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Assemblages and Agents in Explanations of Institutional Change

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I want to raise some questions about a chief matter of concern for political scientists, namely civics: how citizens self-govern. Many political scientists – like most sociologists and economists – favor explanations that use institutions to fix and predict citizen behaviors; individuals act within an institutional context. It’s a well-ordered universe. Either behavior is controlled by rules and incentives backed by authority to impose compliance or, in more sociological accounts, behavior is embedded in cultural norms and social roles that individuals unwittingly enact. The one invests the state with paramount powers to guide and shift citizens and the other invokes a durable society compulsively following established paths. In both scenarios, individual citizen agency is sharply circumscribed. Change – when it occurs – is usually attributed to structural shifts that disrupt the smooth reproduction of government. It’s hard to see any self-governing going on. I think that’s right: self-government is problematic. But part of the problem is how we study politics; our conceptions don’t enable us to see that there’s a lot of self-government going on.

Self-government is overflowing the conception of institutions as the cause of action. Recently in the U.S. we’ve seen the reversal of public employment labor institutions in Wisconsin, Tea Party-type opposition to public services (such as government-supported home mortgages and public schools, including the privatization of schools in New Orleans), the emergence of the filibuster as a routine technique in the Senate, the rapid growth of income inequality between the top 1% and the 99%, and the use of 501(c) corporations for partisan politics, *but also* the successful rescue of the auto industry, the Federal Reserve’s successful prevention of a new Great Depression, the re-federalization of student loan programs, rising voter turnout in the last three presidential elections after decades of decline, Obamacare, Occupy Wall Street, and so on. These are all novelties of civic affairs that are not easily explained by settled concepts like weak state, strong nation, liberal market economy, Madisonian Constitution, center-right political culture, Southern Politics, the Three Traditions, and the logic of plurality election rules. Perhaps we’ve prematurely settled our accounts of political reality.

Similar observations to mine about the deterministic shortcoming of historical institutional explanations have been made by others. The growing attention to incremental institutional change is an instance of a search for models of institutions that attempt to avoid the smooth or automatic features of institutional rule. But mostly these efforts haven’t gone far enough if we’re interested in investigating the possibilities of self-government.

What I want to do in this talk is contrast two typical moves of institutional theories of change with pragmatist concepts of institutions as political artifacts that are constituted of the action dispositions of agents. What pragmatist institutionalism and historical institutionalism have in common is the notion of situated agency; namely, that individuals are situated in institutions and that these institutions shape what individuals do. The institutions have a variety of historical trajectories to govern specific fields of action at varying scales of operation. But for pragmatists, institutions don’t determine action: rules and norms are sufficiently ambiguous, repertoires are plural, and situations are significantly idiosyncratic … that assessments about what to do and how to do it involve individual creative action – situated creativity. Rather than a new voluntarism and throwing out structure to privilege agency, pragmatist research requires us to get very concrete about how institutions are implicated in the assembly work that agents do. Then I’m going to illustrate what I mean by sketching an explanation of the unexpected successful auto industry rescue by the Obama administration.

One move of theories of incremental institutional change is to loosen and complexify the institutional controls that implement the institution’s goals. Institutions are typically defined as congealed power distributions that authoritatively allocate resources. [[1]](#endnote-1) This loosening allows various agents, official and non-official, to take advantage of the gaps. Institutional goals are said to be general and ambiguous and, therefore, open to interpretation during rule development and enforcement; differences may emerge between the original designers of the institution and the staffs that operate them; differences exist between the center and periphery, global and local, and macro and micro sites or scales of action; changing circumstances may lead the groups that are governed to contest the distribution of resources and thus the rules that establish resource shares; institutions may clash with each other; and individuals inhabit an environment of multiple institutional orders and, therefore, may be able to enlist allies from one to challenge another.

These conditions are useful to describe. The limitation is that either the agents are said to adopt strategies toward institutional change from a menu of structured strategies, which are either pro- or anti-institution, *or* challenging agents are motivated by their social and economic interests, which throws us into another kind of determinism.[[2]](#endnote-2) There’s virtually no theory of action and no self-government involved in it; structure and institutional control still do the work.

