

# Institutional and Policy Change: Meta-theory and Method

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## I INTRODUCTION

This volume emerged from a general call for papers for a panel on institutional entrepreneurship and institutional change at the International Conference on Public Policy (ICPP) held in Milan, Italy, in the summer of 2015. We were overwhelmed by submissions to the panel and a level of interest in the topic which far exceeded our expectations. In retrospect, we should not have been surprised. Issues of institutional change continue to be of central concern to political scientists, economists, sociologists, and policy scholars alike—indeed, why and how institutions emerge, change, or are transcended over time is a core theoretical question at the centre of most social science inquiry. As North famously noted:

History matters. It matters not just because we can learn from the past, but because the present and the future are connected to the past by the continuity

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of society's institutions. Today's and tomorrow's choices are shaped by the past. And the past can only be made intelligible as a story of institutional evolution. (North, 1990, p. vii)

For North, the focus on institutions was driven by an intellectual interest to understand how social agents create entities that facilitate cooperation, especially around complex phenomena such as exchange relations where interests do not always coincide. It was North's contention that at the very core of successful societies, which North defined in relation to sustained economic growth and deepening economic and technological complexity, lay the role of institutions—or, more specifically, 'institutional frameworks'. But, as North also observed, not all institutional frameworks are created equal; 'not all human cooperation is socially productive' (North, 1990, p. vii). North's self-professed task was thus to correct the oversight of his own profession, integrating into economic theory a theory of institutional change by 'explaining the evolution of institutional frameworks that induce economic stagnation and decline' and those that induce success (North, 1990, p. vii).

North, of course, has not been alone in this project. The rise of institutional analysis and renewed interest in institutions has been intimately associated with structural changes in the institutional fabric of modern industrial societies, particularly in the last few decades of the twentieth century. The decline of Keynesianism and with it transformations in the socio-political and economic institutions which guided management of the economy, labour relations, welfare, tax and redistributive measures, social policy and the provision of health, education and public housing, has generated extensive debates about the extent of these changes and their causes (Campbell & Pedersen, 2001). Ideational changes associated with the rise of market-oriented policy preferences, and of political movements seeking to reframe the relationship between the state and market, and between the state, market and citizen, also coincided with the rise of institutional analysis—especially the rise of rational choice institutional paradigms which see institutions (or what the World Bank terms 'enabling environments') as central determinants of economic and political performance (Campbell & Pedersen, 2001, p. 1; Carroll & Jarvis, 2015, 2017; North, 1981, 1990, 2005).

The coextensive nature of these developments has fostered a burgeoning industry of institutional paradigms (Campbell & Pedersen, 2001, p. 5). Rational choice institutionalism (North, 1990; Ostrom, 1993),

while perhaps the most influential, has also been joined by historical institutionalism (Clemens & Cook, 1999; Hall, 2010; Immergut, 2006; Pierre, Peters, & Stoker, 2008; Steinmo, 2008; Thelen, 1999), sociological institutionalism (or what some term organisational institutionalism) (Campbell, 1998, 2008; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Hall & Taylor, 1996; March & Olsen, 1989; Scott & Myer, 1994) and post-modern or discursive institutionalism (Bourdieu, 1998; Foucault, 1969, 2007; Jameson, 1997; Schmidt, 2008). Despite substantive variation in approach and epistemology, the new institutionalisms all grapple with the enduring issue of institutional construction, instantiation (or how institutions become embedded), and institutional change—in particular, the role of agency in mediating and intercepting power and influence (conceived both in the visceral sense of capturing institutions and steering them but also in the ideational sense of emerging knowledge systems and of the role of ideas in shaping and determining social, political and economic orders).

This volume continues this tradition of intellectual inquiry, attempting to grapple both theoretically and empirically with questions of institutional isomorphism. The vantage points of its contributions are variously informed by the ‘great debates’ of institutional theory. These have typically wrestled with ontological issues about structure and agency, in part to understand the nature of institutional stasis but most obviously as a means to explain change—gradual, evolutionary change and particularly dramatic or revolutionary transformation. Earlier historical institutionalists such as Theda Skocpol (1979), for example, famously analysed the structure and composition of pre-revolutionary state institutions to explain revolutionary outcomes. State capture and the dominance of the state over populations could induce long periods of stability while also laying the foundation for social revolution and the birthing of new institutional orders. Similarly, Chalmers Johnson’s analysis of the rise of ‘revolutionary nationalism’ and the ‘exigencies and requirements of national survival and mobilization’ were used to explain institutional outcomes in Japan and China in the post-war era (Johnson, 1966, 1982; Steinmo, 2008; Woo-Cumings, 1999, p. 2). Both Skocpol and Johnson viewed the state and state institutions as central to the stabilization of social, political and economic orders, while also seeing the state as the primary source of social fissure because of non-adaptability or non-responsiveness to changing contexts. For historical institutionalists, in other words, the span of history was understood as wave like; long periods of stasis interjected by sudden periods of crisis—or,

as Blyth notes, they posit a model as thus: ‘institutional equilibrium → punctuation → new institutional equilibrium’ (Blyth, 2002, p. 7).

Such a model, of course, posits two contradictory axioms: institutions constrain, order, moderate, and pattern agential behaviours, in large measure constricting the possibility of institutional change, while, at the same time, agents and agency are by definition the drivers of history, manufacturing institutional change and new institutional orders. Rational choice institutionalists too explain the tendency to stasis and equilibrium using similar theoretical fiats. Long periods of institutional stasis reflect institutional maturation, in which formal and informal rules act as mechanisms that sanction certain behaviours and induce agential compliance. As long as the functional predominance of institutions in transmitting rules and norms is sustained, the tendency toward change is constrained. Change, in this sense, is either an outgrowth of the breakdown of institutional sanctions and signalling mechanisms causing agential compliance to be fractured, or a reflection of poor institutional design in which the wrong signals (perverse incentives) are transmitted, producing disequilibria and causing agential authority to reconfigure new institutional arrangements.

Institutionalists of various persuasions have thus assumed a *hierarchical ontology* between institutions and actors. While change, evolutionary or revolutionary, is uniformly viewed as a filament of social action, institutions are typically viewed as minding the store, as it were, tending to constrain actors and stabilize patterns of behaviour which, in turn, reproduce institutional orders. For institutionalists, such ontological relationships help explain the tendency toward equilibria; long periods of continuity, the infrequency of revolutionary change and the predominance of evolutionary or gradual institutional change through ideational adaptation and incremental rule and norm modification. Equally, for social theorists, the predominance of structure—defined in terms of institutional setting or context—has similarly been understood as the substantive force shaping the choices of agents which in turn shapes the universe of potential outcomes or the pathways via which change occurs (Campbell, 2004, 2010; Giddens, 1979, 1993; Heugens & Lander, 2009). Agency, by contrast, has typically been understood as a second-order variable and subservient to the overarching role of socio-economic structure and history.

This tendency toward a hierarchical ontology in theory construction, most often encapsulated in anthropology, sociology, philosophy, economics, political science and history with the rise of *structuralism*, has had far-reaching implications for how research into policy entrepreneurship

and institutional change has proceeded. As Bakir notes, this has essentially funnelled research into two broad questions: (1) *how* and *why* institutional contexts inform and frame agential actions?; and (2) how do policy entrepreneurs initiate institutional change if their decisions and actions are conditioned by the very institution they wish to change? (Bakir, 2013; Bathelt & Glückler, 2014, p. 353; see also DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Morgan, Campbell, Crouch, Pedersen, & Whitley, 2010, pp. 4–5; Peters, 2001, p. 71).

