored the interplay between feminist approaches to gendered institutions and new institutional theory, publishing work that synthesizes insights from each approach in order to address issues of gender, politics, power, and change (www.femfiin.com). This volume builds on those foundations, offering new research on gender in institutions that is theoretically grounded in terms of both feminism and of the new institutionalism.

JONI LOVENDUSKI

Notes

I am grateful to Dermot Hodson and Alan Ware for comments on this essay.

1. See also the recent 'Critical Perspectives on Feminist Institutionalism' in *Politics & Gender*, 5: 2, 2009.

Acknowledgements

This volume is the product of many conversations, workshops and conference panels, and an ongoing seven-year dialogue about the promise of a feminist institutionalism. The idea was sparked at the European Consortium of Political Research (ECPR) Joint Sessions of Workshops in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 2003, by a workshop convened by Fiona Mackay and Petra Meier, and bore fruit with the establishment in 2006 of the Feminism and Institutionalism International Network (FIIN; for more details, see www.femfiin.com). Since the founding of the network, we have debated and shared findings at the Gender Research Network Launch Conference in Manchester, England, in June 2007; the European Consortium for Political Research General Conference in Pisa, Italy, in September 2007; the European Conference on Politics and Gender, organized by the Gender and Politics Standing Group of the European Consortium for Political Research, in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in January 2009; and the Midwest Political Science Association National Conference in Chicago, Illinois, in April 2009. In April 2008, we also organized a six-day workshop on 'Gender, Politics, and Institutions: Towards a Feminist Institutionalism?' for the ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops in Rennes, France.

The task of putting together this volume was made possible thanks to the encouragement and assistance of a number of important people. For financial assistance, we are grateful to the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Edinburgh and the Centre for Political Economy at Washington University in St. Louis for funding our attendance at several key workshops and panels. We also appreciate support from the University of Edinburgh Campaign Small Projects Scheme, and the School of Social and Political Science Strategic Research Fund for enabling us to set up the FIIN website, run by FIIN coordinator Meryl Kenny, which has facilitated communications among members of the network and beyond. All panel participants over the years, and especially those who participated in the ECPR workshop in Rennes, have contributed to the broader conversation that has led to the publication of this book. We thank our co-directors, Louise Chappell, Meryl Kenny, and Georgina Waylen for their support. We acknowledge our debt to Joni Lovenduski, whose work inspired us to embark on the project, and we thank her also for writing the foreword. We record our appreciation

of Alison Howson, Amber Stone-Galilee, and Liz Blackmore at Palgrave, as well as the Gender and Politics Series editors, Judith Squires and Johanna Kantola, for their enthusiastic support and patience. Finally, we very much appreciate the editorial assistance of Mindy Sher and Meryl Kenny in the very last stages of pulling this manuscript together. We hope that the final product reflects a shared collective enterprise to forge a synthesis between feminism and institutionalism.

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