Book Review: Moving beyond ‘pale, male and stale’ in UK politics: the case for feminist institutionalism.

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Amy Watson *finds plenty of strong arguments for a gendered approach to understanding political imbalances.*

Gender, Politics and Institutions: Towards a Feminist Institutionalism. By Mona Lena Krook and Fiona Mackay. Palgrave Macmillan. December 2010.

Gender, Politics and Institutions is founded in the understanding that institutions are gendered, and that this is crucial for understanding power inequalities in public and political life. Until recently, the majority of institutional studies have not incorporated a gendered approach. The various authors of this collection propose a number of strategies for addressing this absence – including feminist variants of different ‘neo-institutionalism’ (NI) schools, and the borrowing and adapting of tools from across the schools of NI – with the hope that the complex, socially-embedded and relational agent of feminist political science will both learn from and illuminate the study of institutions.

Institutions are here defined as ‘the rules that structure social and political life’, which incorporates both formal and informal arrangements – and their interaction – that may ostensibly appear gender-neutral, or be obviously gender-biased. As an institution, Westminster and the world of British politics seems to be a prime candidate for institutional studies. Given the socio-economic composition of the current coalition government– largely a wealthy, white, male elite, reminiscent of an apparently distant political era – the analysis of enduring institutional norms and practices which this collection offers us seems apt.

The analytical inclusion of informal institutional norms is particularly compelling. Susan Franceschat’s chapter on Chilean and Argentine legislators provides an insightful view of two different institutional contexts which have altered the penalties paid by female political actors on breaking unwritten behavioural codes. Franceschat shows that it is not just Argentina’s larger number of female politicians that have created higher levels of female political activity than in Chile, but is instead the entrenched informal institution of consensus-seeking and conflict avoidance that characterises Chilean politics. This works to restrict even politicians well-known as feminists from acting on controversial issues, such as the decriminalisation of abortion.

The pluralism of this volume is also one of its key strengths. The focus is broad, with the topics covered including gender quotas in Sweden and France, political recruitment in post-devolution Scotland, gender justice in the International Criminal Court, Canadian child care and social policy debates, and issues of substantive representation in Argentina and Chile.

This multiplicity extends into the modes of analysis used by the various authors, and the editors emphasise that a consensus as to what comprises Feminist Institutionalism is not a considered desirable or necessary outcome of these essays. As opposed to emphasising an underdevelopment of gendered institutional studies, Michelle Beyeler and Claire Annesley argue that Feminist Institutionalism has existed for some time in the form of welfare regime analysis, even if it has not been labelled as such.

A thread that runs through many of the essays in this collection is institutional resistance to change, and the endurance of subtle norms across decades, even centuries. From this angle, several authors pose challenges to traditional understandings of path dependency.

A particularly interesting view of this is provided by Hana Hašková and Steven Saxonburg, in their analysis of post-Communist family policy in the Czech and Slovak Republics. Employing an innovative approach to path dependency, four cumulative and internally shifting critical junctures – rather than one crucial exogenous shock – are shown to have created and sustained the institutional

context in which Czech and Slovak family policies have developed.

Combining historical and sociological institutionalism, the authors show that conservative gender relations – as an institution – have been in place before the rise of communism, and prevented those in power from even considering the possibility of men sharing in child-care leave, despite their radical emancipatory ideology. So, the authors argue, whilst research shows that Czechs and Slovaks do not have more conservative views on gender relations, historical and enduring institutional arrangements which have given nurseries and de-familial care a bad reputation are seen to have shaped negative attitudes of both policy makers and the wider population towards working mothers. Hašková and Saxonburg argue that these institutionally-induced cultural values endure and are reproduced throughout institutional 'change', and serve to undermine policy aims that may have originally aimed to emancipate women.

Conventional understandings of path dependency have often emphasised the potential for change that the early, or 'permissive' stages of institutions can offer. However, Louise Chappell concludes that enduring – and highly gendered – legacies make it unlikely that such 'new' institutions offer an entirely 'clean slate', and that those 'equalities seekers and gender change agents need to keep their expectations in check'.

This collection of essays travels across the world, carefully mixing theory and analysis from gender and institutional studies, with very promising results. The authors manage to maintain an engaging and clear dialogue, and offer a compelling insight into future research possibilities.

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