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Path Dependence, Sequence, History, Theory

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Paul Pierson has undertaken an important theoretical venture for comparative politics, and for social science more broadly. Recognizing the historical turn in the social sciences, and taken with the theoretical power of path dependence, Pierson hopes to generate "portable" mid-range theoretical constructs to align history and social science more closely. Were we to have an armament of arguable hypotheses about timing, sequence, and "temporal processes" our understanding of politics and political development would be much advanced. This is a tempting prospect.

In this commentary, I begin by re-introducing path dependence to the reader. I argue that the adoption of path dependence by political scientists, sociologists, and historians has undermined the concept's theoretical power. The second section discusses timing, sequence, and temporal processes and argues that, taken together, they are not quite history. In the final section, I suggest how we might know powerful theory and portable constructs, if we had them.

PATH DEPENDENCE

Paul Pierson makes enormous claims for path dependence: that path dependence is intrinsically historical, that "we are beginning to construct a rather powerful theory about path dependent processes," that these processes are very prevalent in political life, that they are a good entry point for understanding timing and sequence, that path dependence is what all sequencing arguments really are, and finally, that path dependence is what "the most prominent substantive claims about the role of timing and sequence really are."

Pierson and others are attempting the difficult task of naturalizing path dependence from its birthplace in economics to the quite different settings of political science, history, and sociology. I am reminded of the lilac in my garden in San Diego. To have a lilac here seems to me a miracle. A botanist, whose name is unknown to me, naturalized the lilac from its forebears' habitat of freezing winters and humid summers to this adopted home of nearly invariant dry, mild days. Unlike my lilac, which perfectly conjures up the lilacs of my New York City childhood, path dependence in its new environment is just not the same.

Path dependence is an explanation for findings surprising to economists, to wit, that technologically suboptimal choices sometimes succeed in free markets.[1] For economists, who are more devout in their faith than other social scientists, this was unsettling. The rest of us, regularly confronted with unintended consequences (political science), social pathology (sociology), or the triumph of evil (history), do not feel our theoretical fundamentals called into question by unhappy empirical findings. But economists expect markets to provide optimal solutions. How could it be that VHS videorecorders established market supremacy over the demonstrably superior Beta VCR? Why does the QWERTY keyboard, counterintuitive and inefficient, enjoy a monopoly?

The answer is that even a brief market advantage sometimes makes the lesser choice more attractive. In the case of the keyboard, several thousand typists were trained to touch type on QWERTY, and were ready to work. For VHS, quite quickly more recorded tapes were available in that format. Under these conditions the market grants victory to the technologi-

1. *Contra* Pierson (this volume) and Thelen path dependence is *not* a theory of technology or technological development. Thelen, "Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics," paper presented at the 1998 American Political Science Associations Meetings.

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cally inferior, because for each individual (as well as for producers of related goods) the technologically inferior is the economically superior choice. The "wrong" choice soon enjoys the preponderance of sales.[2]

One could make a number of inferences from these trajectories. For example, we might observe that technological superiority is not the only consideration of consumers and producers. Or, similarly, we could acknowledge that substantial technological differences to experts are inconsequential to consumers, who feel their QWERTY keyboards and VHS VCRs are altogether adequate. For economists the critical inference was that history mattered; that brief, small, perhaps even accidental events dramatically altered the market's course. These accounts thus marked the entry of history and accident – powerful amendments – into previously ahistorical disciplinary doctrine. Nonetheless, the market retained its central place.

We might observe similar trajectories of mere happenstance changing the course of events in politics. It has been argued, for example, that had Wilbur Mills not dallied with Fannie Fox, he would instead have masterminded some reasonable facsimile of universal health insurance through the House of Representatives. A second and more useful understanding of path dependence is that events, decisions, and arrangements put in place at one moment constrain the choices available later. This understanding of path dependence informs Terry Karl's account of politics and economy in the oil exporting countries in the 1970s. For these countries, a sudden increase in oil revenues seemed to offer the chance to rechart the course of their economic development and provide the means to diversify their economies. Yet like *The Millionaire's* knock or the winning lottery ticket, increased resources only exacerbated the weaknesses in long standing patterns of politics, administration, and economic development.[3]

Beyond these sorts of arguments, I think that path dependence loses vigor outside of economics. The reason is that the central mechanism in economics, the market, does not function elsewhere. Nor are successful outcomes elsewhere the aggregates of individual choices or congealed tastes (if outcomes were simply the aggregate of individual choices, the process would be analogous to markets). Political institutions do not persist because individuals continue to choose them as we persist in buying QWERTY keyboards and VHS VCRs.

