

Feminist Discursive Institutionalism – What’s Discursive About It?

Limitations of conventional political studies paradigms

To be presented at the 2nd European Conference on Politics and Gender, Budapest:
13 – 15 January 2011, in section 4: Research Methodologies and Methods

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This paper is intended to contribute to ongoing discussions about the desirability, or undesirability, of an alliance between feminists involved in the study of politics and the ‘new institutionalisms’ (Mackay and Meier 2003; Mackay, Krook and Kenny 2010; Krook and Mackay 2010). In developing our position we would like to make clear that we do not see ourselves as involved in marking out ‘our turf’. Rather, we want to suggest that methodologies matter politically and therefore that theoretical debates ought to be considered at this level – that is, they ought to be considered in terms of the forms of politics they make possible. Because of our conviction that ‘institutionalisms’ of whatever kind impose rigidities on the political landscape in ways that hamper progressive politics, we are uneasy about recommendations that feminists makes alliances with the new institutionalisms. This paper lays out, in a preliminary form, political reasons for steering clear of all ‘institutionalisms’ as modes of explanation along with other conventional political science paradigms.

Our particular focus is ‘discursive institutionalism’. We would like to suggest that this term is an oxymoron, and that this is the case whether or not you preface it with ‘feminist’, as in ‘*feminist discursive institutionalism*’ (Kulawik 2009, Freidenvall 2010). In addition, we also have a specific interest in discursive institutionalism because of the feminist interest in this approach. For example, both Kulawik and Freidenvall argue that a discursive insitutionalism approach is a way of improving a feminist analysis of politics. ‘Discursive’, as we understand the concept (discussion to follow), emphasizes contestation and contingency while ‘institutions’ are, in the main, conceptualised as fixed and immutable, albeit to different degrees (discussion to follow) – hence, there is, we argue, an inherent contradiction in their linking (‘discursive institutionalism’). A focus on discourses, in our usage (explained below), does *not* mean that institutions disappear but that they are thought about as inherently unstable and as formed in a relational matrix. This way of thinking about institutions, elaborated below, makes it unwise to privilege their role in political analysis, a privileging unavoidable in any institutionalism, including feminist discursive institutionalism.

In addition, we also see *feminist discursive institutionalism* as one of several examples in feminist studies where there is an ambition to ‘bridge over’ different epistemological and also ontological positions. This could be seen in Kulawik’s article when she claims that: ‘Rather than emphasizing their differences, I stress that institutionalism and discourse theory share important epistemological insights that facilitate their convergence into an integrated approach’ (2009: 262).

A similar tendency can be found in the discussion on intersectionality where, for example, Kathy Davis (2008) presents intersectionality as a theory that both structuralists and poststructuralists could agree on. Although she states that there are some theoretical and methodological incompatibilities, she argues that intersectionality provides an unanticipated way of overcoming

these: 'It takes up the political project of making the social and material consequences of the categories of gender/race/class visible, but does so by employing methodologies compatible with the post-structural project of deconstructing categories, unmasking universalism, and exploring the dynamic and contradictory workings of power.' (Davies 2008: 74). We see this tendency of merging epistemological and ontological positions as worrying, the main reason being the argument introduced in this paper that our positioning in research has political implications, that methodologies matter politically.

Our argument is grounded in a proposition that theoretical methodologies *create* specific political realities, that theorists are involved in an 'ontological politics' (Mol 1999). In this proposition, reality is conceived as variable and as multiple, leading to questions about how certain realities are produced as *the* real and how the 'doing' involved in these creations disappears, which leaves the impression that they are natural and incontestable. Forms of explanation or theories, and their accompanying methodologies and methods, ought to be recognised as key contributors to the stabilisation of selected realities. As Annemarie Mol (2002: 154) states: 'Methods are not a way of opening a window on the world, but a way of interfering with it. They act, they mediate between an object and its representations. One way or another. Inevitably.' Because this is the case, we have a political responsibility to reflect on the realities our methodologies create. In our discussion of feminist discursive institutionalism, we reflect on the kinds of realities forged by conventional political science paradigms and on the political advisability of distancing feminist analysis from them.

Locating 'feminist discursive institutionalism'

The return to institutions in political theory can be explained as a reaction to 'excessively general theories of social structure and individual behaviour' (Campbell and Pedersen 2001: 13). 'Discursive institutionalism', sometimes called the fourth 'new institutionalism' (Schmidt 2010b), is located alongside the three earlier 'new institutionalisms', rational choice institutionalism (RI), historical institutionalism (HI), and sociological institutionalism (SI) (Schmidt 2010b: 1), sometimes called 'organisational institutionalism' (Campbell 2001: 159) or 'normative institutionalism' (Peters 2008). In their useful overview of the different foci of the four new institutionalism, Campbell and Petersen (2001: 253) trace the location of the different paradigms along a positivist-interpretive continuum. They align the specific approach designated by the label 'discursive institutionalism' with other interpretive approaches, such as 'ideational institutionalism' (Hay 2001) or 'constructivist institutionalism' (Hay 2006).