The root problem is that the conceptions of institutions and agency are too thin. [also see anthropological concept of institutions – habits but not routines. Mary Douglas et al. See below.] In contrast to the conception of institutions as power-distributions, Christopher Ansell suggests a pragmatist conception of institutions that is much richer in possibilities for novel citizen action. Institutions are both instruments for collective action and repositories of values, experience and competence.[[3]](#endnote-3) The state is a “going concern”, as John Dewey characterized it.[[4]](#endnote-4) All agents are *already performing projects* because we’re all working in ecologies of institutions; much of the action is performed according learned behavior or dispositions that orient us to act. These orientations are powerful – they help us coordinate with others to achieve goals – but they are flexible because the details of what we do are not precisely prescribed by them. Situated agency refers to the ways in which institutions organize the places of action and the extent to which institutions contribute to the capacity of agents to successfully address problems they perceive.

The agents of organizational action develop self-consciousness about their missions – somewhat as we think about the achievement of autonomy of the state, but now not predetermined by our notions of “stateness” or by the dominant political coalition. Ansell argues that, in contrast to Weber’s bureaucracy with a fixed goal and rational design, institutions are relationships between symbolic artifacts that mediate social relationships – such as Social Security, equal opportunity, tax fairness, making work pay, the right to access to health care – that are *partly fixed and partly evolving* as they are used by the organizations that carry them out, as they interact with other concepts pursued by other organizations, and as they become objects of public interest and expectation.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The important point about this is that institutions are a means for social learning and developing capacities and *not only for* the imposition of a dominant coalition’s preferences. There is a cognitive and cultural dimension that engages the imagination and energy of both the primary agents in the institution and the secondary agents – also known as the public. Mary Douglas’ phrase is that people think their institutions.[[6]](#endnote-6) [We all live in multiple relationships or associations that are governed by inter-related institutions that orient us conceptually.]

How do these different conceptions of institutions and agents help us explain institutional change? First, change is not so much about “gaps” in the control exercised by a semi-Weberian bureaucracy as it is about the how teams of agents coordinate their actions to carry out a version of an institution’s project. Institutional agents have dispositions, as I said – an institutionally-influenced action-oriented attitude – to interpret the situations they face according to institutional concepts. One technique for handling a new situation is to develop the institution’s competence. Daniel Galvin’s study of National Party Committees shows agents pursuing this response.[[7]](#endnote-7) In more problematic situations, primary and secondary agents have the capacity to reflect on what kind of situation it is and to draw institutional resources – including resources from the broader set of associations that they’re participating in – to assemble the elements they need to bring their work to fruition.

[E.g. the extension of Social Security pensions to farm workers (and others) occurred when tax fairness was connected to contributory pension funding. Similarly Obamacare links access to health care with a mandate to buy health insurance.]

When a crisis situation for the U.S. auto companies emerged in the late 1970’s when Japanese manufacturers scored big sales in the U.S. market, the first task for people in the American companies was to figure out what kind of crisis it was. Maybe the popularity of Japanese cars was a fad. Maybe the source of Japanese success was cheap labor or something peculiar about Japanese culture or production technologies that could be purchased off-the-shelf. As I’ll sketch out later, whatever the cause, getting their arms around a common concept of the problem was critical for Americans to proceed to do something about it. Employees and managers drew from the existing institutional repertoire of auto manufacturing but they also began a systematic search beyond their boundaries for new techniques to help them succeed in the new situation.

A second typical move of historical institutional theories of change is to invoke a transhistorical meta-rule to account for large-scale developments and change: rules like weak state, federalism, the separation of powers, and liberal culture. *Instead of* meta*-rules*, pragmatists propose meta-*concepts* that operate to galvanize action across organizations. Meta-concepts are a feature of a process of institutional evolution in which a conception of a governing project is proposed and projected that its proponents hope will become grounded in specific applications in actual problem-solving. [[8]](#endnote-8)