In social theory, of course, structuration theory was meant to overcome this ontological dilemma. Giddens' 'duality of structure', for example, attempted to replace ontological hierarchies with a reflexive situationalism, in which the 'recursive' or reflexive 'character of social life' was constituted by the interactions of agents with structures that reproduced social orders while also modifying them. As Giddens notes, structuration theory understands that 'even action which disrupts the social order, breaking conventions or challenging established hierarchies, is mediated by structural features which are reconstituted by the action, albeit in a modified form' (Giddens as quoted in Thompson, 1989, p. 58; Giddens, 1984). History and historical change, in other words, were to be explained through recursive interactions; 'social structures are both constituted *by* human agency, and yet at the same time they are the very *medium* of this constitution' (our emphasis) (Giddens, 1993, p. 121).

Rational choice institutionalism has similarly dealt with the problem of hierarchical ontologies. As Campbell observes, one of the main contributions of political scientists and sociologists to rational choice perspectives has been to develop a 'choice-within-constraints approach' in which agential authority is seen to be limited by the coextensive institutional frameworks in which agents operate (Campbell, 2004, p. 15; Peters, 2001, p. 67; Roberts & Greenwood, 1997). Much like structuration theory, rational choice institutionalists have sought to level the ontological playing field by conceiving of agents and institutions as processes of mutuality, codependent but differentiated by the quality of institutional endowments (capacities) across institutional contexts—which provides either more or less space for agential interventions and thus greater or lesser latitude for institutional change. Institutional constraints, in other words, are context specific and change through time, either through the erosion of institutional quality or the failure of institutions to adapt to changing exogenous forces which, in turn, explain the preponderance of institutional stasis and incremental change and the infrequency of sudden revolutionary transformation.

## 2 POLICY SCIENCE AND THE PROBLEM OF INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

Despite these theoretical advances the sense in which they can be simply imported, adapted, deployed and operationalised as research frameworks in order to understand policy change and institutional isomorphism remains problematic. Five interrelated issues are apparent.

The first arises from what we might term the vantage point of observation or temporality. Social theorists, for example, enjoy the benefit of hindsight when examining the sweep of history. Hindsight provides a vast laboratory for investigation, observation and theorization, allowing the historian to examine known outcomes and draw connections between events, time and place, identifying causalities of change and how these manifest in terms of new or evolving institutional orders. Hindsight, in other words, provides the historian with a *fungible temporality* which, as North noted, demonstrates how ‘today’s and tomorrow’s choices are shaped by the past’ (North, 1990, p. vii).

Absent a fungible temporality, however, how do social scientists operationalise structuration theory as a means of explaining institutional change, particularly change which is contemporaneous? How do we identify ‘choice-within-constraints’ when the choices may not be readily apparent or the constraints obvious? For policy scholars, for example, the vantage point of hindsight is not always available, ‘recursive interactions’ are often hidden behind institutional facades and the professional practitioners who populate them, while knowledge about change is typically empirically fuzzy, contradictory, or contested. More obviously, how do policy scholars assess which change is important, what impact it will have on institutional orders or practices, whose interests it may serve and how, and whether what they observe is incremental, episodic or potentially revolutionary change? Much policy science, for example, is projection: scholarship designed to intercept emerging problems, change trends with potentiality deleterious implications, or avoid outcomes that may generate negative social and economic consequences (global climate change, the impact of ageing demographics, deterring low rates of savings to ensure sufficient income in incidences of increasing longevity, etc.). Policy science invariably sits at the intersection of contemporaneous intellectual inquiry and is designed to project into the future to change outcomes that have yet to transpire. Rather than a fungible temporality which allows assessments of institutional change to be triangulated through time and interrogated in terms of sig-

nificance, direction, impact and outcome, policy scholars are often required to address change in contexts of indeterminate temporalities and make assessments about change in present and future contexts.

Second, while a core analytical variable, the concept of *change* remains both under-theorised and analytically diffuse. Historically, for example, first-wave institutionalism concerned itself predominantly with patterns of stasis or institutional stickiness, focusing on the role of authority, power and legitimacy, along with the high transaction costs (and risks) associated with institutional isomorphism, in order to explain the reproduction of institutional orders through path dependencies (Bush, 1987; Koning, 2015, p. 641). In part, this reflected the way first-wave institutionalism defined institutions; as a ‘stable, recurring pattern of behaviour’ (Goodin, 1996, p. 22). Change, in other words, was antithetical to the core idea of institutions as technologies of social, economic and political reproduction. Krasner, for example, encapsulated this dialectic noting ‘a basic analytic distinction [...] between periods of institutional creation and periods of institutional stasis’, where change was important but only in the context of the birthing or ending of institutional orders—the bookends of epochs. Gradual or incremental change was, in essence, squeezed out of analytical view, with change understood episodically and often the result of systemic crisis (Krasner as quoted in Koning, 2015, p. 643; Krasner, 1984, p. 240).

This intellectual legacy continues to impact how issues of institutional isomorphism and isomorphic processes are framed theoretically. Much contemporary institutional scholarship, for example, is unable to differentiate between *patterns* or types of change and thus ‘the degree to which a given episode of change is actually evolutionary, revolutionary or something else’ (Campbell, 2004, p. 5). Capano reinforces this point, noting while there is a ‘plentiful selection of studies from various academic fields examining the question of whether the processes of change should be considered evolutionary or revolutionary, reversible or irreversible, linear or non-linear, contingent or partially determined’, the ‘*explanandum* (change) is too frequently defined in an ambiguous manner’, its complexity set aside or treated as a mechanical variable (e.g.,  $t^1$  to  $t^2$ ) (Capano, 2009, p. 8). A continuing theoretical dilemma for institutional scholars, in other words, is the conceptual indeterminacy of one of its core analytical categories: *change*.

Third, this intellectual legacy also has implications for where scholars situate the *locus* of causality that produces change. When institutions are conceived as patterns of recurrent behaviour that propagate stability or

stasis through combinations of cascading norms, rules, authority structures (legal and juridical systems), power relationships and traditions, for example, the locus of change is typically identified as *exogenous* to institutional orders rather than propagated through *endogenous* institutional processes. Change is viewed as institutionally alien and most often conceptualised in relation to large-scale structural transformations or the sudden, episodic rupture of institutional stability brought about, for example, by war, financial crises, sudden environmental change, or other large-scale disruptive exogenous events and processes. Much historical institutionalism has thus posited change as an episodic consequence of institutional non-adaptability, or a consequence of insufficient institutional capacity to manage various large-scale exogenous processes. Issues of endogeneity, by contrast, while not dismissed entirely from analytical view, have tended to be framed as issues of institutional inertia, where the absence of institutional change, or the right types of institutional adaptability in relation to increasing tensions brought about by emergent exogenous realities, ultimately ruptures institutional orders and produces new institutional configurations. Endogeneity as a core locus of isomorphic processes has thus often been marginalised, or seen as less consequential and thus less professionally rewarding as an object of intellectual inquiry.