It is not our task to attempt to sort through the different problematics and methodologies of these varied groups, a task admirably performed by Campbell and Pedersen (2001). However, we wish to draw attention to two points in their survey: first, those they call discursive institutionalists tend to be associated with a particular form of discourse analysis, one focussed on textual interpretation; and second, the more Habermasian version of discursive institutionalism, offered by Vivien Schmidt (2008, 2010a, 2010b), fails to make an appearance in their review. Both these points are relevant for our analysis.

Turning to the first point, even those scholars (Kjaer and Pedersen 2001) who, according to Campbell and Pedersen (2001: 15, emphasis added), are 'located *more centrally* within discursive institutionalism', tend to treat discourse as a 'textual phenomenon'. They (Kjaer and Pedersen 2001: 226) describe 'discursive practice' as 'preconditioned' by a 'set of linguistic or discursive rules'. Elsewhere Bacchi (2005, 2009a) draws a distinction between those who consider discourse to be roughly equivalent to language, and those who understand discourses to be forms of relatively bounded knowledges, a position Bonham and Bacchi (2011, forthcoming) link to Foucault. In this context we also would like to point out a sub-division within the group who consider discourse to

be language between those who do textual interpretation and those who focus on communication and argumentation/rhetoric. More will be said about the implications of these different understandings of discourse later. Here we are simply signalling that use of the term ‘discourse’ involves a theorist in a conceptual minefield, which requires at the very least a need to clarify how the term is understood. This is not because there is one ‘correct’ meaning of discourse but because different usages involve competing political visions that need to be considered (Bacchi 2000: 46).

The second point addresses the absence of Schmidt and Habermas (1989, 1996) from the Campbell and Pedersen (2001) review of new institutionalisms. We see this as important for two reasons. First, Schmidt and her more Habermasian approach to discursive institutionalism figure largely in recent contributions to a feminist discursive institutionalism (Kulawik 2009, Freidenvall 2010). Second, the Habermasian approach to discourse has repercussions for thinking about institutions, repercussions that explain its absence from the Campbell and Pederson (2001) collection. Put briefly, a Habermasian understanding of discourse as ‘communicative action’ produces institutions as more fixed and stable than do the interpretive versions canvassed by Campbell and Pederson though, in these versions as well, there is a tendency to theorize institutions as ‘sites’ of power, thus as somewhat more fixed than we believe to be useful.

Our project in this paper is to postulate a basic incompatibility between Foucauldian analysis and any form of institutionalism, signalled in the proposition that ‘discursive institutionalism’ is an oxymoron. This project is made the more pressing by some blurring of the boundaries between Foucauldian and Habermasian ‘strands’ of political theorizing in current attempts to articulate a ‘feminist discursive institutionalism’.¹ Note, as already mentioned, we are not arguing that there is a single, correct definition of discourse but that different meanings have different political implications that need to be identified and that this kind of discussion is lacking in the scholarly work on feminist discursive institutionalism.

As a starting point for these reflections it is important to recognize that Foucault wished to establish a critical distance between his analysis and the study of ideas. Foucault’s goal was to de-epistemologize things, to challenge the status of objects as real, revealing instead their contingency and the political relations involved in their formation. Hence he had strong objections to treating ‘ideas’ as objects, raising questions for all those who talk about the turn to ‘ideas’ or ‘ideational analysis’ (Béland and Cox 2010; Hay 2001) or the need to study ‘*ideas and discourse*’ (Schmidt 2010b). We will return to this theme later in the paper.

Importantly, some scholars in the field are well aware of these theoretical impasses. Radaelli and Schmidt (2004: 365; emphasis added), for example, clearly stipulate how the kind of analysis they offer differs from their understanding of a Foucauldian approach:

Our approach to discourse has a political science-policy analysis orientation. ... The emphasis we put on context differentiates us from socio-linguistic analysis ... we follow the socio-linguistic interest in the specific form in which discourse is cast, such as rhetoric, frames, story-lines and policy narratives. We share with critical approaches an interest in power and context (Fairclough 1995). The studies presented here show how discourse as both ideas and interaction creates and sustains unequal relations of power (the so-called distal context). In most of our stories, there is someone who wins and someone who loses. However, *we do not say anything about power abuse, disciplinary discourses, privileges hidden in dominant discourse, and about how some actors are discursively regulated outside the perimeter of decision-making activity*. Our notion of discourse differs from the more macro-political concept of discourse used by Foucault – a concept more suitable to describe entire social institutions, such as education, family and medicine. Simply put, we accept that

reality is socially and discursively constructed, but do not engage with the critical orientation of some discourse analysis traditions.

It is extremely useful when theorists demarcate their perspectives as clearly as these authors do, and it is a practice we would recommend. Along similar lines Mackay, Krook and Kenny (2010: 15) note that Kulawik's (2009) 'feminist discursive institutionalism', 'which proposes to integrate feminist discourse analysis and HI [historical institutionalism], is a significantly different understanding than, for example, Vivien Schmidt's (2002a, 2008, 2010) discursive institutionalism'. They also note that a key difference is how power is conceptualised, about which more will be said shortly.