An example of the way that historical institutional meta ***rule***s are used, consider a recent article that invokes “national capacity building” as a rule of state development in order to evaluate explanations for patterns of antebellum railroad building by American state governments. [[9]](#endnote-9) The failure to coordinate nationwide railroad building – as evidenced by the absence of a national system – is presented as proof of a weak state. A strong state by definition embodies autonomy from local economic and political conditions and a process of social learning that leads to satisfaction of national needs. A weak state is characterized by parallel thinking, not coordination. In this case, the rule tells us all we need to know about action alternatives before any investigation is made of why railroads were built the way they were where they were. Did anyone propose a national system or organize a state-building project? In contrast, in studies by Stephen Skowronek [Building a New American State] and Gerald Berk [Alternative Tracks], each in distinctive ways, specific actual projects of state building and railroad building are concretely linked to the situations of particular people and associations.

A move of some new institutional theories of incremental change to soften meta rules is to introduce interactionism. A meta rule is proposed and then the authors say that its instantiation in any case depends on the interaction of the rule and the local context. Desmond King and Marc Stears use this formulation in their theory of standardization.[[10]](#endnote-10) To organize, count, categorize roles and relationships, and implement rules to stabilize behavior are common techniques of government. These standardization techniques help us to govern ourselves. But from a pragmatist perspective their analysis won’t get us to self-government because there’s no theory of action. They identify three standardization processes in the U.S.: the need for “law and order” over a territory, a need for a stable legal framework of capitalist markets – much like Weber’s vision – and “ideological” impulses for a certain kind of standard American character, an element that makes the U.S. peculiar among states.

They urge us to give “detailed attention” to the sites of standardization (514), but the meta rules either overwhelm whatever the actors do or under theorize it: actors are pre-defined as either pro- or anti-standardization or we’re invited to investigation interaction effects. (513) The dynamic quality of development and the particular outcomes are a function of the contradictory influences of the standardizing impulses. Change agents are forces rather than individuals. [They take care to disagree with Foucault, p. 509.] The forces interact with each other and with the social and political contexts in which they take form to produce patterns of standardization. (512) But how exactly? They, themselves, recommend the study of the FDA by Dan Carpenter as an excellent example of the research that should be done and, yet, his study seems to go beyond their theory because it describes a particular learning environment that was not determined by any of the meta rules.

Pragmatists ask in what ways an institution contributes to individual capacity to self-govern. The state is an on-going concern that already has concrete links between officials and citizens through the routines of work that they pursue and the formation of relationships among them that contribute to their capacity to get their work done. The pragmatist alternative is to see the deep and concrete inter-penetration [??] of the state and society in projects that seek to stabilize pieces of reality sufficiently to enable agents to act capably to achieve goals. Sometimes citizens enlist the state to help them and sometimes state officials control situations to establish stability, but a lot of the time individuals go about their business according to habits adopted from past state-citizen governing projects and they improvise solutions where no standard seems to operate.

The research focus is on how the specific agents go about their work and address problems they perceive. That means things like bureaucratic procedures, documents, court proceedings, conferences about goals and policies, information sharing along the network of agents in the field about problematic situations, research procedures and evaluation of results, monitoring techniques, and so on. These work routines are at least partly informed by institutional concepts and procedures, but a lot is relatively ungoverned in the daily agenda. Disruption of routine prompts reflection and potential re-assemblage of these concrete pieces of government. In contrast to being cases of something, the agents regain the ability to tell us something that we don’t already know about how stuff happens (facts are created and acted on, how individuals get other individuals to do something, the role of events etc.).

In contrast to meta rules, meta ***concepts*** are proposed by specific people and deliberately spread through associational means to mobilize resources. The meta concept is general enough to appeals to a broad range of agents in many organizations who identify something useful about it to discuss and orient their responses to a problematic situation. The conceptual orientation contributes to concrete actions that ground the concept in a practice. Some concepts don’t get grounded; they may become an object around which debate occurs, but no practice develops to give them traction as a solution to a problem. For example, according to a study of housing policy in New Orleans, one failed meta concept was “the right of return” for the people who were displaced by the flood and post-flood destruction of low-income housing. A specific organization proposed transposing the international human rights concept of a “right of return” to the New Orleans context; interestingly, the Louisiana Congressional delegation initially accepted the concept; but, in the end, the concept was not linked to a practice of returning residents to the city.[[11]](#endnote-11) The reason meta concepts do or don’t get traction is that the concept is or is not useful for helping the various organizations and agents who are involved in the problem to express their commitments and to coordinate their actions. Typically, the failure is because the concept is unilateral or marginal to the on-going activity of most groups… [[12]](#endnote-12) More successful examples of meta concepts are “net neutrality” for internet service providers and a “labor market for everyone”, a concept around which the Danish Active Labor Market Policy has been organized.

