

Applications of Darwinian Evolutionary Theory within Historical Institutionalism

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Abstract

There are many discussions and debates within the field of Historical Institutionalism. From institutional creation to change, there is significant disagreement about how to combine the many different ideas being proposed by varying academics within this area of study. These ideas include concepts such as punctuated equilibrium, path dependency, long term temporal analysis, and institutional dynamism. Many of these concepts are variations of ideas found within Darwin's theory of evolution. By applying this theory, I will connect these different ideas within Historical Institutionalism – and present a novel way to look at institutions: species within an environment.

Darwinian theories of human nature can be applied to a number of different fields. His idea of evolution through natural selection, could be applied to any number of systems of analysis. New Institutionalism (NI) is one such system of analysis. For the purposes of this paper, the primary area of discussion will involve Historical Institutionalism (HI), which is a sub-variant of NI. By applying a Darwinian theory of evolution (DET) to New Institutionalism, or treating institutions as biological species, it will bring together the ideas of equilibrium, path dependency, and institutional dynamism under one umbrella term, while further challenging the static notion of institutions. Furthermore, it will place focus on longer temporal periods of examination, thereby addressing one of Paul Pierson's main concerns with the social sciences: the field's lack of focus on lengthy temporal periods.

New Institutionalism is a theory that is concerned with how institutional structures affect political and social outcomes (Hall and Taylor 1996: 936). Resultantly, there is a significant focus on the structural elements within the political arena. Furthermore, NI distances itself from the view that individuals are the primary decision makers, invulnerable to environmental pressures affecting their decision-making (Lowndes 1996: 181). Instead of simply seeing people as atoms completely separated from their surroundings, the individual is immersed in a complex institutional context that interacts with many aspects of the individual's decision-making process. While there are many different variants of New Institutionalism which vary in the strength they attribute to this point, the focus of this paper will surround Historical Institutionalism.

Historical Institutionalism is identified by the works of authors such as Kathleen Thelen, Paul Pierson, Ellen Immergut, and others. Historical Institutionalists assume that political actors are constrained by the institutions that they participate in to achieve political change. These institutions shape activities carried out by political parties, individuals, and various social groups. While political actors are constrained by institutions, institutions are also constrained by the historical legacy of past policies (Béland 2005: 42). This particular brand of Institutionalism tends to emphasize the temporality more so than the others. It focuses on longer temporal periods of study as well stressing the need to understand institutional contexts (Fioretos 2011: 371).

Before beginning to examine the implications of applying Darwinian evolutionary theory to NI, a brief discussion of the term institution is in order. According to Steinmo and Thelen, Historical Institutionalists agree on using mid-level institutions as their main unit of analysis – though in the larger HI family, high-level institutions are also discussed. Higher-level institutions, or “macro-level socioeconomic structures”, include things such as class, democracy, and capitalistic markets (2008: 8-11). In contrast, mid-level structures include corporatist arrangements, party structures, and the executive, legislative, and electoral arenas (Steinmo & Thelen 1992: 6; Immergut 1992: 66). Mid-level structures are favored over higher-level structures because often the higher-level structures are often sources of commonality between objects of study; it is the differences that are of interest. Historical Institutionalists want to know, among other things, how these higher-level structures can be seen through mid-level structures. By focusing primacy on the mid-level structures, it “allows us to explore the effects of such overarching structures on political outcomes, but avoiding the structural determinism that often characterizes broader and more abstract Marxist, functionalist, and systems-theory approaches” (Steinmo & Thelen 1992: 11).

The distinctions drawn between mid-level and higher-level institutions are arbitrary; it is important to make a distinction, but that distinction may shift somewhat depending on the individual who is studying it. In order to link a Darwinian evolutionary perspective to HI, it will be necessary to explain both higher-level and mid-level institutions in terms of species. This is where it will become difficult to achieve a straightforward application. Instead of assuming higher-level institutions as a species, which is what would be expected in a simple application, it will be necessary to envision higher-level institutions as factors that make up an environment. The higher-level institutions, such as democracy and capitalism, should be thought of as akin to temperature and water availability, for instance. These strict assignments are not so important, so long as they are identified as factors, that, when combined together, make up an environment. Mid-level institutions, on the other hand, should be identified as the species. Each institution is a species, and the environment is something that the species share and interact with, while also interacting with each other. For instance, we are an environment to the countless bacterium that inhabit our bodies. From their stand point, we are like the temperature, the water, and the air quality. Just our large intestine alone contains about 10^{14} bacteria, with over 500 different species. Not only do these bacterium exist in vast quantities in the human body, but many serve an important purpose. The human body provides various climatic qualities; it is in a sense, the environment, or institution, though the bacteria also modify conditions. They help process food, break down fibers and certain carbohydrates; they can help protect against other bacteria strains that may be more damaging. In this sense, we have both institution and organism within, and they are both affecting each other (Bischoff and Kramer 2007: 329-330).