If, however, there is this clear understanding of different approaches to discourse and that they matter to political analysis, what does it mean that Schmidt features as a part both of Kulawik's (2009: 268) and of Freidenhall's (2010: 3, 10-11, 12, 22) versions of 'feminist discursive institutionalism'? Indeed, as mentioned above, there is a distinct tendency in the developing feminist discursive institutionalist literature to blur the lines between these contrasting theoretical positions. Given this tendency, it is important to consider in more detail what is at stake in the Habermasian versus Foucauldian versions of 'the discursive' and their vision of politics. To accomplish this goal we need to reflect on the different conceptions of discourse involved in these stances, and on several key interrelated concepts – power, 'the subject' and ontology (or conceptions of 'the real'). Given the extensive reliance on Schmidt's work in 'feminist discursive institutionalism' and given her explicit disconnection from Foucault, she will be used as a point of reference.

Discourse, power, 'the subject', and the production of 'the real'

Schmidt and Radaelli (2004: 184) define discourse 'in terms of its content, as a set of policy ideas and values, and in terms of its usage, as a process of interaction focused on policy formulation and communication'. The focus on communication indicates a Habermasian influence and indeed Habermas features largely in the analysis and in the references (Schmidt and Radaelli 2004: 208). Note that in the abstract to her 2008 article, Schmidt (2008: 303) reframes this position slightly, putting more emphasis on communicative action, a Habermasian concept: 'Ideas are the substantive content of discourse Discourse is the interactive process of conveying ideas'.

Schmidt (2010b: 2) explains that she brought discourse into institutional analysis primarily because she found that the other 'new institutionalisms' treated institutions 'largely as given, static and constraining'. She (2008: 304) argues that those interested in discursive institutionalism (DI) 'take a more dynamic view of change, in which ideas and discourse overcome obstacles that the three more equilibrium-focused and static older institutionalisms posit as insurmountable'. The space for change is located primarily in the 'background ideational capacities' and 'discursive capacities' of social actors (Schmidt 2008: 305). Schmidt's analysis therefore is strongly agent-centred. She (2008: 310) distinguishes between 'coordinative' and 'communicative' forms of discourse, with the former shaped by and among policy actors while the latter is the 'discourse' employed by these actors to persuade the public. Both of these 'discourses' are strongly agent-focused, despite Freidenvall's (2010: 11) claim that the former reflects a Foucauldian influence.

Next, Schmidt and Radaelli insist that they do not assume that 'discourse is always the critical factor to take into account': 'Discourse, just as any other factor, sometimes matters, sometimes does not in the explanation of policy change' (Schmidt and Radaelli 2004: 184). The goal, according to Schmidt, is to identify 'the attributes of successful ideas and discourse' (Schmidt 2008: 305) and the 'Nature of a "Good" Discourse', which is one which persuades the public to 'move' in a desired direction (Radaelli and Schmidt 2004: 366).

This position, that discourses sometimes matter and sometimes do not, appears in Schmidt's (2002b) approach to comparative politics. In her study of why, in her view, neoliberalism succeeded in the UK and failed in New Zealand (a surprise, we suspect, for some New Zealanders), she tested her hypothesis that political leaders' 'discourse' alone can have a major impact by using 'a matched pair of cases in which all factors are controlled for other than the discourse' (Schmidt 2008: 312). 'Discourse' here, referring to the arguments of political leaders, is treated as one variable among others that might explain a particular political 'outcome'. Hence Schmidt's comparative analysis fits comfortably within conventional variable-based approaches to comparative politics.

To say that 'discourse' is 'a term that refers to 'talking about one's ideas', as Schmidt (2008: 305) does, marks a considerable distance from the notion as used in Foucault. So too do suggestions that discourse can be a key factor *facilitating* social change, that discourses sometimes matter and sometimes do not (see Paul 2009: 247), and that there are 'good' and 'bad' discourses. Remember that Schmidt does not pretend otherwise; she (with Radaelli) explicitly dissociates her form of analysis from Foucault's (see above). However, the vast distance between this agent-centred view of discourse and Foucault's emphasis on discourse as constitutive of both political subjects and objects raises serious concerns for those who see no difficulties in blending the two perspectives (Freidenvall 2010, Kulawik 2009).

On one occasion Schmidt (2008: 312) acknowledges the possible relevance of what, in her view, is a Foucauldian perspective: 'Successful discourses may be manipulative, they may lie, they may be "happy talk" or "spin" to obscure what political leaders are really doing, and they may even be vehicles for elite domination and power, as Bourdieu (1990), Foucault (2000), and Gramsci (1971) argue'. While there is a hint here of understanding discourse as something other than simply what people say, Schmidt immediately defers to the latter view: 'But this is where public debates in democratic societies come in. They can expose the bad ideas of the political discourse of any political actor or set of actors'. Hence she effectively installs political subjects as powerful and rational agents once again. There are strong connections here with Fischer's (2003) views on deliberative democracy and Drysek's (1990) on discursive democracy.

Institutions in Schmidt's DI ('discursive institutionalism') are understood as 'simultaneously structures and constructs internal to agents' (2008: 305). The reference to 'structures' may seem to suggest a desire to signal constraint, while the reference to 'constructs internal to agents' hints at an understanding of subjectivity beyond rational action pure and simple. However, in Schmidt's understanding, these 'structures and constructs' consist of 'background ideational abilities' and 'foreground discursive abilities'. Hence, in DI, as Schmidt develops it, institutions provide the settings for agents, who are more or less skilled in defending their 'discourse' (arguments), to achieve some success in being heard. We argue that this use of the concept of discourse is very close to the concept of communication, and that therefore it might make things clearer to refer to 'communicative institutionalism' rather than 'discursive institutionalism' to describe this approach..

