Chapter Two

Beyond Institutions-as-Structure: A Deeper Structural Perspective

The life of the nation has grown infinitely varied. It does not centre now upon questions of governmental structure or of the distribution of governmental powers. It centres upon questions of the very structure and operation of society itself, of which government is only the instrument.

—Woodrow Wilson, 1912

Structure Muddled

Woodrow Wilson had it right, up to a point. There is a structure of power—"the very structure and operation of society itself"—that lies beneath the distribution of governmental powers. His 1912 observation points to a flaw in the conventional structure-as-institutions approach adopted by mainstream political science.¹ That approach privileges the institutional balance of power among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, often ignoring (or accepting as a “given”) the deeper structure of power within which institutions operate. Then, as now, serious analysis of the presidency would benefit from examining and questioning that power structure underlying the operation of governmental institutions. Wilson’s presidential campaign rhetoric above introduced a critique of the rise of giant corporations within the American political economy, monopoly power that came under attack in the Progressive Era with often harsh indictment:

The masters of the government of the United States are the combined capitalists and manufacturers of the United States. It is written over every intimate page of the records of Congress, it is written all through the history of conferences at the White House, that the suggestions of economic policy in this country have come from one source, not from many sources. The benevolent guardians, the kindhearted trustees who have taken the troubles of government off our hands, have become so conspicuous that almost anybody can write out a list of them.²

W. F. Grover et al., The Unsustainable Presidency
© William F. Grover and Joseph G. Peschek 2014
However, the venom Wilson reserved for big manufacturers, bankers, the great railroad combinations, and other trusts should not, of course, be mistaken for a general rejection of the business ethos or the basic structural arrangements of the political economy. He sought to preserve all of that. What he opposed—what progressives opposed, in word if not deed, as a movement—was the pernicious effect of monopoly on market competition and business opportunities for smaller enterprises. “I am for big business, and I am against the trusts,” he added, drawing a distinction that reveals the limits of his examination of “the very structure and operation of society itself.” He elaborated on this distinction in a passage that celebrated big business:

Big business is no doubt to a large extent necessary and natural. The development of business upon a great scale of cooperation, is inevitable, and, is probably desirable. But that is a very different matter from the development of trusts, because the trusts have not grown. They have been artificially created; they have been put together, not by natural processes, but by the will, the deliberate planning will, of men who were more powerful than their neighbors in the business world.

Large corporations were viewed as “natural,” even organic, whereas trusts were a contrived impediment to the “natural processes” of the market—standard fare for the progressive critique of the day.

Wilson’s focus on the structure of society beneath the mere governmental structure entailed a conservative reading of the political economy, as he acknowledged when he explained that “if I did not believe that to be a progressive was to preserve the essentials of our institutions, I for one could not be a progressive.” His perspective was echoed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt while running for his first reelection in 1936. In a succinct summary of the limits of progressive reformism, he argued that “the most serious threat to our institutions comes from those who refuse to face the need for change.” As he went on to explain: “Liberalism becomes the protection for the far-sighted conservative… ‘Reform if you would preserve.’ I am that kind of conservative because I am that kind of liberal.” These two Democratic presidents embraced a relatively thin notion of “structure.” Were trusts the lone cause of the class bias of economic policy in the halls of Congress and conferences in the White House? Or must politics in a capitalist democracy necessarily favor the interests of wealthy owners of capital over the interest of the common person? Would restraining or eliminating monopoly while preserving big business cure “the