Fourth, and relatedly, the tendency of historical and rational choice institutionalists to theorise institutions through functionalist lenses has also tended to marginalise issues of endogeneity as a locus of institutional change. The dominant means of analysing institutional change, for example, has rested on mapping interests with institutional type, functions, and capacities in order to correlate specific institutional endowments (or institutional designs) with their ability to satisfy economic, social and political needs—i.e., the institutional characteristics which manufacture *legitimacy*, where legitimacy is understood as central to the reproduction of institutional orders. For many historical and rational choice institutionalists, in other words, institutions are understood as sets of social and political relations that, above all, contain distributional instruments in relation to power and economic resources (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010a, pp. 8–9). What makes some institutions more effective than others simply reflects the balance of legitimacy in respect of how adroitly power and economic resources are distributed, and how, over time, institutional capacities to manage distributional instruments adapt to changing realities. Rational choice and historical institutionalists thus posit institutional stasis as a function of legitimacy, and thus, in turn, as a reflection of individual interests

being institutionally derived. It reflects what Bathelt and Glückler (2014) term the ‘paradox of embedded action’, whereby the interests of actors is both derived from, and reflected in, the prevailing institutional orthodoxy, rendering change through agential authority irrational. The paradox of embedded action thus made *endogenous* change theoretically nonsensical, substantially blinding first-wave institutionalism to issues of institutional adaptation, institutional learning and other *endogenous* isomorphic processes (Blyth, 2002, pp. 19–20; Koning, 2015, p. 647).

Fifth, while second-wave institutionalism has attempted to overcome this problem by focusing on *endogenous* sources of change, and by addressing explicitly the paradox of embedded action, it has often attempted to do so by situating interests in more diffuse theoretical containers. Ideational institutionalism, for example, focuses on the receptiveness of institutions to ideational innovation, institutional learning, and the way institutions do or don’t, as the case may be, interact with values, norms and beliefs. It thus posits the central importance of *ideas* in institutional change—if not their role as the constituting basis of institutional orders. As Blyth points out, institutions do in fact change, ‘sometimes without obvious punctuations, and because of this theoretical problem, ideas also become attractive to historical institutionalists as an *endogenous* source of change’ (Blyth, 2002, p. 20). For Blyth, ideas are the *zeitgeist* and intellectual scaffolding that ‘provide agents with an interpretive framework’, a scientific and normative framing of the economy and polity, and a blueprint about how these entities should be constituted and related. Ideas act as normative frames or constructions which facilitate the design of new institutions and the development of plans and politic strategies—ideas, in other words, are an important source of endogenous change:

... such an analysis of institutional change suggests that the reduction of uncertainty, the specification of causes, and the actual supply of new institutions are parts of a temporally distinct sequence of events where ideas have different effects at different junctures.... This is *not* to say that only ideas matter, nor that institutional change is purely an ideational affair; they do not and it is not. (Blyth, 2002, p. 11)

Blyth thus suggests that there exists a certain reciprocity between ideas, institutional learning, processes of policy or ideational diffusion and change—in which ideas form an important, perhaps even dominant, agency in institutional change.

But if we accept the importance of *ideas* as a source of change, as does much contemporary institutional scholarship, then how should *ideas* be understood? How do ideas manifest, propagate, and impact institutions and produce change; indeed, how do they overcome the paradox of embedded action especially if they impact or threaten interests? As an analytical category, *ideas* are conceptually slippery. Do we view ideas as a thought or suggestion, an aim or a purpose, a mental impression, an opinion or belief, a cognitive map, as shared values or concerns, or as strategies to inform actions? How do we differentiate between ideas? Are economic ideas as important as ideas about social values and beliefs in terms of inducing institutional change? And where do ideas sit in terms of their locus; within institutions as statements of purpose, mandate, role, function or aspiration, broadly within the polity as a means of projecting group identity, or diffusely as conceptual boundaries which allow for inter-subjective understanding? More fundamentally, how do we understand the relationship between ideas and interests? Do ideas trump interests, or do ideas reflect the ways and means of projecting interests (Colomy, 1998)?

Equally, why should we assume that ideas are the repository of agency that produces change? Ideas can be constraining and disciplining. Ideas comprise knowledge systems which impose meaning, reproduce social, political and economic institutional orders and often resist change. The canon law of the Catholic church, for example, or the notion of Christendom are ideas that involve the imposition of certain values to the exclusion of others, seeking to embed certain social relations and modes of conduct, and resist ideational deviation other than through acts of proselytising. Similarly, as Campbell notes, paradigms can act as ‘cognitive background assumptions that constrain decision making and institutional change by limiting the range of alternatives that decision-making elites are likely to perceive as useful and worth considering’ (Campbell, 2002, p. 22, 2004, p. 94). There is no reason to assume that ideas are always sources of change. They can also be sources of stasis, a means of constraining change or of disciplining contrarian thinking (Carstensen, 2011).

As an *explanandum*, *ideas* thus remain theoretically obtuse and suffer from indeterminacy and contestation. It is one thing to assert that ideas are important, even powerful, but quite another to trace their origins, to map why some ideas become more powerful than others, and how ideas manifest as a change agent to influence actors, interests, or cause variation, modification, or innovation in institutional orders. No one doubts the

pervasive influence of Keynesianism, liberalism, and neoliberalism, but demonstrating ideational pathways as mechanisms of change and their manifestation in institutional orders is both theoretically complex and vexed. Blyth's statement of the problem perhaps best summarises this theoretical conundrum:

Despite ... historical institutionalist analyses opening up more fully to ideas as independent causal elements, some problems remain. For example, Helleiner's study, explaining why ideas about the role and function of finance changed in the 1930s and 1970s, relies on the ostensible "facts" of economic difficulties promoting new ideas. However, positing that the supply of new ideas is reducible to material changes itself relegates ideas to being autonomic responses to periods of crisis. If this is the case, then the transformative role of ideas is limited at best. Similarly, although McNamara's and other recent historical institutionalist scholarship has been increasingly open to viewing ideas and interests "not as competing causal factors, but as ... inherent[ly] interconnect[ed]," such scholarship has not, as yet, explicitly theorized exactly how this occurs .... [T]he assumptions behind this body of theory—and the lack of explicit theorizing about the relationship between ideas, interests, and institutions—dictate that ideas tend to be seen ... as auxiliary hypotheses employed to account for the anomaly of change within otherwise static theories. (Blyth, 2002, p. 23)

At one and the same time, Blyth's statement is a call for more explicit theorising about the relationship between ideas, interests, and institutions, but also an admission that ideas, values, and beliefs remain problematic as stand-alone theoretical categories—unless, that is, social scientists reconceptualise *ideas* such that they are not seen as simply 'anterior or external to interests' (Blyth, 2002, p. 27).