In a Foucauldian approach there are no good or bad discourses, and they *always* matter. They are not, as in Schmidt's DI, 'arguments' to be marshalled for specific political purposes. Rather, discourses are understood as the social meanings or knowledges that shape what can be said and how people come to understand themselves. There is no outside to discourse, signalling a very different understanding of power. The distinction that needs to be grasped here is subtly different from the classic distinction drawn between 'power over', with power understood as an ability to dominate, and 'power to', understood as a capacity to act. Both these conceptions of power rely on an agent who either holds power or who is empowered. By contrast, in Foucault the political subject is *an effect of power*.

There are not on the one hand inert discourses, which are already half dead, and on the other hand, an all-powerful subject which manipulates them, overturns them, renews them; but that discoursing subjects form a part of a discursive field ... Discourse is not a place into which subjectivity irrupts; it is a space of differentiated subject-positions and subject-functions. (Foucault 1968 in Burchell et al. 1991: 58)

This does not mean that Foucault portrays political subjects as dominated by 'forces', operating outside of and upon them. His view of power as productive, or constitutive (Bacchi 2009: 37-38), rather than as limiting, means that, instead of thinking of political subjects as oppressed by power relations, 'it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals' (Foucault 1976 in Gordon 1980: 98). In effect, how we come to think about political subjects and about ourselves as subjects, even the terms we use to describe 'subjects', such as 'rational' and 'consciousness', are themselves products of authoritative knowledges, such as the human sciences (Simons 1995: 47). So power in Foucault shapes (produces) what it is possible to be and what it is possible to say or think. In such an account, "normality" is something people positively desire, from the inside, instead of something that, like a rule, is imposed on them from the outside' (Mol 2002: 59). Instead of subjects 'using' language, as in Schmidt, therefore, we have subjects produced in discourse, an understanding captured in the term 'subjectification' (Bacchi 2009b: 16-17). Mackay, Krook and Kenny (2010: 15) acknowledge this 'foucauldian' view of power as constitutive, which they link to Kulawik. However, they say very little about its meaning or implications, and neither does Kulawik (2009).

Given subjectification, we need to re-conceptualise resistance and protest. Foucault, it should be remembered, had a social justice agenda and hence was always very concerned about these issues. In his view resistance always exists. In fact he says that 'there are no relations of power without resistance' (Gordon 1980: 142). But we need to rethink the nature of resistance. It does not come from a place outside power because there is no place outside power. Hence protest is always complicated. Foucault is concerned by sweeping reform programs that herald a new utopia. He redirects attention to local efforts to make change, to micro-politics. In his view, and we concur, it is at the level of local practices that change takes place. Moreover, because of our location *within* discourse, self-reflection or, more precisely, self-problematization (Bacchi and Eveline 2010: 116; Connolly 1995: 92; Bacchi 2011 forthcoming), is a necessary part of any resistance strategy.

Several scholars have tried to describe the nature of this *intra*-discursive subject location as a form of dual problematic. Potter and Wetherell (1990: 213-14), for example, talk about the ways in which 'people use discourse' and 'discourse uses people'. However, it is easy to see how references to people *using* discourse could easily lead to a conventional view of political subjects as autonomous agents. We see this as a more conventional position on the political, found for example in Schmidt's work, a position that we believe misses out on the dimension of the shaping of subjectivity. To address adequately the dual problematic within discourse theory – what the subject is able to say and what the subject is permitted to say (Threadgold 1988: 50) – elsewhere Bacchi (2005: 207) suggests a dual-focus research agenda. This agenda would identify both the ways in which discourses delimit understandings, and the politics involved in the intentional deployment of concepts and categories to achieve specific political goals (Bacchi 1999; 1996).

However, this position does not imply a 'discourse light' (Freidenvall 2010: 23). As specified,

In clarifying the distinction between these two analytical projects the goal is not to suggest that they should be kept separate, but that understanding them as two analytical perspectives is a first step to considering *how they can be combined*. Both aspects need to be included in any attempt to come to terms with the complexity of feminist activism. That is, while it is

clearly crucial to pay due heed to the intentional shaping of strategic frames, this task *needs to be accompanied* by critical introspection on the conceptual and interpretive premises underpinning these frames. ... *Important insights into limitations imposed by our own subject positionings are lost if only the first of these projects is pursued.* (Bacchi 2005: 208; emphasis added)

As argued elsewhere Bacchi (1999: 62) contends that it is not possible to ‘deconstruct only in an outward direction’. Rather, it is crucial that

all analysts reflect upon their own location, institutional and cultural, reflect upon their position in discourse, and discuss this in their comments on constructions of policy problems. The point is to recognize that there is no stepping outside of these influences and that in fact all analyses reflect current discursive constructions – it could not be otherwise.

How to construct such self-problematising analyses remains a continuing and pressing project for feminism. Chela Sandoval (2000) has contributed significantly to this project with her articulation of a ‘methodology of the oppressed’. Bacchi (2011, forthcoming) offers her ‘what’s the problem represented to be?’ approach as a technology or resource to add to Sandoval’s list of ‘skills’ that facilitate this critical task.

