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Taking Path Dependence Seriously:

A historical institutionalist research agenda in planning history

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Abstract

This paper outlines an historical institutionalist (HI) research agenda for planning history. Historical institutionalist approaches to the understanding of institutions, path dependence, positive feedback effects in public policy, and patterned processes of institutional change offer a robust theoretical framework and a valuable set of conceptual and analytic tools for the analysis of continuity and change in public policy. Yet to date there has been no systematic effort to incorporate historical institutionalism into planning history research. The body of the paper proposes planning history relevant definitions of institutions, path dependence, critical junctures, and incremental change processes, outlines recent HI literature applying and extending these concepts, and frames a number of research questions for planning history that these approaches suggest. A concluding section explores the potential application and leverage of HI approaches to the study of planning history and international comparative planning studies, and outlines a research agenda.

1. Introduction

In a major recent review of the achievements and current state of planning history scholarship, Ward, Freestone and Silver[1] conclude that despite a remarkable blossoming over the last four decades that crosses multiple disciplinary boundaries and increasingly includes scholars from around the world, there is a persistent weakness in its theoretical basis. They argue that most planning history research is empirical and narrative driven, is framed and presented in case study formats, and that most theorizing consists of the elaboration of propositional principles. They suggest that while this careful empirical work has been valuable, and has helped to temper the earlier tendency towards teleological 'grand narrative' approaches that too easily supported preconceived notions of the meaning and future goals of the planning project, the reluctance to engage with theory

> "has limited the ability of planning historians themselves to offer clear and resonant interpretations of longer term directions and trends in planning. It has also impeded meaningful connections with interpretations of physical and social phenomena advanced by others." [2]

In short, a weak theoretical grounding has meant that planning history easily lapses into the telling of interesting stories, and fails to further a cumulative project of knowledge building. Particularly problematic is that without a robust theoretical framing, it has been difficult to achieve more systematic comparative analysis of changing planning approaches between cities, between countries, and over time.

In this paper I argue that a careful application of historical institutionalist (HI) concepts and analytical approaches to planning history provides significant insights into some of the short- and long-term spatial and temporal processes that generate varied outcomes in different cities, and promises valuable theoretical and conceptual frameworks for planning history and planning studies, and particularly for comparative analysis and theory development.

The central importance and major challenge of comparative urban research has been increasingly widely argued in recent years.[3] In particular, Robinson's powerful critique of established modes of comparative urban analysis points to the need to develop new theoretical frameworks, new

comparative strategies, and changed units of analysis of comparative research.[4] Robinson demonstrates that by restricting our comparisons to cities and countries that share common political and economic environments we have lost major opportunities, and have focused attention primarily on the advanced cities of the global north. I argue that a historical institutionalist approach to the comparison of particular urban institutions that examines the critical junctures of institutional development, patterns of path dependence and developmental pathways of institutional evolution offers a reconceptualization and reframing of comparative studies that can answer Robinson's challenge. When we compare specific institutions with a historical institutionalist approach then the level of wealth and size of the city, patterns of institutional embeddedness, timing and sequencing of institutional development, and linkages between scales of governance become the objects of comparative study, instead of attempting to control these variables by selecting most-like cities as comparators.

The next section defines the major concepts of historical institutionalism and their application to planning history in detail, but here it is worth offering a definition of HI itself. Historical institutionalism is a social science research method that focuses on the creation, persistence, and change of institutions over time. HI is best known for the concept of 'path dependence,' but as discussed in this paper, recent work that examines processes of incremental institutional change and the political dynamics associated with both institutional stasis and change has greatly enriched the approach. Historical institutionalist approaches to the understanding of institutions, path dependence, positive feedback effects in public policy, and patterned processes of institutional change offer a robust theoretical framework and a valuable set of analytic tools for the analysis of continuity and change in public policy, and have been developed and deployed effectively in several areas of study, particularly by political scientists.[5]

The precise definition of institutions is discussed further below, and depends on the object of study, but they can be broadly defined as the shared norms and formal rules that shape action in social, political and economic processes. Historical institutionalism developed in parallel but separately from sociological institutionalism, which defines institutions much more broadly than HI, to include not just norms and formal rules but also ideas, moral codes and cognitive templates as factors understood to shape interpretation and action.[6] The focus here is on historical institutionalism, as while sociological institutionalism has contributed important

insights to urban and planning studies research during the last 20 years, HI has been largely ignored.[7]

On the other hand, HI concepts and methods – particularly the concept of 'path dependence' – are increasingly used and debated in other urban research, especially in studies of urban transportation systems, where the early dominance of particular modes of travel within cities are seen to have created powerful obstacles to the emergence of other modes.[8] In economics an important focus is on the early historical development of key institutional frameworks as factors differentiating countries (e.g. civil law vs common law in colonies)[9] or on the consequences of different pathways towards a capitalist agriculture,[10] and as major factors encouraging or discouraging economic development more broadly.[11] Studies of urban and regional economic development by both economists and economic geographers examine the importance of historical patterns of economic development and institutional capacity building for understanding the developmental trajectory and capacities of contemporary city regions.[12] This work has also contributed to a significant body of research in evolutionary economic geography on the long run impacts on regional economic structure and competitiveness of early industrial location patterns, which in some cases had decisive impacts on subsequent investments and decisions.[13] Recent work in planning studies and urban geography point to the importance of path dependent processes to the study of urban infrastructure systems and studies of local responses to globalization processes.[14] Housing theorists have deployed ideas of path dependence in international comparative studies of housing policy and outcomes.[15] A rich political science literature examines varied aspects of urban politics from a historical institutionalist perspective, including in the emerging subdiscipline of American Political Development. [16]

There are a very few recent papers that employ HI approaches in explicitly planning historical projects[17] but although the concept of path dependence is increasingly widely applied to urban processes, to date there has been no systematic exploration of the potential analytical and theoretical opportunities and challenges of applying HI in the study of planning history.

As will be discussed in the next section, there is no doubt that many urban institutions show signs of path dependence, and that the positive feedback effects that generate it are pervasive in cities. Indeed, planning history can be told as a history of institution-building: as the

development of a multifaceted system of decision rules, shared understandings, codes, and organizations charged with regulating city building. These invariably serve not merely to accomplish their headline responsibility, but also create sets of relationships among affected actors; establish decision rules for policy revisions; create sets of beneficiaries; establish liability for errors; create debt instruments, financing tools and schedules of repayment; create and support differentiated geographies of urban land value; and encourage some built forms and prohibit others. Such institutions often generate powerful political and economic incentives to oppose change. And indeed, urban planning institutions are often intentionally designed to generate political support coalitions and be hard to change. Yet change does occur, both in the course of major upheavals and the establishment of new arrangements, and through incremental revision, and it is certain both that some institutions are harder to change than others, and that such differences in openness to, and patterns of change can have profound impacts on urban outcomes.

