Foreword to *Gender, Politics and Institutions: Toward a Feminist Institutionalism* Edited by Mona Lena Krook and Fiona Mackay. Palgrave Macmillan. 2011

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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 any good institutionalist should realise 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 theorisation 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 to its array of concepts. 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
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 characterise 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 that 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 both take precise meaning through the actions of the individual organisations (parliaments, executives and political parties) that they constitute and they 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 organisational 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 over privileges 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 recognise 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 in common 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 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 ignoring crucial elements of ideas, interests, rules and processes, portents and causes of change and instances of agency, and hence impairs the institutionalist project. If a central question of institutionalism is what it means to maximise 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 an eye for internally generated change and the agency of institutional actors. In making gender a central concern and conceptualising institutions as, \textit{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, masculinity and femininity. 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 proceed[s] depends on which of at least four different strands of new institutionalism is adopted: historical, sociological, rational
choice and discursive. 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). Whilst 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 long ago (1960) made insight of Schattschneider 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 marginalised, 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 Institutionalist 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 both in feminism and the new institutionalism.

Notes

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

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