We can see here that how feminists conceptualise discourse has important implications for political practice. A Foucauldian emphasis on our location as ‘discursing subjects’ makes urgent a self-critical analysis that sits at some distance from assumptions that political subjects exist outside of power and shape political futures in some unproblematic manner, that they can craft ‘good’ ‘discourses’, evaluated simply by their power to persuade. As a consequence, a Foucauldian view raises hard questions for all those who position themselves as ‘experts’, presuming access to some untarnished ‘truth’ (Bacchi 2011, forthcoming), including theorists who hazard ‘explanations’ of sociopolitical processes (Bacchi and Eveline 2010: 339).

This self-problematising stance needs to be applied to our selected methodologies. As argued in the introductory comments, the ‘real’ does not exist outside power; hence, methodologies are political interventions that play a role in shaping reality. Methodological issues, in this view, are important ‘not because they determine how close we get to what is really there but because to choose a method is to begin to construct a reality’ (Rowse 2009: 34) *So, we need to ask – what realities are created by feminist discursive institutionalism, and indeed by the Foucauldian alternative put forward here?* To address this question we need to take a closer look at how institutions are conceptualised in discursive institutionalism and in Foucault.

Mackay, Krook and Kenny (2010: 9) make a crucial observation on this point. They note that

most discursive institutionalists are careful to distinguish ‘discourses’ from ‘institutions’, referring instead to the discursive effects of institutions (Fischer 2003) or the institutional contexts ‘in which and through which ideas are communicated via discourse’ (Schmidt 2010b, 4). Thus, while they stress the importance of discourse in institutional innovation, dynamism, and transformation, they stop short of treating discourses on a par with institutions themselves (Freidenvall 2009; Freidenvall and Krook 2010 forthcoming).

The examples offered in this quote, certainly Fischer (2003), Schmidt (2010b) and Freidenvall (2010), are closely aligned with a Habermasian perspective on discourse as effective communication, supporting the earlier suggestion that a more appropriate label of this approach would be ‘communicative institutionalism’. Kulawik (2009: 268), indicating a somewhat more Foucauldian perspective, describes institutions as ‘sedimented discourses’ as a challenge to the

institution/discourse binary. However, in our view, even this amount of ‘fixing’ of institutions creates political difficulties. To explain this point, we wish to explore the alternative configuration of politics accompanying a Foucauldian perspective. To do this, we need to examine several key concepts: practices, performativity (or enactment), and assemblages.

Institutions or assemblages?

Foucault has several things to say about institutions. Indeed, in one interview he describes institutions in terms that would undoubtedly please a vast array of institutionalists:

The term ‘institution’ is generally applied to every kind of more-or-less constrained, learned behaviour. Everything which functions in a society as a system of constraint and which isn’t an utterance, in short, all the field of the non-discursive social, is an institution. (Foucault 1977a: 197-198)

Some scholars (see Barad 2003: 820 n25) have expressed disappointment with the distinction drawn here between discursive and non-discursive ‘spheres’. In fact, one of the interviewers at the time, J-A Miller, protested: ‘But clearly the institution is itself discursive’ (in Foucault 1977a: 198).

To understand this exchange and Foucault’s distinction between discursive and non-discursive it is necessary to recognise that, for Foucault, at least at this stage, the term ‘discourse’ was reserved for forms of ‘regulated practices’ that can best be understood as knowledges (Foucault 1972: 80). The human sciences were his principal target (Foucault 1980: 26; see Bonham and Bacchi 2011). Hence, to call institutions ‘non-discursive’ means simply that they are *not* forms of knowledge. The distinction is a heuristic one.

The key focus of Foucault’s analysis was, however, none of these ‘items’, neither institutions nor indeed ‘knowledges’, as essences. Rather, he always emphasized the *interactions*, the relations, among the factors he identified as important to the constitution of society. To put it simply, whereas institutionalists tend (as we saw above) to maintain institutions as discrete entities, albeit to different degrees – talking for example about relations *between* institutions *and* individuals or groups – Foucault’s focus is on ‘*the between*’. Deleuze and Parnet (1987: viii in Law 2004: 42) explain what this means: ‘In a multiplicity, what counts are not the terms or the elements, but what there is “between”: the between, a set of relations which are not separable from each other’.

In the same 1977 interview Foucault introduced a new concept, the *dispositive* (translated as ‘apparatus’), which highlights his primary interest in the full panoply of heterogeneous relations:

What I’m trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid.

He explained that ‘the apparatus itself *is the system of relations* that can be established between these heterogeneous elements’: ‘between these elements, whether discursive or non-discursive, there is a sort of interplay of shifts of position and modification of functions which can also vary widely’ (Foucault 1977a: 195; emphasis added). And crucially: ‘the apparatus is essentially of a strategic nature, which means assuming that it is a matter of a certain manipulation of relations of forces ... the apparatus is thus always inscribed in a play of power’ (Foucault 1977a: 196). Heterogeneous social relations are, therefore, always and inevitably a site of power and hence of politics.