Therefore, mid-level institutions are interacting with each other and their environment – affected by each other and the environment (high-level institutions). Now that the term ‘institution’ has been examined and clarified, it is necessary to briefly outline some basic tenets of the Darwinian evolutionary theory that we will be working from, before analyzing the usefulness it can offer Historical Institutionalism, and by extension, NI.

It is important to take time to clarify as much as possible some of the main ideas that are used in the paper to decrease the level of ambiguity and room for problematic interpretation; as such, a somewhat simple variant of Darwin’s evolutionary theory will be used. When discussing

evolutionary theory, according to Haberman and Stevenson, there has sometimes been a tendency to think of it as implying a progression. However, during the 20th century, academics who subscribed to Darwinism began to question this assumption. While it is true that a contemporary species is likely better adapted to the present environment than a past species might be, it does not mean that it is better in any other fashion. Furthermore, it does not have to be efficient within its environment, or ecological niche. It just has to do well enough to survive and reproduce. Additionally, a species “from another part of the world may flourish much better than the natives” (2004: 200-01). Another important aspect that should be elaborated on is natural selection, which is an important mechanism within Darwinian evolutionary theory. The basic idea is that the better-suited something is in a particular environment, the better it will do. The word ‘do’ includes the time frame of survival, both individually, and in terms of species, as well as the degree of flourishing. Flourishing can be seen as the way in which a species spreads and grows within its environment (Haberman & Stevenson 2004: 198). One final point that should be elaborated is Harvard O. Wilson’s view of the brain as a mechanistic instrument that is the result of purely biological processes of evolution. Wilson suggests that because the brain is the direct result of biological evolutionary mechanisms, then things such as aesthetic judgements and religious beliefs are also the result of these processes. He discusses how humans, and other organisms, have left-over adaptations from previous environments (2000: 272). Keith E. Stanovich, in his work “The Robot’s Rebellion: Finding Meaning in the Age of Darwin”, discusses processes that are left in the brain from past environments, yet still activate today, even in inappropriate situations (2005: 13). The species still carries these traits despite the often detrimental affect they may have in its new environment. This point will tie into the idea of institutions finding new roles, which is elaborated on later in the paper. These basic concepts are outlined due to their relation to some of the central points of HI. For instance, the evolution of species relates to punctuated equilibrium. The ability of species to adapt to new situations ties into institutional dynamism, and the idea of path dependency relates to the overall theory of evolution. The following sections will elaborate and reinforce these connections, and propose that using a Darwinian evolutionary theory usefully accentuates these central points of HI, further challenging the static notions of institutions, and addresses Pierson’s call for longer temporal periods of study within the social sciences.

Steinmo and Thelen discuss Stephen Krasner’s model of “punctuated equilibrium”. In short, Karsner proposes that institutions have generally long periods of stability, with short time frames of crisis that “bring... about relatively abrupt institutional change, after which institutional stasis again sets in” (1992: 15). During these periods of crisis, the equilibrium is disrupted, and old institutions can break down, and be replaced by newer ones (1992: 15). This break down can be directly related to the idea of species, and ecological niches, as mentioned earlier. The crisis is similar to Paul Pierson’s meteor example in his article “Big, Slow-Moving and... Invisible: Macrosocial Processes in the Study of Comparative Politics”, where the meteor may have allowed mammals to take the place of the dinosaurs (2003: 178). In this example, dinosaurs are the old institutions, and mammals are the new ones. One issue with the equilibrium theory, however, was that it did not properly address how institutions change over time, and how changes in the environment can affect the behavior of these institutions (Steinmo & Thelen 1992: 15-6).

Steinmo and Thelen go on to elaborate on institutional dynamism, which is meant to address the problems with an otherwise useful theory on institutional equilibrium and crisis.