So the first, and most important, reason path dependence is resistant to naturalization in disciplines other than economics is that the social process at the center of economics (the market) does not have counterparts elsewhere. Expanding the understanding of path dependence to include a series of steps (large start up costs, learning effects, coordination effects, adaptive expectations, self-reinforcing processes, "reproduction," and positive feedback loops) does not ameliorate this difficulty. Failing to designate recognizable social processes, these "mechanisms" of path dependence do not travel well from the economy to comparative politics and political history; they are not even descriptions, much less explanations.

A second problem is that a theory meant to explain countertheoretical outcomes in economics has become a description of permanence, stasis, or tenacity in politics. It is striking how eager Pierson is to attribute stability to social phenomena. In the economy tenacity is maintained by the preponderance of sales. In society and politics we can acknowledge the force of existing arrangements, presuming in favor of the status quo. Nevertheless, we need to problematize stability, not assume it. How do institutions or regimes sustain themselves? Some regimes and institutions have more staying power than others. We can list many reasons (they provide jobs, they enjoy the force of law and authority, they perform useful social functions); we can, with Thelen, look for their "distributive effects."[4] Any of these might identify social processes that constitute "self-reinforcement" or "feedback loops."

Their functions are unlikely, however, to be so unidirectional. If we assume, and then perceive, only stasis, we will not be getting the whole picture, and will miss the central dynamics of political change. Self-reinforcing processes are rare in politics and society; we need, as Orren and Skowronek point out, to "focus . . . on the incongruities that political institutions routinely produce."[5]

We may take Pierson's account of Shefter's work on party formation as an example. The argument is that, absent social forces favoring the construction of autonomous bureaucracies, and in the presence of sufficient resources, parties based on patronage can form and, "once entrenched, the dominant basis of political mobilization became extremely difficult to dislodge." If we look at the history of those parties, we see that opposition to them was almost immediate. More important on both empirical and theoretical grounds, even the alleged beneficiaries of these par-

2. W. Brian Arthur, "Positive Feedback in the Economy," *Scientific American* 267 (1990): 92–99; and Arthur, "Competing Technologies, Increasing Returns, and Lock-in by Historical Events," *The Economic Journal* 99 (1989): 116–31. Paul A. David, "Understanding the Economics of QWERTY: The Necessity of History," in *Economic History and the Modern Economist,* ed. William N. Parker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 30–49.

3. Terry Lynn Karl, *The Paradox of Plenty, Oil Booms and Petro-States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

4. Thelen argues that institutions are not neutral coordinating mechanisms, but have particular distributional effects ("Historical Institutionalism," 48).

5. Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, "Beyond the Iconography of Order: Notes for a 'New Institutionalism'," in *The Dynamics of American Politics, Approaches and Interpretations,* eds. Lawrence C. Dodd and Calvin Jillson (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 320.

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ties resented the coercive quality and the insecurity of patronage employment. As a consequence, some patronage employees themselves supported the introduction of civil service. Was patronage a very powerful resource for building strong party organizations? Certainly. Was it a self-reinforcing mechanism? Only in part. Patronage generated opposition even as it generated alliance. Was the patronage element of popular mobilization "extremely difficult to dislodge"? This is a complicated question. Patronage parties always delivered more than patronage; we do not really know how much the jobs mattered to the average faithful partisan. How "difficult to dislodge" is a judgment call. Compared to securing the suffrage for African Americans, for example, we could only judge the campaigns for civil service brief and benign.[6]

Path dependence is a powerful idea, but not a theory of society, history, or politics. It is a mistake to understand history as a series of cycles in which social and political processes "are prone to consolidation or institutionalization" in arrangements which then "reproduce" themselves until new conditions "disrupt" or "overwhelm" them. For one thing, this reading leaves us content to recognize stability, but condemned to surprise at change. For another, although there are times when "external" shocks reconfigure societies, change is not always provoked by outside forces. Elements of change and disruption inhere in superficially stable situations; if we cannot recognize and theorize these we settle for superficial readings of politics and society.

TIMING, SEQUENCE, AND HISTORY

Timing and sequence often play a role in political and historical explanation. Although timing and sequence evoke a historical sense about social processes, they do not, standing alone or taken together, constitute history. Again analogy is clarifying. There is an intellectual industry concerned with child development. Scholars of child development argue persuasively that each year of childhood has its own peculiar characteristics (the two year old desires independence, the three year old is bossy, and so on). Other scholars of child development find explanatory power in placing the child's arrival in a sequence: the first child has certain personality characteristics, the middle child another set, and the baby their own distinctive traits. In addition, scholars might theorize about parallel, and related, temporal processes. No doubt there are child development researchers theorizing about the consequences for child development of how and when the child's appearance intersects with the trajectory of parental development, how the children of the middle aged differ from the children of the young.