As a result Foucault’s reply to Miller’s query about institutions themselves being discursive in nature is somewhat bemused:

Yes, if you like, but it doesn't much matter for my notion of the apparatus to be able to say that this is discursive and this isn't. If you take Gabriel's architectural plan for the Military School together with the actual construction of the School, how is one to say what is discursive and what institutional? That would only interest me if the building didn't conform with the plan. But I don't think it's very important to be able to make that distinction, given that my problem isn't a linguistic one. (Foucault 1977a: 197)

On more than one occasion Foucault (1972: 48, 200) repeated that his form of analysis stands at a distance from linguistics, posing questions for the discursive institutionalists in the Campbell and Pedersen (2001) collection (see earlier discussion) who focus largely on textual interpretation. The point here is that Foucault is not interested in texts as grammatical products but as 'things said', whose being 'said' requires explanation. The explanation takes us well beyond texts into the multifarious relationships that form the *dispositif*.

Post-Deleuze (1988), *dispositifs* are commonly referred to as assemblages, a translation of the French word '*agencement*'. John Law (2004: 41) explains that '*agencement*' is an abstract noun, the action (or the result of the action) of the verb '*agencer*'. Hence there is no equivalent in English. Whereas the French term is meant to keep the focus on movement, the term 'assemblage' has come to sound more definite, clear, fixed, planned and rationally centred than in French. It has also come to sound more like a state of affairs or an arrangement rather than an uncertain or unfolding process.

If 'assemblage' is to do the work that is needed, explains Law, then it needs to be understood as a tentative and hesitant unfolding, that is at most only very partially under any form of deliberate control. It needs to be understood as a verb as well as a noun – e.g. a 'doing' or 'assembling' (Law 2004: 42).

The key intent here is the one mentioned earlier – a desire to de-epistemologize 'things', to challenge the status of objects as real, revealing instead their contingency and the political relations involved in their formation. Foucault adopted a number of languages to try to ensure that this focus on the formation of 'things' was not lost. Principally he spoke about 'practices'. Bonham and Bacchi (2011, forthcoming) argue that the key term in Foucault was never discourse, which itself can appear too fixed, too much of a 'thing', but *practices*. So, in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1977b) he studied, not the *institution* of the prison, but the *practice* of imprisonment.

In this piece of research [*Discipline and Punish*], as in my earlier work, the target of analysis wasn't 'institutions', 'theories', or 'ideology', but *practices* ... It is a question of analysing a 'regime of practices' – practices being understood here as places where what is said and what is done, rules imposed and reasons given, the planned and the taken for granted meet and intersect. (Foucault 1991: 75; emphasis in original)

It is here that the key term 'discursive practices' makes its appearance in Foucault (Foucault 1972: 117; see Bonham and Bacchi 2011, forthcoming). Given that 'discursive' refers to 'knowledges', discursive practices refer to the ways in which 'knowledges' 'practice', how 'knowledges' function to shape the 'real'. Foucault elaborated a set of rules (of formation) to explain more precisely the 'procedures' by which knowledges come into being and come to matter. As in the *dispositif* (or assemblage) the focus remains on the relations that these procedures involve. In each and every case the emphasis is on 'doing'. What Foucault wants to show is that things we take to be 'real' and 'true' (hence 'knowledge') is not something transcendental but the product of human practices. The specific practices he identifies as forming 'a discursive practice' are the set of historically contingent and specific rules that produce forms of knowledge. He (1972: 102) explains that what is going on here is not a matter of manipulation or distortion, and hence is 'both much more and much less than ideology'. What is going on is that 'the real' is produced through 'technologies of truth' (de Goede 2006: 7).

A large number of theorists in diverse settings now use the language of ‘doing’ to communicate a specific understanding of political relations. However, what is accomplished by this term is not always fully articulated (Kulawik 2009: 268, Freidenvall 2010: 13). In gender studies for some time it has been proposed that we need to see gender as something that is ‘done’ rather than as a fixed ‘institution’ (West and Zimmerman 2003). The suggestion that it is better to think about gender as a verb rather than as a noun, and hence to talk about ‘gendering’, follows from this proposition (Bacchi and Eveline 2010). Judith Butler (1993: 7) talks about gender being ‘performed’ in order to capture the focus on movement, on ‘doing’. For Butler as for Mol, identity is not something that is given; it is something that is practiced: ‘The pervasive and mundane acts in which this is done make people what they are’ (Mol 2002: 38-39). Hence, people’s identities ‘do not precede their performances, but are constituted in and through them’. (Mol 2002: 38).

In poststructural discourse theory, therefore, ‘a performative is that which enacts or brings about what it names’ (de Goede 2006: 10). This same theoretical insight applies to ‘objects’ as well as to identities. For example, Aitken (2006) makes the point that ‘the financial economy’ is better understood ‘not as an exploitative system designed by particular interests, but as a performative practice, the reiteration of which in the space of everyday life makes capital possible’ (de Goede 2006: 9).

A downside in the language of ‘performativity’ is the tendency, yet again, to shift attention to the presumed ‘actors’ in the ‘performance’. But as explained above, in poststructuralism, there are no actors who exist outside the relations producing them. To counterbalance this tendency to reinscribe ‘speaking subjects’, therefore, Annemarie Mol (2002: 23) prefers the language of *enactment*, which suggests that ‘activities take place but leaves the actors vague’. Who then does the doing, if not subject-actors?