This is an extraordinarily rich terrain for historical institutionalist analysis yet these theoretical and conceptual approaches have been little explored by planning historians. The goal of this paper is to begin a discussion toward the development of a theoretically robust and nuanced approach to the analysis of patterns of continuity and change in urban governance, planning and city building, through the deployment of an historical institutionalist approach to the study of planning history. The body of the paper proposes planning history relevant definitions of institutions, path dependence, critical junctures, and incremental change processes, outlines recent HI literature applying and extending these concepts, and frames a number of research questions that these approaches suggest.

A concluding section explores the potential application and leverage of HI approaches to the study of planning history and international comparative planning studies, and outlines a research agenda.

2. Defining institutions, path-dependence, critical junctures, and punctuated equilibrium vs incremental change

There are many ways of defining institutions, depending on the discipline and focus of research.

Immergut argues that as research focuses on widely differing processes, the relevant institutions should be specified for each study.[18] I argue that for planning history studies seeking to employ a historical institutional approach it makes sense to define institutions, path dependence, and critical junctures relatively narrowly. Urban processes are complex and multifaceted, with such a varied and diverse array of institutional structures available for study, relatively restricted definitions are preferable for the sake of analytical clarity.

A widely cited definition of institutions is Peter A. Hall's "The formal rules, compliance procedures, and standard operating practices that structure the relationship between individuals in various units of the polity and economy".[19] Here 'standard operating practices' points to the wide range of taken-for-granted assumptions about how things work, what is acceptable, and the 'shared scripts', values and cultural norms that is the focus of sociological institutionalism. There is no doubt that such norms and ideas, for example of 'good urban form', good housing, and safe urban property investments are powerful forces in planning history, so for some planning history studies this broad definition of institutions will be useful.

For studies of legal frameworks, plans, and regulatory approaches, it will add clarity to define institutions more narrowly. Streeck and Thelen define institutions as "collectively enforced expectations with respect to the behavior of specific categories of actors or to the performance of certain activities".[20] Following this approach we can define planning institutions as "collectively enforced expectations with respect to the creation, management, and use of urban space". Here collective enforcement refers primarily to the use of coercion by the state to enforce laws and bylaws, and recourse of private actors to the courts to enforce contracts. This narrower definition focuses attention primarily on the formal legal-political institutions structuring urban space such as plans, laws and regulations that are enforceable by the state or by recourse to a third party. Such a restrictive definition will be particularly useful for those seeking to compare the development and application of particular urban policies and processes in different cities and contexts.

Cities are dense collections of institutions as defined here, including land development and redevelopment rules, building standards, rules for the financing, use and maintenance of infrastructure networks, governance and policy making structures, parking standards, tree protection rules, public education systems (including taxation systems to support them), animal

bylaws, fire codes, insurance requirements, property rights, mortgage systems, street and sidewalk standards, water use and disposal regulations, garbage and waste management systems, public health rules, and many other formally codified and collectively enforced sets of rules that have been developed as a part of efforts to collectively shape, manage, and add value to the shared spaces of the city. We also know that many of these rule systems exhibit strong continuity over time. The question is: Why? Of what importance is such continuity? How can we understand change? It is worth noting that while patterns of urban form also demonstrate powerful continuities over time because of sunk costs, and patterns of prior investment, the focus here is on institutions, as defined above, and how these institutions change or exhibit continuity.

2.1 Path Dependence[21]

The core idea of 'path dependence' is that once established some institutions tend to become increasingly difficult to change over time, and so small choices early on can have significant long-term impacts. This insight lies at the heart of historical institutional analysis, because if certain institutions are path dependent in this way, then understanding the generators of such continuity examined next, the critical junctures of new institution formation discussed in section 2.2, and the patterns of incremental and endogenous change discussed in 2.3 becomes essential.

The idea of path dependence originates in separate work by David and Arthur on the economics of knowledge-intensive high technology sectors, where there are sometimes increasing returns to scale because of learning effects and coordination effects.[22] A key aspect of increasing returns is that the more widely a particular system is used, the greater the benefit to every user, both because they share a larger network of people using the same technology, making skills more portable, and because costs are reduced. David's classic example is the QWERTY keyboard, which although not the most efficient design, has remained the most common keyboard layout because it was the first design to achieve a dominant position and became the standard for most typewriters, and later keyboards. As so many individuals and firms adopted this layout, it became increasingly difficult over time to challenge its dominance, even after the particular technical limitations that prompted that design were no longer present. The claim is thus that a suboptimal arrangement can persist because even though multiple possibilities initially existed,

contingent events led to one approach gaining an early lead, and increasing returns to scale ensure continued dominance. Similar arguments have been made with the MSDOS operating system, and VHS vs Betamax.

While in economic arguments the concept of increasing returns makes sense, it is clearer in political and urban processes to think in terms of positive feedback effects, as for example when a particular policy helps to generate a political coalition that works towards the continuation of the policy.[23] The most famous such example is that of public pensions, where pay-as-you-go pension systems create an ever growing constituency of voters whose self interest lies in maintaining and even strengthening the system, as they are paying in to it every year, but will only get a payout after retirement if the system continues with many younger people paying in.[24] The longer the period of time from the initiation of such a system, the more people will be invested in it, and the greater each individual's incentive in ensuring it continues. This is positive feedback. Important urban examples include restrictive residential zoning that is understood to protect property values, or greenbelts and green-space designation that guarantee landscape amenities. The longer such rules are in place, the more entrenched their status in many cases.

Pierson suggests that we should define path dependence relatively narrowly, as the concept has been popularized as meaning simply that earlier events shape later ones, or that 'history matters'. But defined more precisely, the concept provides greater analytical leverage. Pierson defines path dependent processes as "social processes that exhibit positive feedback and thus generate branching patterns of historical development".[25] Where positive feedback exists, each step down a particular pathway increases the likelihood of further steps along the same pathway, and increases the cost of reverting to some previously available option. A planning example might be the common choice in 19th century cities of combined sanitary and storm-water sewers. Most cities chose combined systems to save on the cost of pipes, and have continued with combined systems because of the enormous and ever-increasing costs of retrofitting the whole system with separate pipes for storm water and household wastewater, even though it is now considered best practice to manage the two water systems separately. Each year that the system grows larger, the more households connect to it, more pipes are covered with pavement, and the cost to change to a different system increases. But other less concrete examples are also common, for example the delineation of municipal boundaries often become very hard to change, even though redrawing

boundaries requires no significant capital investment.