In the case of auto rescue of the American auto industry, there were meta concepts that didn’t work and those that did. One unworkable concept was the “shareholder value” concept of corporate governance, which otherwise has been very influential in U.S. financial markets. A concept that was powerful was “lean production”. Let me now sketch out a pragmatist analysis of the auto rescue.

First consider that few would have predicted that the so-called weak U.S. state could take over and successfully restructure one of the largest sectors of the economy. But the frame of government “take over” (versus a hands-off free market) doesn’t describe the situation for the industry agents: to them the industry always was governed. What changed is the way the industry was governed. Second, the auto industry is usually understood as the paradigm of mass production manufacturing and bureaucratic hierarchy. Little in our stylized histories of Fordism prepares us to perceive that the industry contained a significant degree of co-determination and social learning, but it did. [By codetermination, I do not mean co-determination as established in German law; I mean something like the collaborative forms identified by pragmatists by which workers, managers, and others in the industry produced cars.] Instead, I propose that mass production was a meta concept that effectively oriented the agents in the industry as well as significant agents beyond the primary field of manufacturing in various governmental agencies. The practical reality of everyday work, however, was specific and detailed far beyond the generality of the concept. Nonetheless, the broad acceptance of the general meaning of mass production manufacturing created a common set of perceptions and expectations that contributed to dialogue and problem-solving on an everyday basis of all those “wicked problems” associated with complex human organizations. I make a distinction, then, between a logic of orientation to meta concepts and the logic of practice. The logic of practice emerges because the actual situations at work are more complex than models can encompass and because the background conditions for production organization are not fixed.

In the 1980’s, workers and managers increasingly became re-oriented to a new meta logic associated with the Toyota production system (or Lean Production). Successful adaptation depends on agents’ assessments of their options and on the political conditions that support (or not) the authority of agents to take action. [[13]](#endnote-13) The companies and the union (with the government in the background but not disconnected) struggled to reform work relationships and the relationships between the industry and society in order to succeed in the changed market environment. By the time that the Bush administration bailed out G.M. and Chrysler in December 2008, the companies’ managers and unionized employees had already made dramatic improvements in manufacturing practice, but there were seemingly intractable problems of internal authority in the companies that blocked reform coalitions from carrying through change successfully. In this context, the auto rescue by the Obama administration was less about the exogenous forces of global market competition and a controlling state and more about the accession of a knowing political coalition that empowered the reformers to pursue their goals. The institutional presidency was an important resource for the U.S. auto industry’s adaptation.[[14]](#endnote-14)

One key part of the transformation of work has to do with the specific ways that workers and managers interact and another has to do with the relationships between the industry and the broader society. Let me sketch the development in each dimension. Auto workers and managers always were cognizant in the pursuit of their projects. During the mid-20th century the core institution of auto governance was pluralist labor-management relations. The operation of pluralism depended on stable political background conditions that included inter-regional alliances cemented by Democratic Party dominance of Congress and by the leading position of the U.S. in the world financial system. [[15]](#endnote-15) Auto managers, union leaders, workers, industrial relations experts, government regulators, members of Congress, and others all were engaged in various ways in managing the industry during a long course of profitable development from the 1930’s to the 1980’s. But the production system was fragile rather than robust because the primary players who worked directly for the companies could not control the boundary conditions that otherwise seemed to promise stable relationships and growth. They always assessed their options for improving their performance vis-à-vis each other and in the marketplace. The interactions between governing institutions, organization relationships, and individual action are complex and require vision and choice in everyday life.