Events are made to happen by several people and lots of things. Words participate too. Paperwork, rooms, buildings, the insurance system. An endless list of heterogeneous elements that can either be highlighted or left in the background. (Mol 2002: 25-26)

As Law (2004: 56) states, enactments ‘don’t just present something that has already been made, but also have powerful productive consequences. They (help to) make realities in-here and out-there’. To talk of enactment, then, is to attend to the continuing practice of crafting realities, captured in Butler’s repeated performances. Since there are many practices, there are many realities, leading to multiplicity (Mol 2002:152). However, some realities are privileged, becoming ‘the real’, and in the process hiding the means of their creation. Among the heterogeneous elements involved in enactments, we need to remember the place of theory and research, a point mentioned at the outset and one to which we return shortly.

Organization studies have been marked for at least fifteen years by what is described as ‘the turn to practice’ (Bacchi and Eveline 2010: 292-294). That is, in poststructural organization studies, there is a determination to displace the ‘organization’ as a presumed fixed entity and to redirect attention instead to how organizations are ‘done’ (Bacchi and Eveline 2010: 140). While there is some almost inevitable diversity in how this ‘turn to practice’ is interpreted (Simpson 2009; Geiger 2009), in general the intent is precisely the same as Foucault’s – to ensure that we pay particular attention to how things come to be, rather than assuming that what is constitutes what must be. This intervention destabilizes ‘things’ that have come to appear natural and hence unquestionable. It ensures that the ‘doing’ in the production of what is called ‘the real’ is not bracketed out but remains a part of the picture. This necessarily politicises what is seen to be ‘fact’. Moreover, if ‘things’ are not natural, if they depend on being done, this requires repetition of practices, producing the room to intervene. Hence, conceptualising reality as enacted opens up a space for resistance: ‘To talk of enactment, then, is to attend to the continuing practice of crafting. ... there are often practical closures but what there aren’t are closures in general (Law 2004: 56).’

With all these developments in organization theory, it seems distinctly odd that the current tendency in political science is to reinscribe ‘institutions’, which are surely a form of ‘organization’, as central analytical categories. At the very same time that organization theorists see the political importance of disrupting organizations as fixed entities, many in political science, it appears, want to talk about institutions in exactly these terms. We find this trend most disturbing because in our view it directs attention away from the practices, the ‘doing’, that make institutions ‘effective’. By fixing institutions, we lose the opportunity to loosen ‘the grip’ of their ‘present facticity’ (Shapiro 1992: 12).

Another related distinction needs to be clarified. The focus on ‘doing’, on practices, does *not* mean an interest in causality. The objective is *not* to try to explain how ‘institutions’ have come to be but how institutional practices operate and with what effects: ‘in Foucault it is not a question of one set of changes “influencing” or “causing” others but of a complex series of interactions’ which allow the production of possible objects of history’ (O’Farrell 2005: 38). Effects are not ‘outcomes’. There is no presumed endpoint that is being ‘explained’. There are rather complex political relationships that need to be considered. Foucault offers, not a metaphysics, but an ontology, ‘a descriptive and analytic account, not a causal explanation’:

Its intent is not to illuminate a bygone era, but to reveal the chance crossing of lines of governance (institutions, practices, attitudes), the brute facts and contingencies at the base of our most cherished values and most respected necessities. (Flynn 1989: 188)

A focus on heterogeneous relations undermines any sense of linear causal relations and the place of ‘variables’ in such explanations, posing a significant challenge to many conventional forms of political analysis. What we have here is a different way of thinking ‘reality’ and politics.

To illustrate this difference consider the place of the nation-state in mainstream political science and in almost all examples of comparative politics (Rönblom and Bacchi 2011, forthcoming). Most such studies presume a fixity of ‘nation-states’ in order to set up comparisons ‘between’ and ‘among’ them. How we ask, with this approach, is it possible to contest the boundaries *between* nation-states, which is an increasingly pressing and contentious issue (Mol 2002: 136)? John Law points out that, by deploying concepts such as ‘nation-state’ unproblematically, analysts actually reinforce them. Hence they participate in creating a *reality* of nation-states. Law offers the concept of ‘method assemblage’ to capture the many accompanying relations that attach to and produce ‘methods’. Says Law (2004: 144), a method assemblage includes ‘not only what is present in the form of texts and their production, but also their hinterlands and hidden supports’. In this view, ‘method is not, and could never be, innocent or purely technical’ because it ‘unavoidably produces not only truths and non-truths, realities and non-realities, presences and absences, but also arrangements with political implications’ (Law 2004: 143). Drawing on this understanding, Rowse (2009: 45) describes the ‘nation-state’ as a ‘method assemblage’. Rethinking nation-states in this way, seeing them as methods for assembling power relations, provides an opening to problematize ‘sovereignty in world politics as well as in research practice itself’ (de Goede 2006: 5).