Most timing and sequence arguments in comparative politics are not, I think, informed by the theory of path dependence so much as they are, like the timing and sequence arguments in the child development literature, about how an event or series of events changes the setting for subsequent events. My own arguments about suffrage and industrialization are of this sort (a plausible political strategy of artisans may not be a plausible political strategy for factory workers; a popular coalition absent the suffrage may be riven by partisan difference once members are voting); Ertman's arguments about building Leviathan are of this sort as well.[7]

But now we are on the edge of history. As fascinating and persuasive as any claims about timing, sequence, and intersecting parallel processes might be in the theory of child development, they pale beside what one knows about children and their life's prospects by knowing the year (better, the year and place) they were born.[8] The study of politics and society too benefits from introducing history.

How shall we think about history, and about how it matters? What does it mean to speak of "historically grounded research," or "historically specific analysis"? History is narratives over time; to think about history is to think about the importance of chronological time, not order and sequence alone. There are no "historically grounded analyses" outside of chronological location. The reason is that for the analysis of politics and society (as for the birth of the child), the whole is prior to the parts, not the aggregate of the parts. More, the parts are themselves relational, and thus not movable from whole to whole.

To think about the whole of society there are an array of constructs – industrializing, capitalist, colonial, core, periphery, feudal, even "seventh century" – suggesting what we know already. This may be what some colleagues mean by "contextualize." Or, it might be one elaboration of Scharpf's injunction that the search for explanations "must be disciplined by strong prior expectations."[9] Tilly enjoins us to pursue "historically grounded analyses . . . as alternatives to timeless, placeless, models of social organization and social change."[10] The caution to be historically specific (rather than ahistorical) is, in the language of

6. Pierson's further conclusion, that "efforts to build bureaucratic autonomy . . . after democratization . . . were 'too late' makes sense of the U.S. c. 1910, but not much later." See Wallace Sayre and Herbert Kaufman, *Governing New York City: Politics in the Metropolis* (New York: Russell Sage, 1960).

7. Amy Bridges, "Becoming American: The Working Classes of the United States Before the Civil War", in Ira Katznelson and Ari Zolberg, eds., *Working Class Formation: Patterns in the Nineteenth Century United States and Europe* (Princeton University Press, 1986).

8. Even the much maligned behavioralists incorporate historical understandings by recognizing *generation* as a determinant of political sentiment and behavior.

9. Fritz Scharpf, *Games Real Actors Play* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 29, quoted in Pierson. I recognize this is not what Scharpf meant.

10. Charles Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984), 2.

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normal science, to specify the set of cases of which one's study is an example.

In historically grounded comparative analyses the most prominent substantive claims are not about path dependence as Pierson theorizes it. Rather, the most prominent claims are about the relation of social forces to political outcomes, and about the consequences of the relations between social forces and political institutions. The contributions of Collier and Collier are arguments about how the working classes joined the political arena, and the consequences for politics and for the working classes of their style of incorporation.

Almost all of the work Pierson cites is historically grounded research, and it is here that Pierson may seek his portable hypotheses. Do any of the arguments about class identities and politics in *Working Class Formation* make sense for the newly industrializing and democratizing countries of the 1950s? the 1970s? Are there lessons from *Shaping the Political Arena* for the newly named countries of the former Soviet bloc? How can we theorize their choices for building political parties? How do technological advance and the tightening embrace of the world system change Ertman's dynamics for countries that seek military establishments in the twentieth century?

TOWARD POWERFUL THEORY

What would a powerful theory look like if we had it? The best armament for a social scientist is a Simple Elegant Theory with Great Explanatory Value. A powerful theory (hypothesis, concept) provokes and informs research, frames our questions, and organizes our findings. There are two ways one might arrive at such a theory (or even, a hypothesis or concept). The theory might follow deductions from some set of premises, as in economics or its progeny, the theory of social choice. Alternately, a powerful theory, hypothesis, or concept might be the consequence of inductive reasoning over several cases, as in Max Weber's writings about bureaucracy or the city. In history, political science, and sociology most powerful theories, hypotheses, and concepts are of this sort. Some combination of industry and epiphany births these ideas, of which each of us no doubt has some list of favorites (e.g., anomie, world system and its attendant concepts, underdevelopment, institutions, state capacity, class, status, party, path dependence).

What if we were to settle for mid-range hypotheses or theories, portable over a more limited range of events? Portable hypotheses will come from the historically grounded analyses we read and write. As we try to move propositions about sequence, institutions, and social forces from one society to another, we should gain insight not only into newly researched social relations, but also into societies and politics we thought we had long understood.

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