The dominant orientation for the primary agents was the image of mass production, which facilitated their relationships and gave meaning to their actions. The common orientation supplied knowledge about how production was organized, a shared language of auto work, a habitual rhythm to hourly, daily and yearly work cycles and contract terms, and expectations about the similarity of condition and action across companies in the industry. There was an appropriate organization for the factory, clearly marked roles, and obvious performance metrics. These relationships were codified by rules, but the stability of relationships required effort and renewal because boundary conditions were much less amenable to such organizational control.

Thus mass production was taken to be characterized by certain facts of technology and economies of scale that required bureaucratic hierarchy, extreme task specialization, and strict control of the pace of production. Each employee’s role was regulated by rules that described precisely what each of thousands of jobs entailed, how the jobs were linked with one another for purposes of promotion and layoff, what pay rates applied, and many other conditions of specific workshops. In the logic of orientation, operational decisions were reserved to managers and the union had no say in decisions about technology, product strategies, supplier relationships, marketing, and investment. The evaluation of a worker’s performance was driven by the overriding fact that the integrated quality of production diminished individual contributions to car building. National contracts specified annual increases in everyone’s wages through cost of living allowances and productivity gain-sharing. Health and pension benefits were piggy-backed on national tax and welfare policies.[[16]](#endnote-16) The wage and work rules stabilized factory life and contributed to the companies’ ability to realize volume sales to sovereign consumers.[[17]](#endnote-17)

These routines depended on the actions of many others beyond the factory. Fiscal and monetary policies underwrote increasing incomes for consumers at large, but they did not end business cycles and specific policy debates. The NLRB managed the union duty of fair representation in cases of race discrimination and the right of employees not to join a union.[[18]](#endnote-18) The U.S. strategy of global hegemony defined domestic consensus, but it also committed the U.S. to large foreign military expenditures and unequal trade relations, which created chronic monetary and trade problems. Increasing returns to scale led to rising industrial concentration and dislocated workers. Union wages created disparity between those in the core firms and those on the margins, many of whom were members of minority groups and southerners, while guaranteed wages in the core contributed to inflation.[[19]](#endnote-19) Wage-price inflation aggravated the pursuit of the U.S. role in the world. So, throughout the 1960’s Democratic administrations intervened in collective bargaining negotiations and corporate price-making, imposed capital controls, and manipulated government commodity inventories and wage and hour rules.

The performance metrics in the industry also had characteristic problems that stimulated a search for modifications. Workers were ensconced in a bureaucratic hierarchy that discouraged their individual contributions, diluted craft skills, and undermined consent. Workers were pressed to work quickly to achieve volume; slowing-down to ensure a better product could be penalized. The situated nature of consent was revealed when workers stopped working during strikes. The U.A.W. bargained for time away from work – vacations, personal days off, voluntary overtime, early retirement, and generous attendance rules – and it collaborated with university experts and managers to implement “quality of work life” programs in the 1970’s based on behavioral theories of the firm in order to humanize work and improve job satisfaction.[[20]](#endnote-20)

In short, workers, unions and managers collaborated to fashion the practical meaning of Fordism to enable the auto companies to profit and autoworkers to make a good living. But in the late 1970’s the Japanese auto import surge began. The U.S. companies began to miss their performance targets and Chrysler was saved from bankruptcy by a federal bailout in January 1980.

The newly competitive automobile market is associated with the success of the “lean” Toyota Production System (TPS). In lean production, a company orchestrates collaborations among a network of suppliers in a disciplined process of tightly coordinated manufacturing and continuous improvement. [[21]](#endnote-21) Firms’ hierarchies are flatter – there are fewer managers and white collar staff – and production workers have greater responsibilities for product flow and quality. [[22]](#endnote-22) Toyota promises to create a work environment that enables employees to be the most productive of the highest quality product they can. The goal is “reliability of delivery rather than sheer volume”. [[23]](#endnote-23) When Toyota began to manufacture in the U.S., it started to modify its system and integrate the company’s principles of manufacturing with practices that American workers and managers were used to.[[24]](#endnote-24)