To a large degree, this has been the most recent project of ideational institutionalists—a third-wave institutionalism. Recent work by scholars such as Mukand and Rodrik (2016), for example, has sought to demonstrate that 'ideas and interests both matter for policy and institutional change, and also feed into each other' (Mukand & Rodrik, 2016, p. 5):

On the one hand economic interests drive the kind of ideas that politicians put forward. As Shepsle (1985) put it, ideas can be regarded as "hooks on which politicians hang their objectives and further their interests." However, ideas also shape interests. In our model, this happens because they alter voter preferences *ex post* and/or shift their worldviews, in both cases shifting rankings over policy. (Mukand & Rodrik, 2016, p. 5; Shepsle, 1985)

For Rodrik, in other words, ‘interests are an idea’ (Rodrik, 2014, p. 206). Interests ‘are not fixed or predetermined. They are themselves shaped by ideas—belief about who we are, what we are trying to archive, and how the world works. Our perceptions of self-interest are always filtered through the lens of ideas’ (Rodrik, 2012). Indeed, for third-wave institutionalists the historical primacy of *interests* in social science is puzzling. For them, the market place of ideas is rarely centred on purely economic interests but filtered through political entrepreneurs developing new ideas, institutions, or policy by appealing to values, identities or other normative reference points which make new ideas or policy compelling and thus change possible. As Mukand and Rodrik (2016, p. 1) note, ideas matter, ‘ideational politics seems at least as important as interest-based politics’—indeed more important especially if we understand interests as a sub-set of preferences defined in relation to ideational values and beliefs (see also Rodrik, 2014). For ideational institutionalists, it is ideas which provide the ‘interpretive frameworks that give definition to our values and preferences and thus make political and economic interests actionable’ (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016, p. 318). This is why resources are given to think tanks, lobbyists, civil society organisations and religious orders who each attempt to shape opinions, push certain ideas and thus achieve change relative to the values they hold.

For third-wave ideational institutionalists, far from ideas being the jet-sam and flotsam floating above the realpolitik of power and interests, ideas in fact embody and reflect power; they manifest in institutional orders, impacting the organisation of social, political and economic relations. Indeed, for more recent discursive institutionalists, ideas are the constituting basis of power and power projection. As Carstensen and Schmidt observe, ideational power reflects the ‘capacity of actors to persuade other actors to accept and adopt their views on what to think and do’, while the persuasiveness of ideas, the entrepreneurialism of brokers marketing ideas, and the way actors view, interpret and understand ideas, help to explain the complex and reflective processes by which some ideas become accepted and thus powerful, either engendering institutional and policy change or, by their very dominance and power, precipitating stability and long waves of stasis (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016, p. 323).

While such insights have made valuable contributions to institutionalist literatures, the theorising of ideas and their relationship to interests, and of ideational power and its relationship to institutional change and stasis, remains theoretically vexed. Despite several decades of scholarly effort and

a now voluminous literature, elemental questions about the role of agency, structure, ideas, and interests—and the relationships that obtain in terms of causality and institutional change—remain as conceptually muddled as ever. As Mahoney and Thelen lament, while ‘institutional analysis has earned a prominent place in contemporary social science, the vast literature that has accumulated provides us with precious little guidance in making sense of processes of institutional change’ (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010a, p. 2). Perhaps the only conclusion we might reasonably draw is that ideas, interests, agential authority, structure, and history are *all* important in understanding processes of institutional isomorphism, but in what magnitude, why and how, remains a continuing theoretical conundrum.

### 3 THEORISING CHANGE: FROM EPISTEMOLOGIES TO CONCEPTUAL TOOLS AND METHODS

Despite the salience of institutional theory it is clear that much theoretical work remains to be done in order to translate meta-theoretical fiats into concrete methods and frameworks of analysis. This is especially the case for policy science where issues of policy and institutional change are core objects of scholarly inquiry but where most analyses have been forced to rely on thick description in order to map the interrelationships between institutions, institutional types, policy actors, policy choices/preferences, institutional/policy outcomes and policy and institutional change.

Of course various efforts have been made to lend greater methodological clarity to this enterprise. In the context of policy development, earlier work by Besley and Case (2003), March and Olsen (1989), Hammond and Knott (1999), Persson (2002), Pierre, Peters, and Stoker (2008), and Peters (2012), has helped elucidate how specific institutional contexts frame, structure and enable policy choice. Similarly, work highlighting particular institutional morphologies has helped explain the implications for either constraining or enabling policy action. Complex, contentious, and institutionally thick environments, for example, can often lead to deadlock or elongated policy processes, reducing the scope for policy adoption or adaptation because of numerous competing institutional interests. By contrast, institutional environments which are less dense may provide more discrete pathways for negotiation, streamlining processes of policy adoption and change (Zahariadis, 2016, p. 7).

Equally, policy science has become more sophisticated in mapping institutional types, capacities and functions and correlating these with outcomes and economic performance. Hall's pioneering work comparing British and French institutions, for example, eloquently maps the intersections between history, institutional evolution, institutional type, the adoption of certain economic policies and the performance of economies over time. For Hall, it is institutional *variation* across societies and economies, and in turn the types of choices made within institutional contexts, that is intimately related to social and economic outcomes—not least the ability of economic, social and political systems to adapt, change and respond to new and emerging circumstances (Hall, 1986; Hall & Soskice, 2013, p. 43). Similarly, work by Thelen (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010b; Thelen, 1999, 2004) has also shed light on the importance of 'distinctive institutional arrangements which ... support specific kinds of strategies' and which, in turn, spore successful growth outcomes; specific institutional configurations associated with 'financial institutions, industrial relations institutions, vocational training systems, bank-industry links, and ... welfare state institutions and policies' (Thelen, 2004, p. 2). Importantly, however, as Thelen argues, it is the *politics* of institutional settlement that lies at the core of institutional sustainability—the mechanisms of reproduction that sustain institutions and the 'mechanisms behind their functional and distributional transformation over time'—and not just institutional design characteristics or the architecture of governance organisations (Thelen, 2004, p. 7; Streeck & Thelen, 2005).

Conversely, an important and influential literature famously championed by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) has focused on patterns of institutional convergence or homogeneity, addressing institutional change through coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphic processes—and more generally through competitive isomorphic processes in which adaptation and institutional change reflect processes of systems rationality and fitness for purpose measures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, pp. 149–150). A myriad of studies in various functional settings, for example, have highlighted institutional isomorphism producing similar institutional types across an increasing number of nation-states; in particular, the institutional design and governance mechanisms of central banks (increasingly constituted as independent regulatory bodies mandated with responsibility for macro-prudential management at arm's length from government); the organisation of higher education and policy trends associated with massification and convergent policy/institutional practices in response to

global rankings; the global standardisation of national accounting regimes; or the standardisation of institutional/organisational practices associated with regulation, standards, certification codes and traceability regimes (food handling, storage, transportation; toxic waste management; product and manufacturing standards—chemicals, pharmaceuticals, electrical components; nuclear safety; phytosanitary standards; various enforcement regimes associated with human trafficking, drugs, child exploitation and criminality, among others) (Jarvis, 2012, 2017a; Koppell, 2010). Policy and institutional change, in other words, reflect increasingly dominant trends associated with policy learning and policy transfer/diffusion: ‘a process in which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions etc. in one time and/or place is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements and institutions in another time and/or place’ (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996, p. 344, 2000; Levi-Faur, 2005; Obinger, Schmitt, & Starke, 2013; Shipan & Volden, 2012; Starke, Obinger, & Castles, 2008; Stone, 2001; Strebler & Widmer, 2012).

Indeed, processes of policy diffusion and learning are increasingly seen as a key *explanandum* of institutional change and emergent patterns of cross-national convergence—a process which Elkins and Simmons (2005, p. 37) describe as the result of ‘uncoordinated interdependence’. This arises from the process of policy/practice adoption impacting the choices of other potential adopters: ‘the adoption of a trait or practice in a population alters the probability of adoption for remaining non-adopters’ (Strang as quoted in Elkins & Simmons, 2005, pp. 37–38; Strang, 1991), either through processes of agenda setting, norm diffusion or relational circumstances where a state’s move to adopt a certain policy prompts other states to follow. Policy diffusion and its consequent impact on institutional/policy change is thus understood as both cause and effect: ‘any pattern of successive adoptions of a policy’ but where the process of diffusion changes the probability of certain policies or institutional characteristics being adopted in the future (Strang and Soule as quoted in Elkins & Simmons, 2005, p. 36; Strang & Soule, 1988). Whatever the cause or mechanism of diffusion, the point is that diffusion is characterized as a reflexive process and assumes no destination or end point, prescriptive organisational form or policy design. It is, for the most part, happenstance and results from a series of individual decisions to adopt certain policies and practices for reasons specific to each policy actor but in a universe where the decisions of policy actors impact the subsequent choices and decisions of other policy actors across institutional and geographic space.