Pierson thus follows Mahoney's definition "path dependence characterizes specifically those historical sequences in which contingent events set into motion institutional patterns or event chains that have deterministic properties."[26] The importance of contingency is that there must be multiple possible alternatives, and that the choice point occurs as a particular historical event or critical juncture. Although such contingency is widely seen as important, the term has led to some confusion.[27] While some economic models stress that there is a random quality to the choices made during a critical juncture, for social and political institutions such choices are less likely to be random than they are to be contingent, in the sense that institutional density and complexity will mean that of a range of possible outcomes the result will be unknowable until after the critical juncture. The choice is usually not random, therefore, but is more likely to be the result of political compromises, power struggles, or impositions, as discussed further in the following sections on critical junctures and incremental change.

The fact that some institution or technology has stayed the same for an extended period does not necessarily mean that it is path dependent, as it may be the only viable option. Claims of path dependence must be able to show that other alternatives are available, and must be able to explain the positive feedback effects that generate continuity. In terms of political and policy processes this will normally mean identifying those who benefit from a particular institution, and who support continuation or will fight a change that will disadvantage them. Invocations of path dependence that do not clearly specify such positive feedback mechanisms contribute little to our understanding. Many historical institutionalists therefore see institutions as "distributional instruments laden with power implications"[28] and see particular institutions as representing the outcomes of particular historical moments and conflicts. Where institutions endure, we need to ask whose interests are vested in particular institutions, and what sustains those interests over time.[29]

It is important to be clear that while the idea of path dependence originated in institutional economics studies of technologies such as the QWERTY keyboard, the concept is applicable also in public policy and political processes. Pierson argues that four characteristics of political systems make them even more subject to positive feedback effects than in economics: "1. The

central role of collective action; 2. The high density of institutions; 3. The possibilities for using political authority to enhance asymmetries of power; 4. Its intrinsic complexity and opacity."[30] Pierson's is the most cogent and thorough discussion of why political processes are highly subject to positive feedback effects, so is worth examining carefully. First, he stresses that a fundamental role of governments is the provision of public goods such as environmental protection, roads, national legal systems, etc. Such goods are characterized by jointness of supply (marginal cost of an additional user is zero or tiny), and non-excludability (it is very expensive or impossible to restrict users to those who have paid). Such goods are highly subject to free rider problems because individuals still gain the benefit of the good even if they don't contribute to paying for it, and so private markets will tend to undersupply such goods. Municipal infrastructure such as streetlights, sidewalks and roads, parks, public libraries, police, and many others have traditionally been supplied by municipal governments for exactly these reasons. Even though they are not 'pure' public goods, they all share significant public good characteristics, and public provision has traditionally been justified on this basis. In most cases collective provision of public goods is by the state, because compliance with rules must be compulsory, not voluntary, and requires the exercise of authority and coercion.

As Pierson suggests, however, "The focus on producing public goods, and the consequent resort to coercive authority, has a number of repercussions for the character of political life, each relevant for an assessment of tendencies toward path dependence."[31] In particular, collective action to influence politics has many characteristics that encourage path dependence, including high startup costs, coordination problems, winner-take-all outcomes, and adaptive expectations where individuals adjust their response based on their expectations of what others will do. This is clear in the case of political party systems, where a new party will have little influence until it gains a significant size so faces large startup costs that limit new entrants, but once a party gains a majority it will have a relatively free hand in devising policies that reward its supporters. And some political supporters will gravitate to the party in power, as it is much more likely to be able to deliver rewards to its supporters. These factors mean that political organizations and institutions have a tendency to persist once they have become established. Unlike market processes, where relatively free individual decisions to opt in or opt out of certain market processes drive processes of change, in political processes many institutions and policies must be

followed by everyone. Formal institutional rules and public policies impose extensive legally binding constraints on behavior. In this sense politics involves contests over the right to create and revise institutions and rules that regulate behavior.

It is clear that the routine exercise of power and authority through public institutions can be a powerful source of positive feedback. Because some actors are able to impose rules on others, such power can be used to change the rules to strengthen the position of those in power. This can be done explicitly through the gerrymandering of political boundaries, or more subtly by rewarding political supporters and strengthening their allegiance. Political winners can sometimes rewrite the rules to help ensure their next victory. Undecided or vulnerable actors may decide to join the winning side to take part in the spoils.[32] The machine politics of some turn of the century U.S. cities where winning parties rewarded their supporters with municipal jobs and contracts is just the most famous example of what is in fact a widespread and often not illegal phenomenon. There is clear positive feedback to access to power, self-evidently in authoritarian states but also more subtly in democratic polities, that is quite different to the positive feedback effects common in markets, and must be considered carefully in assessing policy continuity and positive feedback effects in political institutions.

Pierson further argues that the complexity of political processes tends to reinforce these tendencies to positive feedback effects in politics. Complexity of interlocking institutions is frequently seen as an obstacle to routine incremental adjustment and change, and therefore as a generator of path dependency. The most prominent elaboration of this idea is in the Varieties of Capitalism literature, which focuses on the persistence of different institutional configurations of modern capitalism in different countries.[33] A key element of the argument is that multiple institutional structures are interdependent, and efficiency gains result from the system as a whole, making it hard to reform or eliminate one aspect. Martin and Sunley have extended this analysis to explain economic path dependence at the regional scale, suggesting that path dependent trajectories of clusters of local industries are mutually reinforcing, a phenomenon they label "path-interdependence."[34] It seems reasonable to apply this analysis also to the institutions of governance at the urban scale, where complex sets of interlocking institutions may make it more difficult to reform one institution without simultaneously reforming the others.