A key difference in the factory is the conception of the role of the workers. As pragmatist analysis predicts – for both mass production and lean production alike – the real work of manufacturing requires problem-solving skills at every level. The Fordist concept supposed that bureaucratic hierarchy was sufficient for the efficient operation of a factory when, in fact, the limits of standardization of work were constantly met by the need for blue-collar workers to lend a hand and for the union and managers to evolve a system of problem-solving. In the Lean Production concept, the implicit knowledge of the employees is brought out explicitly in a new work design that empowers workers to contribute to problem-solving in a systematic way. This explicit problem-solving involves the creation of teams across work groups and across hierarchies of roles, information sharing, identification and investigation of problems, and greater responsibility by each agent for their contribution to the project rather than post-hoc accountability for results. The capacity for problem-solving is in the focus on joint determination to hone in on actual work problems – and to follow or create the factual basis for wider perspective when necessary to deal with them. A certain craft-like ability to improvise in non-standard situations is prized. These are all features of an organization for social learning, according to pragmatists. [[25]](#endnote-25) Something like a learning organization is what the reformers in the Detroit Three were trying to create in emulation of their understanding of the “best practices” in the sector.

The ability of reformers in the UAW and the companies to orchestrate a jazz-like production was complicated and contested and showed remarkable determination for over twenty years. The furthest extent of the transformation was the joint venture of G.M. and the UAW at Saturn. Yet Saturn also demonstrates the limits of reform within the company and union because, despite widely documented success in manufacturing performance, product quality, and consumer acceptance, G.M. underfunded the project by the mid-1990’s and the UAW shifted its focus to the crisis of immediate job retention. The corporate leadership ultimately sought a solution to G.M.’s competitive problems in massive investment in technology, fostering price competition among its suppliers, and avoiding head-to-head competition in the car segment of the market by switching to trucks and SUVs. But this strategy almost bankrupted the company in 2008, only saved by Bush’s bailout from liquidation.

The second dimension of the transformation, then, had to do with new leadership and a new relationship between the industry and society. The Obama administration came into office with the bailout step already taken, but it was determined to remake the industry, to no longer “kick the can down the road” as the President put it. How could the administration do this? In brief, Obama created an Auto Task Force that drew upon assets in his political coalition that included the networks of financial expertise and management consulting experience that had grown up during the previous decades of crisis for American manufacturing (under neo-liberal policy regime).

The administration connected itself with the industry by employing individuals at its Auto Task Force who were familiar with the debates about industrial relations, corporate governance, and industry restructuring—the practical discourses of organizational life. It narrated a new history that contrasted selected past practices with current performance and with superior practices demonstrated by more successful organizations, such as Toyota. The administration engaged some parts of the primary agents’ common project—the manufacture of cars for a profit and a livelihood—and brought new authority for changes in the rules of play into the discussion. The administration had the authority to be there and compel other agents to participate, but it announced it would lead rather than command.

Workers and plant managers had shown that they could adapt lean production techniques, but the commitment of corporate leadership was still problematic. The quality argument became incised in the cost reduction plan of the Auto Task Force.[[26]](#endnote-26) Product and process quality was a goal of teamwork among workers and managers, manufacturers and suppliers. The administration replaced top managers, invested in suppliers, and placed limits on outsourcing. [[27]](#endnote-27)

When Obama stipulated that best practice was the non-union auto companies in the American south, it may have seemed to abandon the New Dealers’ commitment to pluralist industrial development, but this was not a simple vindication of the old south’s unitary management. Instead, the meaning of the regional differences was given a new interpretation by Obama because his administration articulated a different lesson from the crisis. It was not the southern employers but the Japanese who perfected the bundle of manufacturing techniques that create high performance work organizations. When Obama emphasized a new spirit of factory teamwork to satisfy public needs, this was no acceptance of the New Deal binary but, instead, something like the transcendence of it.[[28]](#endnote-28) Teamwork is a challenge to G.M. and the U.A.W., but it is also a challenge to historical southern social and labor institutions and the companies that have grown up under their protection.

The White House helped the companies fulfill what the Detroit 3 had not been able to accomplish alone. The Task Force drew upon the new expertise in industry restructuring that had developed since the 1970’s in management consulting, investment and private equity banking, university research centers, and think tanks and it had the political leverage to make those knowledge resources available to the industry agents who were willing to become partners to achieve their goals.

