Review Essay

INSTITUTIONAL PERFORMANCE, POLITICAL CULTURE AND POLITICAL CHANGE

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Comparative political analysis evolves at an ever increasing pace. Yet the basic approaches that orient this enterprise in the 1990s have been with us for almost five decades. In the early 1960s, S.N. Eisenstadt’s pathbreaking The Political Systems of Empires drew upon structural-functionalism to analyze the operational characteristics of empires, portraying them as a vanishing but once-common species of polity. Renewed interest in how Eisenstadt employed structural-functionalism in this work led Transaction Publishers to reissue Empires with an extensive new introduction by the author. In this update, Eisenstadt ties comparative sociological-historical studies to ongoing debate over the utility of structural-functionalism as an overarching social science paradigm.

S.N. Eisenstadt was not the first political analyst to draw upon structural-functionalism. In the decade that preceded publication of The Political Systems of Empires, numerous scholars attempted to infuse political science with concepts from this perspective, an approach that came from physics to the social sciences through anthropology. Prominent

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political scientists with an early interest in structural-functionalism include Gabriel Almond, David Easton, David Apter, and Lucian Pye. These pioneers anticipated that structural-functionalism would enable them to move beyond the orthodoxy of institutionalism, the paradigm that had dominated their discipline since the nineteenth century. They also saw in structural-functionalism a framework conducive to cross-national theorizing about political life in settings as diverse as liberal democracies, communism, and the third world.

More recently, in the wake of structural-functionalism’s failure to fulfill expectations that it would lead to scientific political theory, Robert Putnam made a powerful case for the centrality of institutions in analyzing the behavior of governments. His *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* is one of the 1990s’ most important political studies. Here Putnam operates from an approach political scientists label the “new institutionalism” to examine why some democratic governments succeed and others fail. Twenty Italian regional governments provide data supporting Putnam’s hypothesis that formal institutions shape political behavior. Concern with how institutions configure politics also underlies the third study under review, Ben Ross Schneider’s *Politics Within the State: Elite Bureaucrats and Industrial Policy In Authoritarian Brazil*. While focusing on specific developmental projects rather than overall government output, Schneider opens windows into the mysterious and opaque inner workings of the state by mapping the interrelatedness of policymaking, policy content, and political stability. Thus, many concerns of *Politics Within the State* resemble those addressed three decades earlier by S. N. Eisenstadt when he examined the political capabilities of empires.

Each of these studies draws upon a distinct methodology. Eisenstadt’s historical macrosociology is breathtaking in scope. Employing almost two thousand years of secondary accounts, it discusses and analyzes five centralized bureaucratic empires: Sassanid Persia, Byzantium, T’ang China, colonial Spanish America, and absolutist Europe. The heart of Eisenstadt’s research lies in its analysis of the basic system characteristics of these empires’ political regimes and in its examination of the most important social structures and processes that they evolved. Eisenstadt also examines the range of policies undertaken by the rulers of these empires as they sought to maintain the systemic boundaries of their respective political regimes.

The dependent variable of *The Political Systems of Empires* is free resources. Eisenstadt posits that the central distinguishing characteristic of empires as a political system type resided in their development, and internal reproduction, of relatively high (compared with tribal, patrimonial and certain city-state regimes) degrees of free resources. An empire’s uncommitted resources are not embedded in ascriptive social groups or committed to their use. Its ruling elites intend that free resources increase their capabilities by liberating them from obligations to traditional aristocratic, rural, or clan groups, and they encourage the institutionalization of alternative interests capable of resource creation and reproduction. Imperial bureaucrats keep these new groups dependent on the state so that government can control their resources for itself.

Institutions possessing increased capabilities is also Robert Putnam’s concern in *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. This volume casts high-performance democratic institutions as its dependent variable, and Putnam portrays institutions as devices for achieving purposes, not just for reaching agreement. “We want to do things, not just decide things.” Putnam’s concept of institutional performance is straightforward: societal demands > political interaction > government > policy choice > implementation. To qualify as “high performance,” a democratic institution must be both responsive and effective.

*Making Democracy Work* explores three possible explanations for the differing institu-