It is worth noting, however, that others have suggested that institutional complexity may make path dependence less likely. As Sheingate argues, in complex systems, ambiguities and contradictions within sets of rules provide opportunities for creative interpretation and subversion of the existing order in such systems: "rules, in their various forms, can provide considerable scope for actors to create, interpret, and elaborate – in short, to act in ways that have transformative effects on politics."[35] Similarly, Mahoney and Thelen suggest that in complex systems issues of compliance (or rather lack of compliance) may be a major driver of institutional change because there may be significant gaps between interpretations of the rules.[36] Whether complexity increases or decreases the tendency towards path dependence in different institutional settings is therefore an empirical question that may vary greatly between sectors and places, and is an important area for further research. The point here is that for all these reasons, positive feedback effects and path dependence may be even more powerful in politics than in market processes.

And where positive feedback does play a significant role in shaping political processes, Pierson suggests that four characteristics will be prevalent: First, multiple equilibria are possible and likely, as suboptimal outcomes can get locked-in. Unlike the assumption of economists that in a efficient markets there will be a single stable equilibrium, if particular institutions persist because of path dependent positive feedback effects, then in different cities historical legacies may result in quite different stable institutional arrangements, even if these are not the most efficient way of doing things. Convergence on a particular 'best practice' is not inevitable simply because it is more efficient. Second, the role of contingency is increased, because small events or choices occurring early in a process can have enduring consequences. Third, in such cases the timing and sequencing of events becomes critically important, because a relatively small event occurring early in a sequence may have a more significant impact than a much larger event occurring later in a sequence. And fourth, path dependence means that once certain institutional configurations become established, inertia will be common.[37]

For planning history research, the implication is that analysis should be particularly attentive to the moments when new policies and approaches are established. The critical moments of new institution building need to be traced back and identified to be able to determine which institutions have tended to become path dependent, and why, and which actors were influential

in institutional choices. Claims of path dependence must include an explicit specification of the particular positive feedback effects involved, or the invocation of path dependence can lapse into simple arguments that history is important, without contributing to systematic explanations of why and how it is important in particular cases, and why certain policies are defended against change, or change in structured ways.

For historical institutionalist research in planning history some major questions are: Which urban institutions tend to be path dependent, and which don't? Why are some institutions path dependent and others not? What sorts of positive feedback effects are prevalent in cities? Which actors are invested in particular institutions and why? Are some institutional designs more or less likely to be subject to positive feedback effects? Are some institutional designs intentionally designed to create positive feedback, and so be hard to change? Ought planning institutions to be designed to be hard to change, in some cases, or would it be preferable to design policies to ensure future adaptability?

2.2 Critical Junctures

The idea of critical junctures and developmental pathways is a second key concept of historical institutional analysis. Critical junctures are those moments of major change when new institutions are established.[38] Collier and Collier define critical junctures as "a period of significant change, which typically occurs in distinct ways in different countries (or in other units of analysis) and which is hypothesized to produce distinct legacies."[39] In this model of institutional change, critical junctures are the punctuation points of a 'punctuated equilibrium,' in which major changes are triggered primarily by exogenous forces, and new institutional arrangements and new developmental pathways are created. The nature of such exogenous forces will depend on the institution and context, and might be a new technology, a changed economic environment, the breaching of some threshold of pollution or other health risk, or some other shock to existing arrangements.

The key point is that the loss of legitimacy of existing institutions resulting from crisis allows a heightened opportunity for policy entrepreneurs or other actors to reshape existing institutions and create new arrangements. As Cappocia and Kelemen argue: "During critical junctures change is substantially less constrained than it is during the phases of path dependence that

precede and follow them. In critical junctures contingency is enhanced, as the structural constraints imposed on actors during the path-dependent phase are substantially relaxed."[40] As Katznelson puts it, critical junctures are the moments of contingency when old policies and understandings no longer work, and new solutions need to be found. Critical junctures are moments when existing political and institutional structures fail to provide either adequate solutions to pressing problems, or explanations of challenging events, and thus lose governance legitimacy and their ability to determine action and interpretation, creating opportunities for actors of all sorts to play greater roles in developing new institutions.[41] Contingency is in this sense the opening of multiple possible futures, the determination of which will depend on the particular political dynamic and power relations when new institutions are established.

Critical junctures therefore represent a window of political opportunity, in Kingdon's sense of the term.[42] Choices are of course still constrained by larger economic, political, and ideological structures beyond their immediate influence, but political actors can influence outcomes, and where there are positive feedback effects, paths not taken recede quickly into the past and cannot easily be retrieved. If critical junctures represent moments when new sets of institutional arrangements are established, then they are very important moments indeed, when the rules of the game are changed. If such rules become long-lasting, then the political dynamics present in the critical juncture can have longer impacts, for as Lowndes puts it concisely: "institutional rules embody power relations by privileging certain positions and certain courses of action over others – they express 'patterns of distributional advantage.'"[43]

This seems especially true in cities, where urban property capital, its quality, liquidity, risk structure, and profit margins are all shaped by place-specific compromises with regard to: Who pays for what, which risks are socialized, how is infrastructure delivered, paid for, and maintained, how are services such as education, health, police and fire provided. Particularly important is the specification of the rules that apply to new capital investment in urban space, and the distribution of the costs and benefits of such investment. In cities these 'rules of the game' are the result of particular compromises, made in particular places, at specific times, and often reflect a balance of power in place at the time they were established. Such rules allocate the costs and benefits of urbanism in specific ways, and will always tend to privilege some actors,

interests, and outcomes over others. Some evolve over time, but others appear to be highly path dependent, and in such cases the particular critical juncture, and the power relations embodied in the formational institutional compromises do in some cases become enduring frameworks. This approach provides a new perspective on power struggles in urban governance, the dynamic aspects of which are examined further below.

For planning history the critical junctures/developmental pathways model seems likely to be productive. There are clearly major turning points during which new institutional structures of city planning are established, for example at the beginning of the 20th century when new modern planning systems were established in all the advanced economies, including the new tools of zoning, extension plans, municipal infrastructure development, etc. And again, after the Second World War many countries reformed their planning apparatus to accommodate rapid urban and economic growth and the huge increase of automobiles.

