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Why Institutions Matter

Rewriting the history of the early republic

Certain kinds of historical writing alter our understanding not only of people, places, and events but also of nations and eras. Sometimes historians introduce new evidence that highlights anomalies in existing explanatory schemes. And sometimes they provide perspective on issues of present-day concern. The emergence in the 1990s of a "new" institutionalism in historical writing on the early American republic did (and continues to do) both. It built on the realization by a small cohort of mostly younger historians that the regnant social and cultural paradigm that had dominated history departments since the 1960s had become unduly confining—a relic, as it were, of a very different age. This shift in historical thinking was energized by a desire to make the history of the United States comprehensible for a generation for whom the passions of the 1960s had been supplanted by a new constellation of concerns. The media, public finance, and the military are but three of many topics that, though of obvious contemporary relevance, were largely ignored by historians of the early republic until quite recently. In turning to such topics, the new-institutional historians have sought to write a history of early America that is more realistic, less sentimental, and more open to international comparisons than the history they remember learning in school or encountered in most of the textbooks taught in introductory college survey courses.

These new institutionalists, many of whom now occupy prominent places in the historical profession, are respectful of the enormous body of fine scholarship on social and cultural topics that is the most enduring legacy of their immediate forbears. Yet they quarrel with this scholarship in at least two ways. Their first quarrel concerns their disinclination to characterize the early republic as precapitalistic and stateless. The anomalies in the historical record are simply too great: to envision the early republic as precapitalistic simply does not square with what we now know about the slave trade and land speculation, to name but two of the many inconvenient truths that historians of this period often neglect. And to deny the existence of the early American state—or even to characterize it as "innocuous" or "weak"—trivializes the existence of congeries of federal government institutions in realms as different as banking, communications, and what we today would call intellectual property.

Contingency is in; inexorability is out.

The second problem with the received wisdom is more of a matter of temperament. To be blunt, new institutionalists have grown impatient with the often-precious text parsing that has come to pass for serious historical analysis among more than a few historians who claim to have taken the linguistic turn. The new institutionalists are more interested in how things worked than in what people believed and are skeptical of historical writing that ignores huge swatches of social reality in a quixotic quest for the authentic and the pure.

An old institutionalism flourished in history departments for several decades before the Second World War. Its practitioners treated institutions as more-or-less stable entities with venerable pedigrees and wrote learned and often perceptive books and articles on particular businesses, government agencies, and cultural institutions. The new institutionalism, in contrast, treats institutions as bundles of rules that are constantly evolving and that interact with social and cultural processes in unpredictable and sometimes idiosyncratic ways. Contingency is in; inexorability is out. Old institutionalists searched for origins, which they referred to as "germs"; new institutionalists track outcomes, which they conceive of as "legacies."

Among the most distinctive features of the new institutionalism is its practitioners' reluctance to regard the rise of the United States as inevitable. For too long, in their view, the history of the United States has been regarded as decisively different—for better or worse—than the history of any other modern nation. No longer is the existence of a uniquely American society taken for granted. No longer are the country's major institutions presumed to be nothing more than the stage upon which its supposedly "real" history has been played out. And no longer is the country's institutional development assumed to have followed some "exceptional" trajectory that distinguished it from, say, Germany or France. Indeed, no longer is it assumed that there has, in fact, existed an American society from time immemorial. If the new institutionalists have a mantra, it is this: institutions beget institutions, shape social relationships, and influence cultural conventions. Specific institutions do things: in the lingua franca of the history profession, they have *agency*. Configurations of institutions, in contrast, are not agents, but have *effects* that no group or individual willed. The distinction between agency and effects was underscored over two decades ago by the sociologist Theda Skocpol in a justly celebrated manifesto entitled "Bringing the State Back In." This essay remains a foundational text for the new institutionalism of today.

Given the indebtedness of the new institutionalism to social science, it is perhaps not surprising that some of the most suggestive recent historical writing on the early republic to take the new-institutionalist turn originated in disciplines other than history. In *Shaped by War and Trade* (2002), for example, political scientist Ira Katznelson delineates the centrality of the military to early nineteenth-century American state building; in *Creation of the Media* (2004), sociologist Paul Starr details the lasting legacy for the media of certain key decisions (or what he calls "constitutive choices") made in the late eighteenth century; and in the *Cambridge Economic History of the United States: The Long Nineteenth Century* (2000), economist Richard Sylla documents how an analogous set of decisions shaped the history of public finance.

Among historians, the new institutionalism has found a home in a variety of fields. Among its champions is the distinguished cultural historian Thomas Bender, whose *Nation among Nations* is perhaps the most ambitious attempt by a historian to underscore the society-shaping influence of some of the nation's largest and most powerful institutions. In pointed contrast to Gordon S. Wood's *Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1992)—a locus classicus of the older, society-centered history that the new institutionalists reject—Bender neither takes the rise of the United States for granted nor assumes that its rise is rooted in social relationships that are in some mysterious way more fundamental than the institutional framework in which these relationships evolved. Bender is by no means alone. Certain insights of the new institutionalists have also found their way into at least one college history textbook: *Inventing America* (2nd ed., 2006), cowritten by Pauline Maier, Merritt Roe Smith, Alexander Keyssar, and Daniel J. Kevles.