A now dominant means of understanding policy and institutional change has thus rested on the emergence of non-functional diffusionist perspectives centred on policy learning and emulation, which see institutional change as the result of broader, systemic processes associated with the transnationalisation of policy processes, the growth in international epistemic knowledge communities and the rise of global benchmarking practices and standard-setting institutions (Cao, 2010; Colomy, 1998; Jakobi, 2012; Jarvis, 2017b; Meseguer, 2005; Meseguer & Gilardi, 2009; Obinger et al., 2013; Vormedal, 2012).

### 3.1 *Advocacy Coalition, Multiple Streams, Punctuated Equilibrium, and Path Dependency Frameworks*

Several other and equally influential perspectives have also emerged as a means of understanding or mapping the processes and causalities by which policy and institutional change occurs. These include the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1988, 1993, 1999), the Multiple Streams Approach (MSA) (Cairney & Jones, 2016; Jones et al., 2016; Kingdon, 1984b; Zahariadis, 2007), the Punctuated Equilibrium Framework (PEF) (Baumgartner, Jones, & Mortensen, 2014; Howlett & Cashore, 2009; John, 2003; Jones et al., 2016), and Path Dependency Frameworks (PDF) (David, 2002; Kay, 2005; Mahoney, 2000), among others.

To varying degrees, these approaches have been successful in providing frameworks of analysis that guide research focus in terms of the broad locus of actors, interests, context and institutional setting, and the decision-making and knowledge ambits that permeate event progression leading to institutional and policy change.

The ACF, for example, one of the most influential approaches to understanding policy change since the 1990s, has moved the analytical focus of scholars away from a conventional concern with elite organisational/bureaucratic decision making (i.e., policy making as ‘quietly managed by a small group of insiders’ and contained within discrete institutional settings) to focus instead on policy formulation and change as a process of complex relationships that are often diffuse, multi-level, contested, controversial, and politicised (Cairney, 2015, p. 484; Weible, Sabatier, & McQueen, 2009). Rather than policy change seen as an incremental outcome of deliberative, reflective, informed decision making, the ACF centres on understanding policy making and policy change in conditions of

ambiguity and uncertainty, often in information-poor environments, sometimes where problem definition is partial or contested, and often occurring over elongated periods of time (Weible & Sabatier, 2006). Its primary claim to fame rests in moving scholarly analytical focus away from a *stages heuristic* paradigm in which policy change is understood as a Lasswellian linear event progression (problem identification, agenda setting, policy formulation, policy adoption, implementation, monitoring, and enforcement or policy recalibration), to recognise instead the centrality of multiple cycles of interaction, conflict, feedback, and the discursive nature of these processes in the ‘translation of normative and empirical beliefs of competing advocacy coalitions’ into public policy (Weible & Sabatier, 2006, pp. 131–132). In doing so, the ACF places great analytical weight on the notion of policy participants being defined by ideational values and beliefs (some core values/beliefs, some secondary), where core values are ‘least susceptible to change in light of empirical evidence’ (Cairney, 2015, p. 486). Indeed, for the ACF, beliefs are seen as ‘the “glue” that keeps a large number of actors together’, embracing the notion of ideas as important in and of themselves and not simply reflecting or projecting sets of interests (Cairney, 2015, pp. 485–486). For the ACF, understanding policy and institutional change has thus been situated in more non-sequential, diffuse, and inherently more complex milieus, and much more broadly around coalitions of actors first and foremost motivated by beliefs, ideas and values.

The MSA approach pioneered by Kingdon (1984a) has similarly sought to understand public policy agenda setting and policy outcomes—why certain policies are adopted and why specific avenues of change materialise relative to others (Cairney & Jones, 2016).<sup>1</sup> In what has become one of the most widely influential frameworks of analysis, Kingdon proposed understanding the policy process as a function of three, interrelated but separate conceptual components: problems, policies, and politics. As Kingdon notes, ‘each of these streams has a life of its own, and runs along without a lot of regard to happenings in the other streams’ (Kingdon, 2003, p. 227; see also Béland & Howlett, 2016, p. 222).

The problem stream arises from political actors who demand solutions to perceived problems or issues that are seen as public in nature. Within the problem stream, however, problems and issues are weighted and perceived differently, demarcated by categories that Kingdon identified as *indicators* (the processes by which actors identify, monitor and understand problems), and which typically appear in policy problems due to

*focusing events* (a crisis—such as the 2008 sub-prime crisis; or cascading problems associated with a particular issue area—climate change and environmental degradation, for example), and by *load* and *feedback*, where load is defined as the institutional capacity to manage problems and feedback the suite of ‘information provided by analogous problems related to the problem of interest’ (Jones et al., 2016, p. 15). The policy stream, by contrast, is what Kingdon described as the primeval soup of ideas and possibilities: ‘[w]hile many ideas float around in this policy primeval soup, the ones that last, as in a natural selection system, meet some criteria. Some ideas survive and prosper ...’ (2003, p. 203). Within the policy stream, Kingdon identified several subcomponents which filter policy, including the value and acceptability of policy within existing value constraints, and the technical feasibility and resource adequacy to implement and sustain certain policy choices. Finally, the political stream refers to the broader institutional context that influences and shapes perceptions within the body politic: the national mood, the configuration of advocacy coalitions, the institutional composition of the legislative and executive branches and thus the meta environment which enables and constrains specific policy choices.

For Kingdon, while each of these streams operates in a kind of parallel universe, they periodically intersect. That is, policy change ‘occurs when a “window” of opportunity opens and a policy entrepreneur merges the three streams by applying an idea from the policy stream to an issue in the problem stream at a time when the problem/solution coupling is acceptable within the political stream’ (Nowlin, 2011, pp. 44–45; Zohlnhöfer, Herweg, & Rüb, 2015). This, as Capano observes, is an important insight since it provides the MSA with a ‘non-linear logic of policy development ... and gives importance to the role of chance and individual behaviour in generating change’—i.e., a kind of evolutionary primeval soup, chaotic and complex, with policy entrepreneurs constantly interacting with their environments, responding to the changing dimensions of ‘value acceptability’, ‘technical feasibility’ and recombining ‘familiar elements’ to devise new policy at opportune times (Cairney & Jones, 2016, p. 41; Capano, 2009, p. 19; Sabatier, 1991, p. 151).