If we accept that there exist critical junctures of major institutional change, and that many countries go through similar stages of institutional development – for example the creation of a modern land planning system or the financialization of property markets – then the timing and sequencing of such critical junctures in relation to other institutional, economic, and political development becomes critical, and an important subject of comparative study. The classic study in this line is Collier and Collier on comparative political development in Latin America, which examines the periods of major incorporation of emergent labor movements into political systems. They argue that the success or failure of that initial moment, the configuration of political actors involved, and its timing in terms of domestic development and world events had profound long - term impacts in terms of political development trajectories in the countries studied.[44] Such a study has yet to be undertaken in planning history, although Sutcliffe's rich and nuanced account of the emergence of modern planning in the UK, Germany, France and the US comes close, as does Abu Lughod's history of New York, Chicago and Los Angeles.[45]

It is clear that the particular conjuncture surrounding the establishment of major urban institutions, whether municipal governance arrangements, municipal water supplies, public transit, or land development control systems, is likely to have powerful impacts on the compromises achieved and the institutions established. Institutions embody political logics and orders, and often continue to reflect the particular compromises and sets of power relations that

existed when they were established. When urban institutions were established, and under what circumstances, becomes of particular importance to planning history scholarship.

Major issues will be the timing and sequencing of the development of particular planning institutions in terms of level of urbanization, degree of wealth, available technology, economic context, and unionization or the degree of incorporation of working people into political structures. Countries that establish effective land-development controls when they are still lightly urbanized are certain to have a very different experience than those that urbanize before planning is established. Rodgers makes this point powerfully in his study of urban politics in the 'progressive age' of the turn of the century United States. He shows that timing is a key factor in the development of municipal ownership of public utilities such as water, gas, electrical, and transit systems, and that a major factor allowing successful municipalization of transit systems in the UK and Germany compared to the U.S. was that local governments that established municipal gas distribution companies gained valuable institutional capacity and large profits, and were much more likely to be successful in managing much more complex transit systems. He argues that in the US the timing of the municipal enterprise movement was later, gas and electrical systems were already established and were virtually all privately owned, and this contributed to the fact that most attempts to establish municipal streetcar systems failed.[46]

The particular circumstances, timing, and configurations of actors during significant planning historical critical junctures can have long legacies. For example, in developing countries the critical juncture of institutional establishment was most commonly controlled by a colonial power, and the legacies of those institutional frameworks continue to play a huge role in shaping planning approaches and agendas, and framing who is involved in particular decisions, and with what powers. For example, Home argues that in many British colonies, ad hoc arms-length 'trusts' were frequently given major town planning powers as a way of keeping such powers within the colonial administration, and insulating them from democratic municipal pressures. But in many cases this arrangement survived the transition to independence, greatly contributing to the weakness and lack of technical capacity of local governments.[47]

Similarly, as Berrisford argues in a recent paper, efforts to revise planning laws in Africa have "very seldom translated into new law that has been implemented successfully or, where there has been implementation, it has not been for the purposes originally envisaged for that law. In many

cases, the planning law inherited from the colonial power remains on the statute books, largely unchanged."[48] He argues that the complexity of systems that include planning law, land ownership systems, and municipal law, and the high value of urban land create political obstacles to reform. This is well known. The point here is that given the inherent difficulty of reforming such institutions, the initial conjuncture of institution formation becomes critical to understanding longrun patterns of urban governance and planning.[49]

Similarly, the timing of major urbanization is a key variable distinguishing different countries. There is little doubt that the kinds of institutional arrangements accepted as appropriate in the 19th century were quite different from those in the first half of the 20th, or those since the 1970s. In the 1950s and 60s developing countries were expected and encouraged to establish comprehensive municipally owned water supply systems, whereas in the 1980s the IMF began to make loans conditional on privatization of water systems. The experience of those which established a new water system in the former period is certain to be very different from those that attempted this in the latter period. For a wide variety of urban governance institutions, timing of the initial period of institutionalization in terms of level of urbanization, economic and political development, and global ideological context can be expected to have powerful impacts on outcomes.[50] Similarly, the sequencing of such developments in relationship to other institutional development, and in relation to similar developments in other countries will be key. Systematic comparative investigation of these relationships seems likely to be a highly productive avenue of planning history research.

Major questions here are: What are the key critical junctures of institutional development that planning historians should be concerned with? Are such critical junctures shared across different cities or systems of cities? Of what significance is it if a particular critical juncture – for example the creation of a city's first municipal plan or the first municipally owned infrastructure system – occurs in different cities at different times in relationship to either technological developments or to other shared political or economic changes?

2.3 Incremental and endogenous change

Some of the most exciting recent historical institutionalist work focuses on patterns and processes of gradual institutional change, and challenges the earlier focus on institutional

continuity and path dependency. The suggestion is that in contrast to the punctuated equilibrium model of stability in between moments of major exogenously induced change, a majority of institutional change may in fact occur through gradual change processes which may nonetheless be transformative over time.[51] As even those who focus primarily on critical junctures acknowledge, "Critical junctures are *rare* events in the development of an institution: the normal state of an institution is either one of stability or one of constrained, adaptive change."[52] Recent work focuses more closely on the characteristics and patterns of such adaptive change processes. The question then becomes: how do constrained processes of adaptive change work in specific institutional settings?

One key is the understanding that many institutions are, in Mahoney and Thelen's words "*distributional instruments* laden with power relations." (emphasis in original)[53] This is certainly the case in cities, as the regulation and management of cities creates, protects, and redistributes urban property values between locations, properties, and between cities and social groups. Urban property can have immense value, but that value depends on the myriad supports of municipal bylaws, infrastructure, mobility systems, security protections of police and fire services, education systems, public goods, and the regulation of land uses. The development, revision, and enforcement of such urban institutions is therefore routinely contested, and is seldom entirely static even if some specific institutions do demonstrate path dependent characteristics, and consistently privilege some outcomes over others.

This more dynamic view of institutions as contested distributional instruments leads Mahoney and Thelen to emphasize two points. First is that path dependence should not be understood as meaning that institutions are simply locked-in, but that continuity is often the result of ongoing mobilization by those advantaged by the institution, who seek to protect their advantages. So change can happen as a consequence of shifts in the balance of power, if those in favour of continuity are weaker than those who favour change.[54] Pierson's analysis of the positive feedback effects associated with access to political power discussed above is relevant here, as in some cases those with such power may have opportunities to veto changes that will weaken their position. The likelihood of continuity may therefore be related to the scale of benefits yielded by the institution in question, which may be decisive in successful mobilization in favour of such continuity. Where positive feedback effects are strong and institutions are relatively stable we

know not only that the institution is effective in biasing outcomes in certain directions, but also that it offers sufficient rewards to its beneficiaries to keep them mobilized to defend against revisions or interpretations of the rules that counter their interests. Institutional stability in many cases requires continued investment and maintenance of the institution-supporting coalition, in order to be able to block unwanted changes. The most common planning examples may be NIMBY style opposition of neighbourhood groups to unwanted land-uses or in support of restrictive zoning ordinances, or the 'defensive localism' opposition of small suburban municipalities to annexation or amalgamation with a larger city.[55]

