

## **Remaking Power and Politics**

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### **SSHA 2010 Presidential Address**

I am so pleased to see that so many people apparently share my engagement with power and politics... This has been a wonderful meeting, and I thank all of you who took part in organizing it, and who have participated in the many great panels.

My interest in power and politics was encouraged, as it was for many in my generation, by the “sound of marching, charging feet” that was all around us in the 60s and 70s: I was too young for the Mississippi summer, but the young civil rights workers from the north were the children of my parents’ friends, and came to visit and tell their tales. At the age of 10 I was taken to my first political event, the March on Washington, by my mother -- a woman from the South Side, whose outlook had been transformed by the Second World War and postwar civil rights initiatives, which she’d shared with my father, a member of the Illinois Civil Rights Commission. As the firstborn daughter of a progressive father, my career owes a lot to his direct support. My mother’s influence was both more foundational and more indirect; her experiences, recounted to me years later, reflected the gains and losses of many women of her generation: she volunteered for the Women’s Army Corps, went to college and on to graduate school at the University of Chicago, got married, got pregnant, dropped out, had me... She stayed politically

active until she died, marching for housing integration, taking to the streets with P-FLAG after my brother came out.<sup>1</sup> It was in part her PhD I earned in 1985...and my feminism has always been indebted to her.

By high school and college, I was participating – along with many of you, I have no doubt – in demonstrations and campaigns to end the Vietnam war, for black liberation, for women’s emancipation. But I was also impelled to political engagement by youthful knowledge of intolerable structures and events: the Holocaust, the vicious attacks and murders of civil rights activists, the deaths in Vietnam, female infanticide. Again, like many of you, I thought political action would challenge such horrors, part of the on and off “state of emergency” that is modernity. The understandings of power and politics that I absorbed in this atmosphere divided the world into heroes and villains, us and them, in which politics was the means to gain power – power that could be deployed to end such injustices. Politics was about showing the majority what was in their interests.

My journey through leftist politics in the 70s and 80s, attempting to organize a union in an electronics factory, selling newspapers in Boston’s poor and working class neighborhoods, helping to organize protests at the welfare office, brought home to me that very few shared my interpretation of their interests even if at times there were goals we could agree on. And the various failures of actually

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<sup>1</sup> I am happy to report generational continuity in this tradition; my daughter took my granddaughter Rowan to her first political event at age 1½ -- the Gay Pride Parade in San Francisco.

existing socialism were sobering – the excesses of the Cultural Revolution and the Khmer Rouge stood out. So did the evidences of workers’ or women’s attachments to organizations and practices that I initially thought were “oppressive.” These and my intellectual absorption of recent history left me unsatisfied with my earlier ways of thinking. And I found that the only way I could live with intolerable structures was to try to understand them; intellectual work is my psychic relief, though I hope it also contributes, in however small and indirect a way, to struggles to eradicate these structures.

In this talk, I will make the case for remaking conceptions of power and politics, taking up from where the *Remaking Modernity* project -- with Julia Adams and Lis Clemens and many others – left off: We argued for remaking “modernity,” a core concept of historical sociology, by building upon the foundational work of the ‘70s and ‘80s and bringing in key elements of institutionalist and culturalist critiques... I want to perform a similar – albeit far shorter! – move for “power and politics.” We focused on sociology, but I think the same move should be made with history and the other historical social sciences. This, I think, can also help us to revitalize the encounters between history and the social sciences.

## **Social Science, History, Power and Politics**

The founding of the Social Science History Association in 1974 was part of a larger shift within history and the social sciences to consider the *political* significance of *social* arrangements and processes. Traditional approaches toward politics and power kept scholars focused on formal institutions, elites and conventional forms of participation. Instead, social science historians insisted on the significance of “politics from below,” and the social sources of power and interests, particularly as rooted in capitalism. These foundational premises about politics and power have, I believe, served to unify – in however loose a way – those of us who meet each year under the banner of the SSHA.

Indeed, the animating questions of the early SSHA and other encounters between history and social science were stimulated largely by political questions. Scholars felt, in a visceral way, the links between the collective actions and social changes they saw around them and the historical events and processes they studied: the rise and decline of social movements from 1848 through the ‘70s, the ongoing “creative destruction” of capitalist development, the processes of war-making and state-making, the origins and the unsettling of welfare capitalism, the sweeping transformations of the world system by national liberation movements.