Other influential perspectives have also lent interpretive and methodological weight to understanding the morphology of policy and institutional change. The PEF, for example, attempts to integrate explanations of incremental and non-incremental policy change into a single perspective. Imported from palaeontology, the PEF challenges incremental perspectives

in which policy is understood exclusively as a gradualist evolutionary process from one period to the next. Rather, as Baumgartner and Jones (1993) and Baumgartner et al. (2014) argue in relation to agenda dynamics in American politics, policy processes tend to be characterised by longer periods of incrementalism, with negative feedback making policy changes to the status quo relatively minor and difficult to sustain. At the same time, however, large policy changes do periodically occur, reflecting processes of positive and assertive feedback, often in response to sudden changes in opinion, event development, or shocks (Robinson, Caver, Meier, O'Tool, & Laurence, 2007, pp. 140–141). Similarly, PDF has also attempted to explain policy change, sequentiality, and processes of contingent and conjunctural causation in relation to the interplay of constraining environments and policy entrepreneurship. It aims to account for both the structured nature of policy making within existing institutional contexts but interspersed with gradual and sudden policy ruptures or institutional transformation (David, 2002; Kay, 2005; Mahoney, 2000).

### 3.2 *Methodological Weaknesses*

Despite their wide utilization as frameworks to map, explain and understand actors, actor constellations, institutions, and the environmental contexts which conspire to cause policy and institutional change in incremental or non-incremental ways, the very fact of the existence of multiple frameworks suggests ongoing theoretical contestation. Path dependency perspectives, for example, have been criticised for assuming sequentiality, and the ‘inherent logic of events’ connected by discrete yet interconnected ‘enchained sequences’. As Mahoney (2000) notes, ‘this formulation leaves open the question of how one event “logically” or “inherently” follows from another’, noting that ‘path-dependent analysts cannot simply appeal to Dr. Seuss-like explanatory principles—i.e., “it just happened that this happened first, then this, then that, and is not likely to happen that way again”’ (p. 530). Similarly, the PEF has drawn strong criticism for being descriptive rather than methodologically rigorous. As Robinson et al. (2007, p. 141) note, ‘[t]his theory has been remarkably difficult to test in political science just as it was in its home discipline of palaeontology’. More obviously, the PEF does not provide any predictive framework for when, ‘precisely, punctuations will occur or when equilibrium returns after a punctuation’. All it predicts is that ‘punctuations will be large, but rare’, rendering the null hypothesis for punctuated equilibrium slippery: ‘Any

particular policy history in which one sees change can be called confirming evidence. Any policy history in which one sees stability can also be seen as confirming evidence' (ibid).

The MSA has also been criticised for failing to produce testable hypotheses, instead splintering into studies that attempt to refine the model and add further variables or qualifications (Nowlin, 2011, p. 46) (see also Herweg, Huß, & Zohlnhöfer, 2015; Howlett, McConnell, & Perl, 2015; Zohlnhöfer et al., 2015). Cairney and Jones, for example, found that while the MSA literature was extensive, it was populated 'primarily by isolated case studies where authors either: do not speak to the wider literature, present models that are difficult to compare with others, or use MSA to focus on new objects of study' (Cairney & Jones, 2016, pp. 49–50; see also Jones et al., 2016; Rawat & Morris, 2016, pp. 622–624; Zahariadis, 2016). Capano (2009) also questions the underlying epistemological logic of the MSA, and what he identifies as a 'substantial incongruence' in the MSA approach:

A complex adaptive system means a system (a policy in our case) that adapts through the reciprocal adaptation of all its own components .... [T]he MSA, on the contrary, assumes that there is only a contingent influence of the three streams of policy, politics and problems, even if the political stream provides several constraints that limit the independence of the other two streams. How do the various components of a policy co-evolve if the three constitutive elements are supposed to be substantially independent? In other words, if the political system is significantly constraining the other two streams, this indicates a kind of hierarchy among the three streams .... To be coherent from the "complex adaptive systems" perspective we need to assume that the various parts of the policy arena constitute a driver of change by directly influencing other components. From this point of view, the MSA is affected by a contradiction between its basic epistemological and theoretical choices and the combination thereof. (pp. 19–21)

Despite its wide application, the ACF also suffers from conceptual indeterminacy, highlighting several issues concerning its epistemological fiat. The primacy of its ideational approach—the theoretical assumption that values and beliefs are core to coalition formation/maintenance and, in essence, dominate over material interests—insulates the framework from rigorous testing. As Jacobs observes, 'most arguments about ideational effects seem to leap directly from the content of an idea to the content of actors' beliefs, goals, and policy preferences'. But why should we assume

that belief systems, ideas or values represent some ‘seamless web’ that are ‘unitary and internally coherent across groups and situations’ (Jacobs as quoted in Carstensen, 2011, p. 151; Jacobs, 2009)? Indeed, the analytical rigour of the framework is limited by several assumptions: that ‘individuals are rationally motivated but are bounded by their imperfect cognitive ability’ (rationally motivated in relation to core beliefs or empirical evidence?); that individuals have multiple layers of beliefs that are inversely related to evidence; the more core the belief, the less malleable it is to empirical evidence (but how do we identify core beliefs, are they discrete or interrelated with other beliefs/values that are equally resistant to empirical evidence?); that the happenstance of external events (major socio-economic changes, changes in public opinion, changes in governing coalitions, etc.) are often key drivers of policy change (but without specifying the parameters of externally driven change versus advocacy coalition induced change); that actors and coalitions are nominally constrained by the institutional environment in which they operate, such as resources, the leadership skills of policy entrepreneurs, or the institutional venues in which advocacy coalitions ply their art of persuasion, but in ways that are not specified (leaving unresolved the enduring problem of the agency of coalitions versus structure/institutional context) (Weible & Sabatier, 2006, pp. 127, 129). These analytical parameters are not empirically grounded so much as statements of faith—beyond verification. Indeed, the ACF can be accused of being *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*; in essence, suggesting that correlations between constituent *assumptions* are important and then assuming that this provides an *explanandum* of causation (James & Jorgensen, 2009, pp. 144–145).

#### 4 WHERE TO NEXT? A GRAMMAR OF INSTITUTIONAL AND POLICY CHANGE

A common outcome of initial waves of theoretical effort is typically the emergence of a shared grammar; the stabilisation of language, the emplacement of definitional parameters around core concepts, broad agreement about key questions or puzzles, and occasionally the emergence of common research agendas—perhaps even core paradigms. Crawford and Ostrom (1995) long ago recognised the importance of this in relation to institutional theory, and the danger the absence of such a grammar posed to theoretical advancement in the field. Their solution was to systematically

emplace such a grammar, to stabilise language and nomenclature so that the specificity of meaning in relation to the description and analysis of institutional features (norms, rules, strategy, institutional statements, routine practices, institutional logics, etc.) would enable genuine comparison across institutional spaces, geographies, and settings, preparing the way for theory building and the possibility of developing testable hypotheses (Levy & Scully, 2007, p. 973).

Despite their efforts, however, many of which were dutifully followed among adherents of the Institutional Analysis and Development Framework (IAD) in addressing common pool resources and collective action problems, the results have been disappointing (Nowlin, 2011, pp. 42–43) (Meier, 2009; Ostrom, 2007). The grammar of institutional theory, specifically of institutional and policy change, remains idiosyncratic, endlessly divisible, with ever more discrete studies often contributing further silos to an already silo-ised and fractious compendium of research effort. While it would be naive to suppose theory building is a simple linear process of knowledge development, cumulative and progressive, it is not unreasonable to assume that it cannot be endlessly circular or reductive in the sense of periodically starting from scratch, continuously modifying method, language, focus, scope, or introducing further analytical qualification.