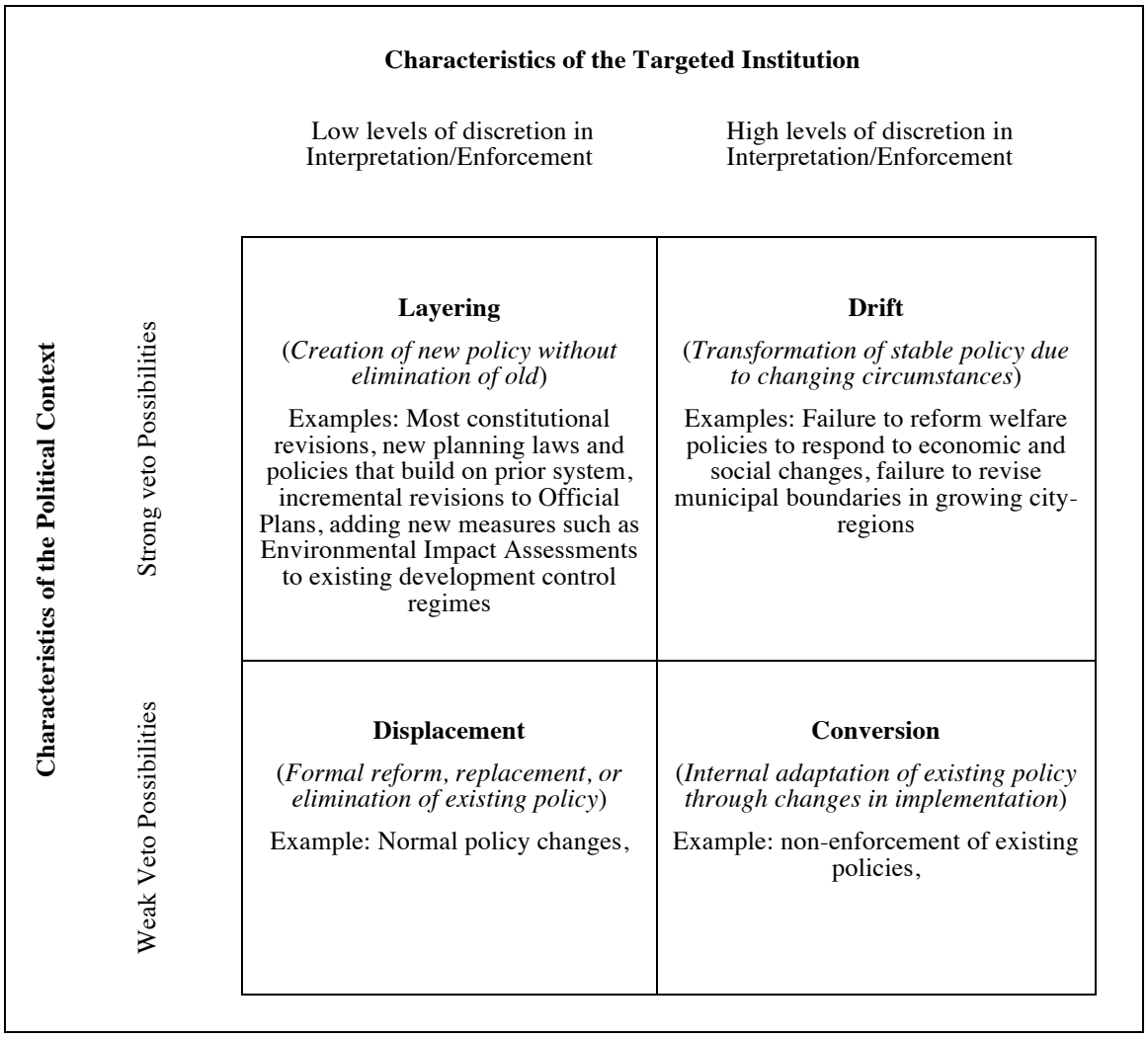
Yet different political and policy settings may offer very different opportunities for such coalitions to block change. For some institutions, such as constitutions, legal and political rules governing policy change are intentionally designed with multiple veto points or veto actors or supermajority voting rules, in order to reduce the likelihood of frequent rule changes. Yet the rules structuring revisions of other institutions may be relatively flexible, offering few built-in advantages for those seeking to prevent change, even if they have access to power. In such cases there will be more opportunities for political coalitions in support of change to succeed, and change processes will be likely to have different characteristics than where multiple veto points exist.

The second point stressed by Mahoney and Thelen is the possible variability of rule enforcement and compliance. Many rules are vague, or don't specify all possible situations, so must be interpreted and enforced. Such rule systems require continuous implementation and ongoing enforcement of compliance.[56] Where rules allow a wide range of possible interpretations, institutional change may occur even without formal revision of the rules, simply through changes in the way the rules are implemented, and/or the way compliance is enforced.

Basic characteristics of the institutions in question are therefore likely to have powerful impacts on political contests over their implementation and/or revision, making some change processes more likely in some cases, and other patterns of change likely elsewhere. Mahoney and Thelen therefore propose a typology of endogenous processes of institutional change, based on two characteristics of the institution in question: 1. whether or not defenders of the status quo have strong or weak veto possibilities, and 2. whether or not the institution allows actors opportunities for discretion in implementation or enforcement.[57] These institutional characteristics can be

combined to create a matrix of four possible modes of institutional change, shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Four modes of policy change



Adapted from Mahoney and Thelen (2010: 19)

Starting in the bottom left corner, *Displacement* is described as a particularly likely mode of policy change in cases where veto opportunities are weak, and where there are low levels of discretion in implementation. Where it is difficult to achieve shifts in policy by the simple expedient of interpreting or enforcing the roles differently, and there are relatively fewer

opportunities for defenders of the status quo to block institutional reform or the passage of new rules, it is much more likely that political actors seeking change will attempt to do so through the formal reform, replacement or elimination of existing policies or rules. This might be understood as a 'normal' mode of policy change that follows the common understanding of how policy processes ought to work – even if most policy change does not actually follow this pattern.