In the 1970s, when the SSHA's first meetings were held, the founding generation wanted "social science history" to address these pressing questions by combining social-science method and theory and new forms of historical evidence. The theories were usually materialist, with strong Marxist influences. The character of state policies and political structures was understood to reflect the "balance of class forces," interests to flow from class position, and power to work in a juridical vein, as "power over." If there was any attention to subjectivity, it was in the form of measuring "true or false" consciousness on the assumption that "objective" interests could be deduced from social position.

These approaches were fruitful, as we know from the early work of Chuck and Louise Tilly on contentious politics and the gender relations of capitalist industrialization. But by the 1980s, the common understandings were widely criticized. There were new emphases on the multiplicity of identities and structures of inequality, new questions about the adequacy of materialist accounts of politics. Dissatisfactions were also stimulated by "real-world" developments: from the high point of movement activism and hopes in the '60s and '70s, there was a sharp shift to the right, symbolized by the elections of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. However, we see a parting of the ways when it came to addressing these new political conditions and analytic challenges. To put it starkly, moves to "bring the state and other political institutions back in" have been focused on politics, while the scholars taking the various cultural turns have focused on power. The conceptualizations of power

and politics have been sundered along with the scholarly communities deploying them. Bringing the state back in, and later, institutionalism have been strong in political science, political history (especially American Political Development), and comparative-historical sociology, and moves to take some version of the cultural turn especially in history, anthropology, and, again, comparative-historical sociology. Note that sociology – my home discipline -- is on the dividing line. I too am Janus-faced, and I want to address both communities.

### **Bringing the State and Political Institutions Back In**

Political institutionalism has worked to address the “failure” of neo-Marxist – or, more broadly, class determinist – accounts of politics with a neo-Weberian approach that highlighted the state as potentially autonomous actor and institution. Specifically political logics derived from struggles over the means of coercion and administration, and competition in the world system of states. Against the grain of much previous social-historical analysis, scholars argued that politics was not fully determined by economic forces, either in the near term or in the “lonely hour of the last instance.” Indeed, many scholars in the SSHA ranks have contributed to understanding the sources of states’ power, capacities and distinctive goals; the historically contingent formation of political groups and interests; and the impact on policy outcomes of differences in state structure, capacities and policy feedback. More recent innovations, especially under the

banner of historical institutionalism, have featured fully processual accounts, which aim to understand the mechanisms of institutional change and continuity.

While mainstream forms of institutionalist analysis exclude the sexual and gendered elements of politics, a great deal of exciting research on gender, social politics and welfare has been done under the auspices of the SSHA – for example in the miniconferences of the 1990s, and indeed led to the founding of the journal *Social Politics*, by Barbara Hobson, Sonya Michel and me. (Sonya has retired from the journal, but Fiona Williams, Rianne Mahon, and Kim Morgan have joined me and Barbara, and are here today.)

Most institutionalist analysis is weaker when it comes to understanding culture, agency, constitutive power. To take but one critical example, war-making is central to many accounts of state-building, but this is seldom linked to its underpinnings in masculine identities or racialized power relations, the creation in empire of “us” and “them.” Scholars in this group typically focus on the institutions of political economy rather than on the organizations that reflect the darker sides of modernity – punishment, regulation of sexualities, “native policies.”

Marshall Sahlins critiques the pervasive assumptions in institutionalist analysis and elsewhere about the “utilitarian individualism” of all humans, in which “all ...actions and options...[are] translated into their apparent common denominator

of 'pleasures' and 'satisfactions,' among which we prudently allocate our limited pecuniary means.... All of culture seems constituted by (and as) the businesslike economizing of autonomous individuals" (in Spiegel 2005, p.113).

Perhaps it is these characteristics that contribute to a certain flatness in institutionalist accounts – “puzzling” developments refer to instances in which these “straightforward and businesslike” interests seem not to have been operative, but then, by looking more closely at institutional patternings of agency, we find that indeed they still do... Although there are unintended consequences in these accounts, they derive from the emergent properties of institutions – but they rarely stem from surprises in terms of group identifications and loyalties beyond class, or actors’ ambivalences, psychic investments, desires, or attachments to non-economic goals. For analyses that do try to account for these recurring non-rational aspects of politics, we can do no better than to consider the work that has been done under the sign of the cultural turn!