The Auto Task Force did not run the factories or pick products and set their prices, but an internal report advised the President that it would be deeply involved in picking the leadership teams in the companies.[[29]](#endnote-29)

Rattner, Bloom and their colleagues assumed the strategic planning function just as they might have in a private restructuring. They superintended the players – the creditors, government agencies both domestic and foreign, the board of directors, the CEO, and the union leadership. They made clear that continued financial support was contingent on progress.[[30]](#endnote-30) The Task Force’s “viability assessments” focused on adjustments to product mix and design, manufacturing flexibility, purchasing, and dealer networks.[[31]](#endnote-31) The Task Force left it to the OEMs to push the suppliers for quality.[[32]](#endnote-32)

The administration’s monitoring was informed by the post-1970’s debates, but the President gave codetermination a greater voice. [[33]](#endnote-33) Treasury resisted “external pressures to focus on public policy goals” such as “job retention”. The Treasury’s view was that the government should have the same goals as those that companies are supposed to have toward their investors – now including citizens-as-investors—which is to maximize shareholder value. This view is what officials believed made Treasury’s actions not political.[[34]](#endnote-34) Even Rattner had doubts about the application of the shareholder value to G.M., in part because he was impressed by the new capabilities at the factory level.[[35]](#endnote-35) Whatever the government did – including shareholder value – was a commitment to a social vision. In a critical meeting about whether to save Chrysler, the Task Force was split and the C.E.A. was opposed. The President made the decision to save the company and workers’ jobs despite a “commercial” argument that a Chrysler liquidation would help G.M. and Ford survive.[[36]](#endnote-36)

The administration saved the union by seeking better collective bargaining agreements and it preserved *most* of the pension and health benefits for incumbent employees and retirees. The auto companies themselves resisted the unitary management assumption that they should fight the union on benefits because “these guys you’re dealing with are the ones who build your products”.[[37]](#endnote-37) The administration gave new authority to the internal alliances around U.A.W. president Ron Gettelfinger, who fought to save jobs, but who also agreed to convince members about the new strategic cooperation. Starting pay was cut dramatically and performance-based pay may increase over time.[[38]](#endnote-38) Hundreds of job classifications were collapsed to make job assignments and responsibilities more flexible. The companies and U.A.W. collapsed production worker jobs into two classifications, team member and team leader; the Task Force pushed to reduce skilled trades jobs into two or three classifications. Union members agreed to a no-strike clause. These changes earned strong opposition from some autoworkers, but most members voted for the changes.[[39]](#endnote-39)

Conclusion

It’s a very old observation that if the actors are like actors in a play, reading a script, they don’t have agency. Similarly, economists standardize individuals when they simplify motives and preferences to apply a theory of maximizing calculation. Political scientists often standardize citizens, voters, bureaucrats, judges, Congressmen etc. as part of our toolkit for explaining how our democracy operates – but it’s also a format of stable roles to play, which leads to generalizations such as the US is a “center-right nation” or a weak state or a liberal market economy or a Christian Nation, as if this has always been the case and ever will be. But if we [here] think that our democracy has evolved, then we have to allow the actors to think for themselves and take actions that are not scripted. We’re more like actors in search of playwright. …

Unlike economists and more like playwrights, some political scientists at least conceive actors or agents not as isolated individuals but as participants in an on-going collective action of popular self-government in which individuals are the object and subject of many forces and relationships.[[40]](#endnote-40) Citizens are moving targets that we try to pin down, for example, to explain voting patterns or account for outcomes of active labor market policies – instrumental goals that we have as observers, but that may not be what the agents think they’re doing.

Voting, for example, looks highly structured by rules on the one hand, but on the other takes hardly any of the time of a typical citizen; there is so much else in their purview. And yet studies of voting behavior typically introduce sociological and economistic theories to radically simplify what comes into voting decisions: there are standard groupings of voters, such as female or male, age group, race, income quintile etc., and members of groups respond similarly to external forces, such as the rate of growth in GDP in the second quarter of an election year. But then we observe the remarkable (if not understood) transformation of the family or what Americans accept as the official, legal, rights-giving form of the family. The explanation for this rapid change is not the pre-formed category “liberal youth”; the category may be our way to pin down something that happened as a result of unscripted action.