In a sense, however, this is precisely what much institutional analysis has been (Meier, 2009): theoretically inconclusive, a research programme that is periodically relaunched, but ultimately failing to provide greater clarity to questions of institutional and policy change or achieve any substantive theoretical settlement. For any new entrant to the discourse and literature on institutional and policy change much of the effort commences with an attempt to work out where we are, what if anything has been achieved, and where the next theory-building effort might be directed—another modification to method, a further variable to consider, a hitherto understudied mechanism of causality producing change, another attempt at theory or theoretical synthesis?

This is not to disparage the enterprise of scholars or the scholarship produced, but simply to acknowledge that the effort has not been commensurate with the outcomes, theoretically speaking. It is also to highlight a core and enduring problem for the social sciences; the failure to more fully grapple with key theoretical questions about *social action*, and the deeper epistemological limits to knowledge manifest in understanding the relationship between *structure* and *agency*. Institutional theory and policy

science have devoted too little time to linking their research agendas to social theory and the epistemic basis of knowledge in social science. The result, unsurprisingly, has been an endless scramble for still more frameworks and methods but in ways that are fundamentally disconnected from core issues otherwise necessary for successful theory building. The failure of theorising is often masked by the call for more research. Mintrom and Norman, for example, when reflecting on policy entrepreneurs and their relationship to policy change, note that policy scholarship is thus far inconclusive, that there remains room ‘for more conceptual development and empirical testing concerning policy entrepreneurship’, that more study is required of the ‘interactions between policy entrepreneurs and their specific policy contexts’, and that various ‘methods could be employed in such studies; as always, methods must be shaped to the specifics of research subjects and their contests’ (Mintrom & Norman, 2009, p. 661). But why? The sense that more empirical studies or more methods to conduct further empirical investigation will lead automatically to conceptual development and theoretical settlement is overly optimistic. It will simply lead to more empirical research, the collective outcomes of which will be a vast compendium of discrete case studies and ever more thick descriptions of actors within, and their relationship to, institutions.

For policy science, the absence of a deeper sense of these epistemological questions is its Achilles heel. It leads to a profusion of what might be termed second- or third-order research questions—interesting though they may be. Mintrom and Norman, for example, provide a shopping list of areas requiring further empirical investigation in order to achieve ‘conceptual breakthroughs’: the motivations of policy entrepreneurs; the role of political ambition among policy entrepreneurs, career paths and policy entrepreneurship; ‘how contextual factors serve to constrain and shape the actions of policy entrepreneurs’; the role of ‘information, risk and trustworthiness’ in policy entrepreneurship; the ‘sequencing of policy entrepreneurship’; how ‘certain circumstances are more or less likely to favour the emergence of policy insiders or outsiders as policy entrepreneurs’; and explorations into the ‘relative significance of contextual factors versus the actions and attributes of policy entrepreneurs for affecting policy change’ (Mintrom & Norman, 2009, pp. 660–662). Much as with Kingdon’s MSA framework, one wonders to what degree further, empirically discrete studies might simply add to the ‘primeval soup’ but without necessarily leading to any ‘conceptual breakthroughs’?

The recent embrace in policy science of *bricolage* as the newest ‘method’ or framework for understanding gradualist institutional and policy change highlights this broader epistemological and theory-building dilemma. Adopted from critical theory perspectives, specifically the work of Lévi-Strauss (1966) who employed the concept as a means of differentiating between mythological and scientific knowledge, *bricolage* was used to describe discursive and opportunistic processes of recombination in which the *bricoleur* (the ‘savage mind’) ‘works with his hands in devious ways, puts pre-existing things together in new ways, and makes do with whatever is at hand’ (Mambrol, 2016). The concept has been appropriated by policy science to conceptualise the manner in which institutional or policy entrepreneurs innovate to produce change. For policy science, the *bricoleur* connotes a ‘Jack of all trades or a kind of professional do-it-yourself person’ (Mambrol, 2016). As Carstensen notes, *bricolage* is ‘relevant for understanding processes of institutional change’ since institutions provide a ‘repertoire of already existing institutional principles and practices that actors can use to innovate’, and thus modify (incrementally) institutions and policy (Carstensen, 2015, p. 143; see also Carstensen, 2011; Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016). Applying the concept of the *bricoleur*, Carstensen argues, helps mediate broader questions about structure and agency (or institutions and institutional entrepreneurs): ‘bricolage is not only about the reuse of existing institutional elements, but also—resembling the process of mimetic isomorphism discussed in DiMaggio and Powell (1983)—about the transfer of practices from one field to another in which they have not previously been applied, leading to true innovation’ (Carstensen, 2015, p. 144).

In point of fact, of course, invoking the concept of the *bricoleur* simply re-states how institutional/policy entrepreneurs have already been defined. For example; ‘[i]nstitutional entrepreneurship can be understood as strategic action: Institutional strategies are patterns of organizational action concerned with the formation and transformation of institutions’; institutional entrepreneurs ‘lead efforts to identify political opportunities, frame issues and problems, and mobilize constituencies’ (Levy & Scully, 2007, p. 974). Or, using Kingdon’s definition of ‘policy entrepreneurs’: they are actors who ‘lie in wait in and around government with their solutions at hand, waiting for problems to float by to which they can attach their solutions, waiting for a development in the political stream they can use to their advantage’ (Kingdon, 1984b, pp. 165–166) (Cairney, 2011, pp. 271–272). *Bricolage* does no more than re-state the existence of

already defined actors and the manner of their actions within institutions. It does not, as such, offer a ‘conceptual breakthrough’ or theoretical innovation, or settle fundamental questions about agency and structure or the ‘paradox of embedded agency’ (Levy & Scully, 2007, p. 974). The fundamental dilemma of embedded agency and of constructing an epistemic social science knowledge able to adequately account for social action within structured environments remains unaddressed.

For institutional theory too, these same dilemmas are apparent. Campbell and Pedersen’s call for a new wave of institutional analysis, for example, recognises the disappointing outcome of theory-building efforts across the social sciences, where recurrent questions about the nature of institutional isomorphism, the constitutive basis of institutions, their functions and characteristics, and the role of agency in relation to incremental and non-incremental change, had produced few conclusive insights. In response, Campbell and Pedersen (2001, p. 3) see the need for a new movement in institutional analysis: ‘the fact that debates about the relative explanatory power of these paradigms keep recurring in the social science fields of political economy, historical sociology, comparative politics, international relations, organizational analysis, and others suggests that no paradigm has a monopoly on the truth’. Rather, they suggest abandoning ‘paradigmatic boundaries’ so that ‘scholars can discover a wider, more complex array of mechanisms of institutional change than each paradigm generally can alone’:

... linking paradigms by specifying contexts under which different causal processes operate; blending insights from different paradigms to show how the causal factors of one paradigm interact or are nested with those of another; identifying analytic problems shared by different paradigms; and subsuming arguments from one paradigm into those of another. (ibid.)