### **The Cultural Turns**

Geoff Eley contends that the rightward political shift of the late 1970s undermined social historians’ beliefs in Marxist teleologies, including the inevitability of workers’ attachment to socialism. They demanded new perspectives on power and politics that took greater account of subjectivity and ideology, contributing to

the turn towards cultural history. Historians, anthropologists and sociologists thus worked to develop a broader, culturalist approach to politics, in which, following Foucault, attention focused on the productive power inherent in the discursive formation of categories, subjects, and agency. George Alter and I are bookended by two people – past President Julia Adams and incoming SSHA Vice President Bill Sewell, Jr., -- who have made extremely influential theoretical contributions on the topic of agency, which has surely been one of the calling cards of the cultural turn; indeed, Julia’s program last year was organized on the theme of “agency and action.” So I will take that as read, and move to some other concerns of the cultural turn.

The diverse potentialities of cultural “resistance,” as in James Scott’s unearthing of “hidden transcripts,” largely displaced studies of so-called juridical power. Rather than the (soon-to-be?) socialist working class attempting to scale the pinnacle of state power we found various other subalterns engaging in resistance. Of course, there had always been workers whose affiliations and desires were not captured by any working-class party, and who also eluded the analytic grasp of social determinism. It is no wonder that Gramsci, the incisive analyst of fascism and hegemony, was so important to emergent cultural-studies paradigms and historical studies of ideology. Carolyn Steedman (1986) wrote brilliantly, in *Landscape for a Good Woman*, about the Tory proclivities of her working-class mother as a way to contest the views of E.P. Thompson about the formation of the English working class, and how these made it impossible to understand the

politics of envy, gender, and striving – captured in the yearning of her mother and other working women for a “New Look” skirt. It did not take long, however, for the whole problem of unified political identity earlier articulated with respect to class to be repeated vis-à-vis “women,” famously articulated by Denise Riley in her critiques of the “category of women.” Every category could be fractured, refused, renegotiated, complicated.

A key move in the culturalist shift was taking up questions of subjectivity, ambivalence, contradiction, multiplicity, here joining with work in gender and critical race studies. Analysts forwarded a notion of “subjectivity at odds with itself” (Rose 1986, p.15), via discourse or psychodynamics or both. The psyche was of great *political* significance, as Jacqueline Rose argued:

Perhaps for women [-- *I would say this for any dominated group* -- ] it is of particular importance that we find a language which allows us to recognize our part in intolerable structures – but in such a way which renders us neither the pure victims nor the sole agents of our distress (Rose 1986, p.14).

Involvement with structures such as sexual difference could not be reduced to complicity or false consciousness.

The cultural turns, and associated moves to foreground gender, race, and empire, produced a fertile outpouring of scholarship that continues today, and I want to bring these theoretical advances to the analysis of politics. But you will not be surprised when I tell you that I am critical here as well. One could take up a friendly critique of the linguistic or cultural turns from the perspective of “lived embodiment,” as does Kathleen Canning, or of practice theory, as does Rick Biernacki. I’m sympathetic to these critiques, but I’m more worried about how they make us think about politics. Too often, politics is anything that reproduces, reflects or resists existing distributions of resources and power. In these accounts, cultural “resistance” is not linked to collective action and institutions. How do we get from the desire for a “New Look” skirt to voting patterns, to systems of representation that magnify or reduce the influence of specific groups, to state organizations that regulate women’s and men’s lives?

Writing in 1986, not so long after the movements of the ‘70s had been replaced in analysts’ minds by the fact of white working-class voters’ support for the right, Rose claimed the political utility of psychoanalysis. When Judith Butler – widely influential in cultural history and beyond -- took up similar questions over a decade later, in *The Psychic Life of Power*, not only was the analysis more abstract – she is a philosopher and not a historian, of course. But it was almost entirely decontextualized. “Power” had no institutional referents. It combines the power of parental love or rejection and the power of the state and the law into one concept; similarly, individual and collective forms of resistance were merged

into an undifferentiated notion of politics. How can we analyze extremely variegated political processes, organizations, and institutions with such an apparatus?

In short, on much of the terrain of the cultural turns, understandings of politics are relatively impoverished, and too little attention is given to the varied institutions of juridical – state – rule and collective political action and how these are imbricated with “capillary” forms of power.