On the other hand, in cases where defenders of the status quo have strong veto opportunities and are able to prevent changes to existing institutions, and those institutions also offer little flexibility in implementation either because of the way the rules are drafted, or because any change in implementation will be particularly visible to those with veto powers, then those seeking change will have to find other ways of achieving reform. In cases where strong veto players or points exist it may often be easier to add a new policy alongside an existing arrangement than to achieve formal reform or revision of the existing rules. Over time, such *Layering* of new policies over old may transform the function and meaning of the older institution. A major example is the case of public pensions in the US, which were strongly supported by a powerful constituency of beneficiaries, and where changes were highly visible, so it was difficult to achieve policy reform to reduce their benefits.[58] Yet over the last 20 years the US pension system has been transformed by the rapid growth of individual retirement savings accounts (401k), that were initially seen as a minor additional pension option yet have cumulatively resulted in a major change in the overall composition of the US pension system.[59]

Mahoney and Thelen describe *Drift* as the transformation of stable policy due to changing circumstances. Drift is a likely mode of policy change when political actors wishing to change policies are confronted with powerful veto actors or veto points. Hacker describes welfare policies in the US during the 1980s and 90s as a case of Drift, as although critics of welfare were largely unsuccessful in reducing particular benefits, they were able to block reforms designed to adjust policies in response to changing socioeconomic conditions.[60] This failure to adapt US welfare policy to a rapidly changing economy and society meant that the social role and effectiveness of social welfare policy declined greatly over time. Similarly, Hacker and Pierson describe the failure to regulate hedge funds, derivatives and mortgage securitization in the 1980s and 90s as a textbook case of drift, that resulted from the active lobbying of powerful financial interests who mobilized to block attempts to regulate new financial products.[61] An urban

example is the common failure to adjust municipal boundaries to include new growth areas. Policy inaction leads inexorably to metropolitan governmental fragmentation in growing regions, because multiple veto players in the form of existing municipalities are able to block the adjustment of municipal boundaries and the creation of new regional governance approaches. In such cases the rules governing municipal annexation and incorporation play a decisive role in policy outcomes by creating powerful veto players.

Conversion describes processes of policy change where the rules remain formally the same but are interpreted and implemented in new ways. The non-enforcement of environmental regulations under the Reagan or George W. Bush presidencies is an often cited example. Such approaches are most likely where there exists considerable latitude for interpretation in enforcement, or ambiguities in the ways the rules are framed. As Mahoney and Thelen put it, "Lacking the capacity to destroy an institution, institutional challengers may be able to exploit its inherent ambiguities in ways that allow them to redirect it toward more favourable functions and effects".[62] Mahoney and Thelen make a convincing case that each of these modes of policy change will be likely to generate quite different configurations of policy actors.

This emphasis on issues of compliance with existing rule sets, and differential capacity to enforce compliance is particularly applicable to planning. While the overarching rules of the game may have been set in a past critical juncture, that does not mean that the system is frozen or entirely predictable until the next major change, as implementation and compliance with existing rules may be contested, and (re)interpretations of the rules may allow openings for creativity, or even outcomes that are quite the opposite of the intended application of the rules.

Some major questions for planning historians here are: Which kinds of planning institutions (plans, regulatory processes, infrastructures, urban forms, and governance arrangements) tend to change primarily in critical junctures and then get stuck in relatively inflexible, path dependent forms? In such cases what is the source of continuity? Are there powerful interests that seek continuity, and if so what is their reward for success? Which institutions tend to change continuously and incrementally? How do positive feedback effects shape each form of change? Do issues of discretion in enforcement and or differential administrative capacity to enforce compliance allow important variations in planning practice in different places or over time?

3. A planning history research agenda

Four main points are worth reinforcing briefly. First, over the last 20 years historical institutional research has developed valuable tools for understanding institutional continuity and change in comparative perspective. If we accept that one of the primary goals of planning history is to develop robust understandings of why city planning systems in different jurisdictions developed the way they did, and what the impacts of planning have been in different cities, then it seems clear that the theoretical and conceptual approaches of historical institutionalism provide some valuable tools for planning history research.

Several HI concepts are of particular value to planning historians: the idea that institutional development is in many cases not a steady and continuous process, but rather one that takes place in bursts of activity during moments of political opportunity or 'critical junctures,' and that such critical junctures demonstrate common characteristics; the idea of path dependence, that some institutions follow developmental pathways where early decisions can have great impacts on later options and positive feedback effects sometimes reinforce continuity; and the idea that change is structured by existing conditions, interests, and institutional structures, so that even where incremental change occurs, it is powerfully shaped by past decisions and institutional arrangements, and by the incentives and possibilities for key actors to attempt to initiate or prevent institutional change. Sets of planning history research questions relevant to each of these are outlined in section 2 above.

Second, path dependence in space has as yet been weakly theorized, with a tendency to refer primarily to sunk costs. I believe that there are much more powerful and complex positive feedback effects embedded in cities, including the fact of urban property as a repository of value, the promises and expectations of continuity bound up in particular properties and places, the governance and financing structures for urban infrastructure, and the geography and spatial aggregation of political units at all governance scales. Planning history scholarship that examines the institutionalization of urban space, the positive feedback effects that generate path dependence in different institutions, and the characteristics of structured processes of institutional change generates new research questions, and promises a richer and more nuanced understanding of planning processes and their long run evolution and impacts.

For example, in all the advanced economies at the beginning of the twentieth century there were major turning points in approaches to the regulation of urban change, planning of public investment, and control of private investment in cities. Prior to this, there was little systematic effort to shape overall patterns of urban development, apart from fortifications, and some special projects. Although in many countries new planning systems were established, there were fundamental differences in how the new approaches were institutionalized. Depending on factors such as their stage of economic and technical development, the division of power between local, state and central governments, constitutional protections and traditions of property rights, and type of urban system, different countries and cities made quite varied institutional choices. Although ideas and methods were widely shared, particular methods were institutionalized in very different ways in different contexts, as for example, the practice of zoning in Germany, the United States, and Japan. Comparative examination will be valuable both of the critical junctures, including the key actors involved in institution building and the choices they made, and of the long-run impacts of those choices.

This approach generates productive questions, such as: Why do some planning institutions in some places appear highly path dependent, while similar institutions in other places continue to evolve? Which institutional arrangements are more prone to path dependent outcomes, and which are open to continued modification and change? Such research will be revealing both of the essential aspects and nature of particular critical junctures, of differences in antecedent conditions and institutional structures between cities and countries, and of the nature of path dependence, and/or incremental change of the institutions that were established.