The notion is – that society and politics themselves are constructed and that they are elements of the other things we want to explain – race relations, health care policy development etc. The fundamental question for investigation is what did some individuals think they were doing: what project did they think they had in common that they expended effort and resources to achieve? The *project* is what is social and political…

In recent years a new post-institutionalist pragmatist theory and research strategy has emerged that focuses on situated agency. [E.g. Mettler’s work on the GI bill and citizenship, viz. how institutions may contribute to the processes of self-government.] Situated agency refers to the ways in which institutions organize the places of action and the extent to which institutions contribute to the capacity of agents to successfully address problems they perceive. The post-institutional impulse is *not* that institutions *are not* forms of power that help us account for what individuals do or for the significant “big” outcomes. Rather, the problem is that institutional analysis is good for some things and not for others, but that political scientists often don’t distinguish the two things. What institutional theories are best at is accounting for strong institutional ordering of relations among agents, but what we’re less inclined to notice is that that kind of established order may be exceptional or provisional only and that, therefore, the more demanding need is to think about how to study the formation and reformation of ordered behaviors and institutions in a thoroughly political way.

I think that (last) point is critical, namely the need for a thoroughly political method of studying politics. Yet the typical move of change-sensitive institutionalism is to invoke gaps and interaction between meta rules and context – the interaction of state and society, structure and agency, global and local, macro and micro – which simply leaves the structure in place rather than explain the production of structure.

The evident partialness of institutional explanations [of civics] has led some to revert to social and economic explanations of politics; namely, arguments of the type that “behind” or “underneath” the governmental or institutional action is really social or economic power – interest group pressure and money, class domination, racial animosity, illiberal beliefs, technological change and technological competence, bureaucrats’ rational self-interest, and so on: that is, politics and power are embedded in society. To repeat: analyses that focus on institutional operations and rules are invaluable in their own way to help us focus on politics *rather than* society and economy. Rather, I’m suggesting that for some questions that have to do with changing citizen roles and public policies – all of which we might call “the new civics” -- we need a method that allows us to see the political work that individuals do to form new associations among people and concepts (a.k.a. relationships, groups, networks) that are both new *and* infused with the institutional and societal stuff that we are (otherwise) only too inclined to reference when we try to comprehend the new. We often are inclined to say that a new group is not so new because we already know it and therefore not a novel movement of individuals who are creating their own ways to mobilize power by assembling events, concepts, links, history, institutions, and potentially all that stuff that’s already out there in new ways in order to get what they think they want/need.

What happens in ostensibly much more formalized politics is similar…. The institutions that we take as authoritative enforcers of rules – regulatory agencies, for example – are always at work and expending energy to sustain the standards and stability of relationships among specific identified groups that (we typically assume, mostly correctly) helps those groups accomplish goals that they and the authoritative agency jointly support. But that work and energy are not given and the nature and extent and direction of the relationships between the officials and the groups – not to mention the “groupness” of the group -- is a constant condition of renewal. What I’m suggesting is that to take social groups and/or government as stable or fixed in order to explain the other is denying what seems obvious, namely that we’re seeing relationships among individuals created and renewing.

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   Cf. Thelen in Comparative Handbook. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ansell, Pragmatist Democracy: Evolutionary Learning as Public Philosophy (London: Oxford University Press, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ansell, pp. 26-7. Following Dewey. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ansell, pp. 30-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
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7. Daniel Galvin, Studies in American Political Development 26 (April 2012) pp. 50-70. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ansell, pp. 45-47f. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Zachary Callen, “Local Rail Innovations: Antebellum States and Policy Diffusion”, Studies in American Political Development, volume 25, no. 2 (2011) pp. 117-42. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. King and Stears, “How the U.S. State Works: A Theory of Standardization”, Perspectives on Politics vol. 9, no. 3 (September 2011) pp. 505-18. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
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17. Harry C. Katz, *Shifting Gears: Changing Labor Relations in the U.S. Automobile Industry* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985): 14f. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
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