**Where does that leave us now, in historical social science and social-scientificallly-informed history?**

These intellectual developments have pushed us to search for fresh approaches to power and politics, and we are encouraged to do so as well by world-shaking political events and processes -- the huge global unsettling occasioned by the collapse of the Soviet Union and communist regimes in Eastern Europe from 1989 on, and the unfolding, part-catastrophic – think of 9/11, part-slow-moving struggle between Islamism and the western capitalist democracies. These have helped to unseat familiar theoretical categories of analysis, and the alliances and enmities that underpinned many aspects of 20<sup>th</sup>-century political and social arrangements.

Each of the scholarly movements I've reviewed has, as recent studies of gradual institutional change by scholars like my colleagues Jim Mahoney and Kathy Thelen would have it, left layers of academic organization in the SSHA. The different scholarly communities that make up the SSHA confederation have friendly relations. We are an admirably open, "hundred flowers bloom" sort of an organization. But I think we are at a moment intellectually where we might find ways to integrate our distinctive theoretical preoccupations. This hope is grounded in both perspectives having reached up against certain limits in their understandings of power and politics – the institutionalists groping for better ways to theorize structured agency and multiplicity, the culturalists looking for ways to tackle newly-urgent issues of political economy, global inequality, empire.

I myself began my scholarly career as an advocate of "state-centered" analysis, learning the ins and outs of comparative and historical analysis with my teacher and collaborator, Theda Skocpol, alongside Margy Weir, Bruce Carruthers and others. So perhaps it is not surprising that I retain a deep interest in the political mechanisms by which power and resources are amassed and deployed. This type of work and its scholarly descendants joins high politics and politics from below, attends to organizations and institutions, including of course, the state, and its varying boundaries and enmeshments with other entities. All of this is critical to maintain.

By the 1990s, I, like some other state-centered analysts and historical institutionalists, was increasingly influenced by Foucaultian or, more generally, culturalist approaches to politics and power. My own path to culturalism was via my friendship and collaborations with Julia Adams and George Steinmetz, my first and best teachers from among the many graduate students with whom I have been privileged to work during my years at Wisconsin and Northwestern. Unlike more purely semiotic approaches, the culturalism of the historical sociologists remains anchored to politics and states, as in Steinmetz's 1999 edited volume, *State/Culture*. Studies of maternalist politics – which have flourished at SSHA – reject determinism, contextualize political identifications, take account of signification. Women do not automatically identify with feminism, or with motherhood, as the basis for making political claims. As Adams argues, our studies of gendered politics – from familial states to maternalist political projects and policy regimes – should examine the “recruitment of subjects,” which is to say the “hailing” or “interpellating” of individuals to specific and identities. Moreover, we should investigate why some hailings, using some signs – say, of “mother” or “citizen” or “submissive wife” or “mama grizzly” -- resonate with some subjects – people! -- more than others. I have also been influenced by the work of feminist scholars who combine historical excavation and ethnographic investigation to probe how state regulation and the constitution of subjected agency work “on the ground” – Lynne Haney's fine books on “inventing the needy” and on new therapeutic technologies of punishment stand out. (I myself am pondering these issues in my current work on feminism and the

politics of maternalism.) We should not give up the insights of culturalism with respect to understanding agency, power, culture, gender, empire and race.

In early 2000s, in *Remaking Modernity*, Julia Adams, Lis Clemens and I – with many colleagues, too many to list by name – forgive me! – worked to summon up a “third wave” of historical sociology that would revivify the conversations that had characterized earlier moments in the subdiscipline, which also featured significant exchanges with history. We were particularly encouraged by the movement in historical sociology to bring some of the culturalist program into studies of states. This work has been prominent in the SSHA, for example, in studies of state categorization projects like the census, which help to create race, nation and ethnicity. We argued that, if in the earlier phase of historical social science we called the second wave, Marx met Weber, this mixing of culturalism with institutionalism might be characterized as Weber meeting Foucault. And to some extent, I think this is what is needed in the broader interdisciplinary landscape.

However, with the political institutionalists and some political theorists, I want to leave behind the culturalists’ overly capacious approach to politics, which assumes that politics is anywhere power is being reproduced or resisted – which is to say, everywhere. But while power is everywhere, politics is not... We need a conception of politics that is linked to but not coterminous with power. As my friend and former colleague Linda Zerilli puts it in her remarkable piece of

feminist Arendtian scholarship, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (p.23; author's emphasis),

[T]he word *political* signifies a relation between things, not a substance in any thing. Housework *becomes* political when two things that are not logically related, say the principle of equality and the sexual division of labor, are brought into a relationship as the object of dispute, that is, as occasion for the speech and action with which people create the common world, the space in which *things become public*, and create it anew.