They discuss how, if the socioeconomic or political context changes, institutions that were minimally active may find themselves suddenly in situations where the level of activity dramatically increases. For instance, “the European Court of Justice has until very recently played a rather minor role in European politics, until the political events surrounding the Single European Act suddenly transformed the institution into an increasingly important locus of conflict and cooperation among the states in Europe” (Steinmo & Thelen 1992: 16). Darwinian evolutionary theory (DET) is apparent here. DET already has the concept of equilibrium, and the dynamism built into it. Socioeconomic and political changes represent changes in higher-order institutions, which translate into changes in the environment. These changes in the environment mean that certain institutions will have to adapt in order to survive. Some institutions, or species, may find themselves in better positions within the new environment, such as the European Court of Justice. In that example, the European Court of Justice is a species, and the Single European Act is a higher-level institution, which constitutes a change in the environment. In the 1830’s, DET encouraged many to abandon the original idea that species were unchanging (Benton & Harper 2009); species may change over time. Imagine if you had a structure like the European Court of Justice that survived a number of crises, and had its role changed periodically over time to suit the new environment. Someone who was familiar with the original European Court of Justice may not recognize the new role it plays; as species may change characteristics over time to adapt to new environments, so do institutions. Therefore, treating institutions as a species integrates Historical Institutionalism’s equilibrium and dynamism under one umbrella view, and does not require them to be mutually exclusive. It highlights dynamism, explains equilibrium, stresses the concept of institutional adaptation, and as a result, effectively challenges the static notion of institutions.

Ellen M. Immergut’s article also challenges the ‘static’ notion of institutions. She proposes the concept of veto points. While Immergut may be more of a Rational Choice Institutionalizer than a Historical Institutionalizer, based on her claim that “actors formulate their goals, ideas, and desires independently from the institutions” (1992: 84), her concept of veto points is relevant to both DET and institutional dynamism. She discusses the location of potential veto points – which is basically a representation of one institution’s advantage in the decision-making process over another. It is the ability to control a legislative outcome (1992: 63). As mentioned earlier, Immergut discusses three main arenas, or institutions: executive, legislative, and electoral. This relates to the relational quality of institutions. The way they interact with each other, the particular structure of the institution, or the way veto points are distributed can affect the outcomes of policy, and the veto points themselves can shift, which emphasizes the dynamic nature of states. To return to the DET, this parallels species’ interactions with each other in a shared environment.

DET is also useful for factoring in the concept of path dependency, and solves the short term temporal focus of social scientists, as portrayed and raised by Paul Pierson. First, path dependency, also known as positive feedback processes, is a situation where a change or alteration in an institution becomes self-reinforcing. The first change reinforces and begins to further drive change. Pierson elaborates, suggesting that, for example, “collective action... may lead to shifts in expectations and resources that facilitate more collective action; similarly, institutionalization may ease problems of coordination, fostering more than institutionalization” (Pierson 2004: 195). Furthermore, once a pattern has begun to stabilize, “the institutional “rules of the game”will often generate self-reinforcing dynamics” (Pierson 2004: 196). These self-

reinforcing dynamics link directly to Stephen Krasner's model of "punctuated equilibrium". Equilibrium does not necessarily mean stasis, but it does mean balanced relations. Self-reinforcing dynamics are basically stabilization of equilibria. Without it, there would be a continuous period of crisis. However, the existence of complex institutions over lengthy periods of times reinforce the idea of equilibrium, and in turn, path dependency. Just like species, institutions tend to reinforce themselves over time. If what they are doing and how they are interacting with their environment is working, then they will continue to function and exist. Secondly, one of Pierson's main concerns in his article, *Big, Slow-Moving, and Invisible*, is the tendency of many social scientists to only focus on very short time frame events, which he calls quadrant one. He proposes that the temporal field of analysis should be extended to longer time frames; many processes that social scientists want to study may take a long time to unfold (Pierson 2004: 180). DET solves this issue. The existence of species, and the process of evolution, has a substantially lengthy time frame. If institutions are viewed as species, the idea to look at institutions using longer temporal frames will no longer be an afterthought. Using Pierson's language, social scientists' attention would no longer be solely focused in quadrant one.

DET promotes some of the basic concepts of HI, such as punctuated equilibrium, institutional dynamism, and path dependency. It challenges the static concept of institutions, and draws attention to longer temporal investigations. Furthermore, it raises awareness of the relational characteristic of institutions; they interact with each, as do different species. DET should be applied to a HI analysis because it brings all these concepts under one umbrella theory, without forcing them to be mutually exclusive. This is not to say that HI should not be used, but that it should be supplemented with DET. Secondly, because DET is prevalent in the biological sciences today, it provides a relatively easy heuristic system for those wishing to use a HI system of analysis to study social phenomenon. Being able to change the way we view objects of study, while maintaining the strengths of current systems of analysis, may offer fruitful insights in future studies.

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