Third, Robinson's seminal critique of established modes of comparative urban analysis has inspired a flourishing of new comparative projects. Her plea for a renewed comparative project goes beyond the necessity, however, of including a broader and more representative group of cities in the comparison, but also demands new theoretical and conceptual approaches to the subject matter. Comparative studies of particular urban institutions across a range of cities will be one approach to a reconceptualization and reframing of comparative planning studies that can answer Robinson's challenge. When we compare particular institutions, then the level of wealth of the city, its size, government structure, and legal system become objects of comparative study,

instead of attempting to control these variables by selecting most-like cities as comparators.

For example, in recent years the condominium model of property development and home ownership has spread around the world. Many countries have borrowed and adopted similar legal frameworks to allow condominium development since the 1960s, but in different countries condominium property markets developed with distinct trajectories. A similar property ownership innovation has produced highly varied forms of property development in the U.S., Japan, Indonesia, and China, for example. And in different countries the legal framework itself has evolved from similar starting points in quite different directions, producing not only divergent property ownership characteristics, but also opportunities to examine and compare planning, governance, legal, and real estate systems in different settings. Much of that variation can be analysed with reference to the timing and sequencing of major periods of institutional development, the degree of path dependence of different institutions, and the patterns of institutional design that structure processes of change.

Equally important will be comparative research that focuses on the timing and sequencing of institutional development in relation to other major changes, as Rodgers did so effectively in his studies of policy borrowing across the Atlantic in the early 20th century. *When* particular urban institutions – such as water supply, sewers, development control, social housing, or condominium ownership models – were adopted in relation to other factors such as urban size, level of GDP, urbanization rate, and dominant global ideological currents clearly has profound impacts on outcomes. As suggested earlier, new water supply systems initiated in the 1960s are quite different in institutional design from those begun in the 1990s. Examination of such variation is likely to produce insight not only into the institution itself, but also into the significance of key contextual factors that shape its development.

These approaches will be particularly valuable in comparative studies. Cities around the world are affected by global vectors of change – industrialization, disease, changing transport technologies, neoliberalization, financialization, economic downturns and banking collapses, and climate change – that in many cases contribute to critical junctures of institutional change and innovation in planning systems. But the impacts, responses, and capacities to respond are quite varied in different places. There is a significant opportunity for planning history research

employing historical institutionalist approaches that examine the impacts of and responses to such shared pressures in different cities to develop a deeper and more clearly theorized understanding of processes of urbanization and urban change.

Fourth and finally, a historical institutionalist approach to planning history research such as that proposed here can bring to historical institutionalism and urban studies a powerful analysis of the roles of planning and regulatory processes in creating urban space and the way spatial phenomena contribute to path dependence in cities. Not only will such an approach produce a richer understanding of planning, but it is also possible that through pursuit of such a research agenda, planning history will increasingly be in a position to contribute to broader debates in urban theory, urban history, and historical institutionalism, as well as to a better understanding of major urban policy and governance issues. Most historical institutional analysis has been trapped in a nation state cage, seeing urban phenomena as either secondary or too complex and differentiated. Planning history can make a major contribution to institutional study through research that deploys the conceptual and analytical tools described here to the richly institutionalized processes of urban continuity and change.

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[26] James Mahoney, 'Path Dependence in Historical Sociology', Theor*y* an*d* Society*,* 29 (2000), 507 - 48.: 50, ibid.

[27] See, for example, Pflieger et al., 'How Does Urban Public Transport Change Cities? Correlations between Past and Present Transport and Urban Planning Policies', p. 1423, where ‘contingent’ is interpreted as ‘accidental’. The existence of multiple equally plausible choices does not necessarily

mean that such a choice is 'accidental' as the emergence of one option as dominant is very often the result of determined efforts of political actors and forces.

[28] Mahoney and Thelen, Explaining Institutional Change : Ambiguity, Agency, and Power.8

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[35] Adam Sheingate, 'Rethinking Rules: Creativity and Constraint in the U.S. House of Representatives', in James Mahoney and Kathleen Ann Thelen (eds.), *Explaining Institutional Change : Ambiguity, Agency, and Power* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 168-203.: 198

[36] Mahoney and Thelen '*Institutional* Change', 10

[37] Pierson '*Politics* in Time', 44

[38] see Ruth B. Collier and David Collier, Shaping the Political Arena (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), Thelen, 'Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics', , Ira Katznelson, 'Periodization and Preferences: Reflections on Purposive Action in Comparative Historical Social Science', in James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer (eds.), Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 270301, Giovanni Capoccia and R. Daniel Kelemen, 'The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism', World Politics, 59/3 (2007), 341-69.

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[48] Stephen Berrisford, 'Why It Is Difficult to Change Urban Planning Laws in African Countries', *Urban Forum,* 22/3 (2011), 209-28. 210

[49] For an example of the long-run impacts of a critical juncture of institutional formation on property rights in Japan, see Andre Sorensen, 'Land, Property Rights and Planning in Japan: Institutional Design and Institutional Change in Land Management', *Planning Perspectives,* 25/3 (2010), 279-302.

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[55] see, for example, Weir, M. (1995). 'Poverty, Social Rights, and the Politics of Place in the United States.' *European Social Policy: Between Fragmentation and Integration*. S. Leibfried and P. Pierson. Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution. Fischel, W. A. (2001). *The homevoter hypothesis : how home values influence local government taxation, school finance, and land-use policies*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press. Cox, K. R. (2002). *Political geography : territory, state, and society*. Oxford, UK ; Malden, Mass., Blackwell.

[56] Mahoney and Thelen '*Institutional Change'*

[57] see Mahoney and Thelen '*Institutional Change'* 19. This typology improves on the typology proposed by Hacker, (2004). Sorensen (2011b) written earlier and longer in press, adopted Hacker's typology, whereas Sorensen (2011c) shifts to the more developed version of Mahoney and Thelen (2010).

[58] Thelen, 'How Institutions Evolve: Insights from Comparative Historical Analysis', Pierson, Dismantling the Welfare State*? :* Reagan*,* Thatcher*,* and the Politics *of* Retrenchment.

[59] Thelen, 'How Institutions Evolve: Insights from Comparative Historical Analysis'. 227

[60] Hacker, 'Privatizing Risk without Privatizing the Welfare State: The Hidden Politics of Social Policy Retrenchment in the United States'.

[61] Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics : How Washington Made the Rich Richer and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class* (1st Simon & Schustser hardcover edn.; New York: Simon & Schustser, 2010) 357 p.

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