

Rixen, Thomas; Lora
Anne Viola; Michael Zürn.
*Historical Institutionalism
and International Relations.
Explaining Institutional
Development in World Politics.*
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The focus of the book is to provide a coherent theoretical framework in order to better explain stability and change in international institutions, e.g., the UN Security Council or the International Monetary Fund. With this purpose in mind, the authors introduce a fairly new perspective into the discipline of international relations (IR): historical institutionalism (HI). Although this approach has been widely used in the area of comparative politics since the 1990s, the intended innovation of the book consists in adapting a neo-institutionalism analytical perspective to understand patterns of global change. From a theoretical point of view this is warranted because classical IR perspectives are ill suited to explain transformation. Moreover, they have focused mostly on analyzing the continuity of international organizations, given that persistence is an apparent characteristic of global institutions. As a result, the overall research question of the book is how to explain change within institutions whose prominent features are persistence and stability.

In order to address this puzzle, Thomas Rixen and Lora Viola introduce in the first chapter the theoretical tools and concepts from HI, but also new instruments in order to refine explanations about institutional change of international organizations. The classical HI

devices used in the book are path-dependence, sequencing and critical junctures. These three explanatory tools highlight the importance of considering the conditions and the contingency of variation. With regard to the new tools, the authors suggest three alternative dimensions of institutional transformation: speed, scope, and depth. Additionally, two types of institutional change are considered: punctuated and incremental. According to HI, whereas the first is explained by the presence of exogenous shocks such as a crisis, the second one takes place as a result of internal or endogenous variables within the institutions. With these basic conceptual tenets at hand, several cases or organizations are examined.

The second chapter by Tim Büthe, addresses the development of a supranational authority over government subsidies in the European Union. Drawing on an agent-centric historic-institutional account of institutional change, Büthe argues that European-level governance of regional aid has deepened endogenously, resisting any re-appropriation of authority by EU member-states. The third chapter by Orfeo Fioretos deals with financial policies after the 2008 crisis and shows that, although this event constitutes a critical juncture, change after the crisis was not radical but incremental, and that the regulatory response post-2008 consisted in complementing the domestic financial systems with the introduction of new layers of intergovernmental and transgovernmental institutions such as the Financial Stability Board. As a result, the countries with the largest financial sectors retrofitted their regulations in order to maintain important national differences. Authored by Tine Hanrieder, the fourth chapter explains the depth of the World Health Organization by using HI, arguing that a characteristic not originally included by the founders of this institution —regional self-governance— became an irreversible institutional feature through path-dependence. The fifth chapter by Alexandru Gregorescu seeks to explain two puzzling variances in non-permanent membership in the League of Nations' Council and the United Nations Security Council. Why did powerful states allow increasing the number of non-permanent members if the latter erode their own control over those councils, and why are there differences in the depth of reforms within these two institutions? He posits that

much of the change can be explained using constructivist arguments that stress the impact of normative pressure on powerful states. The sixth chapter by Manuela Moschella and Antje Vetterlein addresses two changes in the International Monetary Fund that led the organization to take on new responsibilities in relation to poverty reduction and the surveillance of the financial sector. The authors found that in the case of poverty-reduction programs, a self-reinforcing 'off the path' was produced, whereas in the case of financial sector surveillance, a reactive path-dependence took place. Finally, Theresa Squatrito, Thomas Sommerer and Jonas Tallberg attempt to explain the access of transnational actors to international organizations between 1950 and 2010, asserting that open participation for these stakeholders was made possible in all regions and policy fields by changes in structural factors after the end of the Cold War—understood as a critical juncture—through the deepening of global governance cooperation and the wave of democratization of domestic politics in some developing countries, which, in turn, required more presence of transnational actors in international organizations. This conclusion is supported by statistical data, which is a way to demonstrate that HI and large-N analyses are compatible.

Even though the five chapters constitute a significant effort to tackle empirical puzzles about change in international institutions, it is necessary to point out that there is not a common theoretical thread in the book, despite the fact that all authors use one or another tool from HI. On the one hand, the cases do not constitute a theoretical unity among them, e. g., they are not using the same type of theoretical tools from HI. As a result, whereas some chapters use critical junctures to explain punctuated change, others are looking to understand incremental change instead. In addition, some chapters use the new conceptual tools proposed by Rixen and Viola in the introduction (speed, depth, and scope), but other chapters do not. On the other hand, there is a sort of ontological incompatibility between the chapters given that some case studies are closer to ideational constructivism, while others are based on rationalist-materialist assumptions.

In sum, the book constitutes a valuable academic exercise to see HI at work within IR through the use of empirical case studies. Nonetheless, the book could have maintained more theoretical concreteness if instead of practically embracing all the tools of HI, it had focused on only some concepts and started from common assumptions regarding rationalist and constructivist views.

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