Again, this is a call for more research, the empirical identification of still more mechanisms of institutional change and more discrete case studies in the hope that the sheer weight of deep empiricism will somehow lead to concrete theoretical breakthroughs. It is also an acknowledgement of theoretical indeterminacy; about the object of study (what it is we are seeking to understand) and how to approach it theoretically. Indeed, Campbell famously demonstrated this theoretical indeterminacy when he posed three basic and enduring questions at the very core of institutional analysis: what is institutional change, how would we know it when we see it,

and what does it look like when it occurs? (Campbell, 2004, p. 31). Unfortunately, Campbell's questions remain largely unanswered, cut adrift by the paradigmatic mixing and blending of countless frameworks and empirical cases coupled with the failure to develop a common institutional-theoretical grammar. As always, theoretical advancement and the construction of an epistemic knowledge of institutions and change will rest in addressing adequately these most fundamental of questions:

1. *What is an institution?* 'Multidimensional sets of rules' as Campbell claims (Campbell, 2010, p. 107)? 'Structures that matter most in the social realm' and 'which make up the stuff of social life' (Hodgson, 2006, p. 2)? A social structure that, as Veblen and Commons both argue, has the potential to change agents, agential purpose and preferences (Commons, 1959; Papageorgiou, Katselidis, & Michaelides, 2013; Veblen, 2007)? Or prescribed patterns of correlated behaviour (Foster, 1981)? While definitional work differentiating between institutions, conventions and rules has proceeded apace in an effort to stabilise the language surrounding institutional analysis, it would be incorrect to state that such efforts have reached a conclusion. To be sure, there is broad agreement that institutions are written and unwritten rules and norms that guide the behaviour of actors through a logic of appropriateness (i.e., beliefs and ideas) and/or a logic of instrumentality (i.e., cost-benefit calculation), but beyond this important insight the notion of an institution remains broadly intuitive, understood generically as a social construction and definitionally malleable, dependent on context and application (Campbell, 2004).
2. *What is the difference between institutions and structure?* Conflating and/or confusing institutions and structures remains problematic in institutionalist, social theory and policy science literatures (Bakir, 2013, 2017). Theorizing the role of structure and agency, and of policy entrepreneurship within institutions, has often been conflated in ways that diminish the prospects for conceptual clarity or theory-building breakthroughs. Sewell, by contrast, understands structures as 'sets of mutually sustaining schemas and resources that empower and constrain social action and that tend to be reproduced by that social action' (Sewell, 1992, p. 19). They refer to broader material (e.g., macroeconomic, market, and financial structures) and ideational (e.g., national culture and administrative traditions/styles)

contexts in which institutions and agents are embedded (Bakir, 2013; Bourdieu, 1979). Structures, in other words, not only shape institutions but also arise organically from the nature of institutions themselves—expressed through agential authority. There is, in this sense, great need for a revisitation of core postulates undergirding our understanding of structure and the way in which institutions are embedded within ideational and material structures—work that hitherto has not received the attention it deserves.

3. *What is the impact of context on agency behaviour?* Much theoretical effort has been expended on theory building concerning the relationship between agential authority and structure. Much of this, however, has been non-situational, particularly so in policy science where the impact of context on actor behaviour has been insufficiently addressed: how individual agents both shape their context and are shaped by it. While there is broad concurrence that agential actions are context-dependent and reflect dynamic interactions among interdependent structures, institutions and agency-level situations, and that these contexts can both enable and constrain agential authority, too little theoretical work has built upon the distinction between structures, institutions, and agency-level enabling/constraining conditions in a way that enables scholars to disaggregate these interactions and the conditions which facilitate and constrain agential behaviour (Bakir, 2013, 2017; Bakir & Jarvis, 2017).
4. *What functions do institutions perform?* While definitions of institutions remain broadly contested, for institutional scholars it is the functions that institutions perform that remain of central concern in terms of how they shape, mediate, and impact social agency, political, economic, and social outcomes—and thus the change that may ensue. But how do we identify institutional functions? Not all institutional functions are obvious, and some may only be important in the context of their relationship to other functions or as a constellation of coextensive functions. Identifying the functions of institutions thus remains an inherently normative exercise, largely contingent on the mode of institutional analysis adopted, context and scholarly fancy.
5. *What is it about institutions that we seek to measure or assess in terms of change?* Is it institutional authority, the instruments of authority, the rules and norms of the institution, or particular attributes (i.e., beliefs, ideational values, systems of empowerment and political

representation)? Are we measuring the changes to institutional structure and composition, context, or the change this generates in relation to agency, social, political and economic outcomes?

6. *How do we demonstrate causality relative to institutional change?* Institutional rules may change, new norms may be adopted, or the precise functions of an institution may evolve over time, but how can these changes be measured in relation to exogenous performance outcomes within an economic system, political regime, or social order? Isolating variables and demonstrating causality is always difficult but in institutional environments where routes of transmission are multiple (market signals, rules based, incentive based, social, political, ideational), teasing out causal drivers and the relationships that may obtain is problematic. As Campbell notes, ‘it is easier to determine the degree to which institutional rules have changed than it is to determine the degree to which these changes have affected functional performance. This is because it is often hard to determine precisely how much institutions, rather than other factors, affect national political-economic performance’ (Campbell, 2010, p. 107).
7. *How do we conceptualise and situate a locus of institutional change?* Do exogenous factors drive institutional change or do changes in the fabric, functions, or ideational values embodied in institutions drive change in the exogenous environment? There are, for example, plenty of examples where ‘institutional drift’ occurs either due to changes in the exogenous environment causing institutions to redefine their role, functions, and the scope of the institution and/or convert the institutional motif in order to sustain institutional relevance, but equally numerous examples of institutions becoming redundant, outpaced by exogenous developments, unable to adapt or modify, resulting in them becoming obsolescent. Do we thus understand institutions predominantly in relation to change in exogenously driven processes, as reactive and adaptive (or non-adaptive as the case may be) or as drivers of change in exogenous environments?
8. *How do we overcome the bias of ‘formal’ and ‘substantive’ rationality in institutional analysis?* Weber long ago identified three rationalities: formal rationality (the ‘extent to which action happens as a consequence of quantitative’ calculation); substantive rationality (which focuses on results and outcomes and refers to ‘the success or failure of economically orientated action to achieve some ultimate

objectives’); and hermeneutic rationality, where action ‘may not be instrumentally optimal, may not be methodically consistent, and yet may be understandable because we comprehend the causal rules that generate it’ (Rona-Tas, 2007, pp. 113–114; Weber, Wittich, & Roth, 2013). In institutional theory there has been a tendency to approach institutions and questions of institutional change from the perspective of formal and substantive rationalities. North’s grand attempt to explain the causes of economic stagnation and decline, and those of success, in terms of the institutional frameworks that prevail, for example, is an attempt to apply formal and substantive rationalities in order to harness a utilitarian logic that can then be applied to public policy. It is an instrumental rationality designed with a view to ‘quantitative calculation or accounting’, the identification of the technically possible, and its potential application to realise socio-political-economic outcomes (i.e., institutional design) (Weber, 1947, p. 184). But can theory-building efforts in institutional analysis be successful if we rely exclusively on formal and substantive rationalities of inquiry? The limits of an epistemic knowledge of institutions and institutional change may reflect a hermeneutic rationality in which history, institutional orders and the social forces that propel them represent numerous socially divisible interpretive efforts by actors to make sense of their environments and then act on this interpretive moment. In other words, the constellation of factors that lead to particular institutional configurations may reflect little more than agential fancy, rather than purposeful design (Beckert, 2009).

Doubtlessly, there are other equally important questions. The challenge for social science, and policy science in particular, rests in a fundamental examination of our attempts at conceptualisation and a more perspicuous engagement with social theory if our collective theory-building efforts about institutions, actors, and institutional and policy change are to yield future conceptual breakthroughs.

## NOTE

1. More recent renditions of the MSA approach have, according to Nowlin (2011, p. 45) shifted from a focus on ‘agenda setting to one of policy design and formulation’.

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