The following three essays in *Common-place*'s special politics issue highlight a few of the possibilities of the institutionalist turn. They touch on three topics that the new institutionalists have begun to explore: namely, the media, public finance, and the military.

The growing convergence between the new institutionalism and the large body of distinguished historical writing on social and cultural themes is cogently underscored by [Sean Adams](#) in a thoughtful essay on the shifting significance of the public career of John Quincy Adams. Once derided as a hidebound elitist

hopelessly out of step with the rising currents of a democratic age, Adams has been lionized in recent years in venues as diverse as Steven Spielberg's popular film *Amistad* and Daniel Walker Howe's Pulitzer Prize-winning *What Hath God Wrought*. The new Adams is portrayed as a visionary statesman who, following a failed attempt as president to mobilize the federal government to promote the public good, harnessed the media to reframe the slavery issue as a struggle over civil liberties. Sean Adams (no relation) concurs. The key to John Quincy Adams's success lay in his resolute mobilization of an institution—in this instance, the constitutionally mandated right to petition—to forge new links between the government and the governed.

The enormous significance of nineteenth-century public finance is brilliantly illuminated by [Max Edling](#)'s compelling comparison of the tax-gathering apparatus of the United States and of Mexico. In *Sinews of Power* (1989), British historian John Brewer famously demonstrated that the military might of the British Empire rested on the superiority of Britain's tax-gathering apparatus over the tax-gathering apparatus of its archrival France; in his essay, Edling makes an analogous comparison between the United States and Mexico. If the early American state is compared with the early Mexican state—rather than, say, the American state during the Cold War—then it no longer makes sense to characterize it, as the influential Princeton University historian John Murrin once did, as a "midget institution in a giant land." On the contrary, it emerges as a highly effective institution that helped the country wage war, expand its boundaries, and forestall recolonization by Great Britain or France.

[Gautham Rao](#) strikes a similar note in his tightly focused case study of the establishment in the early republic of marine hospitals in ports large and small. The Treasury Department established these hospitals to help maintain the health of the sailors who staffed the country's merchant marine. Like the post office, the customs house, and the land office, the marine hospital was a tangible reminder of the reach of the newly established federal government. The hospitals were funded not from general revenue but rather from a tax on the mariners' salaries, which customs officers collected when mariners came into port. By providing thousands of Americans with high-quality medical service, these institutions highlighted the vital role that the federal government had come to play in the provisioning of health care. The rationale for the marine hospitals was not only humanitarian but also economic and military. Lawmakers regarded sea-borne commerce as a vital economic sector and, in the absence of a large navy, were determined to ensure that the government had at its disposal a cadre of highly skilled seafarers should the country find itself at war with one of the major European powers.

The consequence of state building for the Indian tribes of North America is the theme of the essay by [Jeffrey L. Pasley](#). From the Indians' perspective, the early American state was a powerful institution indeed. Not only did the military force thousands of Indians to relocate, most notoriously during the administration of Andrew Jackson; it also built a vast network of roads through Indian territory, which limited tribal autonomy, while establishing a large and sprawling "welfare" state apparatus to educate Indians, which devastated their culture. It is one of the many ironies of the social and cultural paradigm that its practitioners evinced great sympathy for the so-called victims of history without paying more than cursory attention to the very institutions that were responsible for their victimization. This is one of the several omissions that the new institutionalists are doing their best to correct.

Taken together, these essays show how historians are returning once again to the perennial questions of power, economics, and nationhood, questions that, with a few conspicuous exceptions, an earlier generation neglected. In this way, they aspire to write a history of the United States that takes nothing for granted. It is a history in which the rise of the nation to world power is no longer foreordained and in which its development becomes a chapter in a global history of modernity, rather than a unique event whose origins spring from a bewitching brew of social circumstances that in some mystical way set the United States apart from the rest of the world.

Further Reading:

For an up-to-date overview of recent historical writing on the early republic in the new-institutionalist tradition, see Mark R. Wilson, "Law and the American State, from the Revolution to the Civil War: Institutional Growth and Structural Change," in Michael Grossberg and Christopher Tomlins, eds., *Cambridge History of Law in America, Volume II: The Long Nineteenth Century, 1789-1920* (Cambridge, 2008): 1-35. For a recent collection of new-institutionalist essays, see Richard R. John, ed., *Ruling Passions: Political Economy in Nineteenth-Century America* (State College, Pa., 2006). The introductory essay to this collection includes an extensive bibliography of recent scholarship on new-institutionalist themes. Skocpol's celebrated essay, "Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research," can be found in Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge, 1985): 3-37. For a stimulating critique of the social and cultural paradigm in historical writing by an eminent sociologist who has written widely on historical topics, see the late Charles Tilly's *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (1984).

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