This is a critique of feminist proclamations that the “personal is political.” One may recognize the *potential* political character of all social arrangements, including issues that are classified as “personal” – after all, power is constitutive and productive of these and other relations – but we can distinguish individual resistance or the everyday reproduction of structures, from politics, which is public and collective.

So we have Marx, Weber, Foucault, Arendt – but there is still a need for a much deeper understanding of subjectivity to undergird our concepts of politics and power than has commonly been available in social sciences and much history. I look to feminism here, though let me stress that it is not the only or privileged site from which attention to subjectification or embodiment have grown – think of the

work of DuBois and Fanon, and critical studies of race and empire. Feminism is simply the site from which I have come to these notions.

So perhaps I can call on Simone deBeauvoir, Butler, Rose or others from the interdisciplinary fields of gender and sexuality studies, with which I have become familiar through my decade-long association with the Northwestern Gender Studies program. As I indicated earlier, in my discussion of the cultural turns, the subject question has been central to that intellectual movement. Work in gender studies – allied with cultural history -- has also been especially insistent on – to borrow Butler’s felicitous title, the “psychic life of power,” and all the desires, ambivalences, and irrational impulses that persist alongside calculating rationality. I often invoke the caring mother as the emblem of such non-rational actors, but in the interest of breaking with gender stereotypes if not with gendered analysis, think of Materazzi and Zidane in the France-Italy World Cup in 2006 – and recall the fight was about what the Italian said about the mother and sister of the Frenchman [oh the irony here – Zidane representing France!]. In any event, feminists’ preoccupation with subjectivities can be traced back to the founding text of twentieth-century feminism and a continuing inspiration, deBeauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. Feminist work also highlights lived embodiment as a site of power and one possible basis for political engagements. There is a lot of room for productive disagreement among accounts of subjectification and embodiment focusing on semiotic, practice-oriented, psychoanalytic, or discursive processes. At the least they encourage us to reject the culturally-thin

understandings of subjectivities that abound in some precincts of political analysis. Such notions of deracinated agents give rise to the idea that we can easily shed our investments in – maybe complicity with -- “intolerable structures,” or, less darkly, in the status quo. This idea is contradicted by the histories we produce and the world we inhabit. So I want to insist on deBeauvoir or Fanon someone like them alongside the others as our north stars for analyzing politics and power.

I have argued for a particular way of understanding power and politics, and I know it is not the only one that might emerge from renewed encounters between institutionalist and culturalist analyses. I do think such encounters and the conceptual work that they will produce could help us to re-forge a productive alliance between history and the social sciences. Why an alliance? After all, some among our ranks identify equally as historians and as social scientists, and therefore have moved beyond partnership or alliance to merger. Yet many others retain stronger identifications with their disciplines, albeit sharing a passion for historicizing. And there is a political battle in academia and in the broader intellectual world. We face not only the demands of administrations for economizing, but for gains in a status game that may be stacked in favor of approaches that claim to be objective, scientific, generalizing rather than reflexive, context-dependent, historically-specific. In this struggle, SSHA is of course the source of rich intellectual resources – but it is also an important intellectual refuge for historically-minded social scientists, or quantitatively- or

theoretically-oriented historians – those who are slightly at odds with their dominant disciplinary ethos.

## **Conclusion**

Walter Benjamin famously described the intolerable structures that are modernity in the essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History”:

A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

Benjamin's vision is one of the most vivid -- and bleakest -- in modern political analysis. Those schooled in some varieties of Foucaultian theorizing about the pervasiveness of power may adopt a similar stance, and feel immobilized -- we cannot even speak except in the languages of power. Are we not at such a crisis point? Yet let us historicize. Benjamin, surely one of the brightest stars of the intellectual firmament, lived in a time when state power was held by a regime bent on annihilating him and his democratic, socialist, Jewish compatriots. He was caught between murderous authorities and escape by suicide, and chose the latter. We are not in such a moment or place. We should not lose sight of the privilege we enjoy in this moment, in this space: we may challenge power, we may participate in democratic politics. To be able to offer students some alternative to received wisdom, to denaturalize power, to destabilize orthodoxies -- to historicize -- is a great privilege of our position as professors and scholars.