If using nation-states as unproblematic entities in political analysis reinforces their existence, political ‘scientists’ clearly have some difficult thinking to do about how to proceed to study politics, in particular, comparative politics. Kulawik (2009: 267) agrees with Weldon (2006) that ‘comparative political analysis only makes sense if one can distinguish between categories and their independent formative effects’. This of course is why such studies compare nation-states and why, presumably, we need ‘institutions’. Given the directions we have just traced in poststructural approaches to discourse, practice and politics, we appear to have reached an impasse. If you have a concept of power as creative/productive, institutions (and other categories) as fixed in any sense do not make sense. Without ‘institutions’, the question will be raised - what is there to study? We proceed to explore the concept of problematisation as a way forward.

Problematization and a politics of movement

In poststructural political studies the goal is to find ways to theorize movement and heterogeneity because of a conviction that this is how power operates. The turn to concepts like ‘practice’, ‘doing’ and ‘assemblages’ reflect this objective. Foucault, as we have seen, was committed to such a politics of movement (see Bacchi and Eveline 2010: 235-242). It is for this reason that he objected to ‘ideas’ as fixed and sought ways to keep a focus on relationships and the production of the ‘real’. One way he tried to do this was through the concept of problematisation, which he saw as a key to reconceptualizing ‘thought’ (Foucault 1997). In Foucault, as Rabinow (2003: 47; emphasis added) explains,

Thought is not autonomous in any of the strong senses that it has been given in Western philosophy. Thought is not transparent, nor is it constitutive, nor is it a passive waiting or an intentional act of consciousness.

Rather, for Foucault, thought becomes a *practice* called *thinking*. We saw exactly this point in the proposition above that knowledges need to be conceived of as practices, as discursive practices. To study thinking, says Foucault (1997), we need to study problematisations.

In order to understand why Foucault believed problematisations open up thinking as ‘a doing’, we need to offer an example. Policy proposals, such as the current focus on lifestyle changes as the key to better health, invariably and inevitably carry *within* them a suggestion of what the problem is. A focus on lifestyle changes, such as recommendations to increase physical activity, produces the ‘problem’ of ill-health as ‘inactivity’. This is what is being problematised. What is important here is that the identification of what is being represented as the ‘problem’ is not extracted from some place *outside the proposal*. There is no imposition of a ‘view from nowhere’. Rather, the proposal carries its problematisation *within it*. Hence, policy proposals, like other forms of proposal, including theoretical stances, provide access to ‘thinking’ if you start by identifying how the ‘problem’ is being represented. It is this logic that leads Bacchi (1999, 2009b) to conclude that studying problematisations opens portals to new and exciting forms of analysis.

Bacchi provides a set of questions that lead to the uncovering of what she calls ‘problem representations’ within problematisations. These problem representations then become the focus of critical analysis, examining what they include or exclude, how they have come to be prominent, and how the issues could be ‘thought’ differently. The focus is on movement, on effects and on power as productive. Problem representations, as interventions in the real, affect what will count as reality.

Kulawik (2009: 266) suggests that Bacchi’s ‘what’s the problem represented to be?’ approach does not allow comparative analysis whereas comparison is implied at its core. According to Bacchi, we are better able to grasp the significance of any singular problematisation by comparing it to how an issue is problematised elsewhere, either across time, across ‘cultures’ or across geophysical ‘spaces’. She (Bacchi 2009b: 14) offers the example of Repetition Strain Injury to illustrate this point. Bammer and Martin (1992) point out that there is no equivalent of Repetition Strain Injury (RSI), a widely recognised medical complaint in Australia, in the United States. Putting aside the possibility that Americans do not suffer from muscle strain due to repetitive forms of work, the authors draw attention to specific institutional factors, such as the relative strength of unions, in Australia compared to the United States, as contributing to the naming of RSI. The goal in this form of analysis is to highlight the specific combination of factors and relations that allows something to become a ‘problem’ in one situation and not in another. In Bacchi’s terminology, we study how particular problem representations take shape and assume dominance, while others are silenced, with a primary focus on the *effects* that accompany specific problem representations.

Note that in Bammer and Martin (1992) trade unions and nation-states (i.e. the United States and Australia) are included as entities, and are not problematized. However, the focus throughout is on the interconnections, the relations, the movement that results in specific effects in specific ‘places’. There is no suggestion that ‘unions’ or ‘nation-states’ ought to be treated as variables in some attempt to predict ‘outcomes’ in other settings.

What is the difference between fixing *problem representations* temporarily, as Bacchi (2009b) suggests here, and fixing *institutions* temporarily, as Kulwick (2009: 268) suggests, with her notion of institutions as ‘sedimented discourses’? Institutions tend to be conceptualised as ‘sites’, instead of looking at the repeated performances that are necessary to their formation and continuation. By contrast, problem representations capture a set of always contested *relations*. They require repetition to secure acceptance and dominance. Hence a greater space for resistance is opened up. Problem representations allow us to keep an eye on the complete assemblage (see discussion above), on the complex relations of political ‘doing’.

Does the turn to ‘institutionalisms’ serve feminist politics well?

As we hope we have made clear, the kind of analysis offered here does not ignore institutions or refuse to mention them. Instead, it emphasizes the importance of pluralising the relations that constitute ‘the real’ and refusing the temptation to freeze these relations. It is for this reason that we are concerned at feminists’ eagerness to embrace the proliferation of *institutionalisms*. Marking out a field as a form of *institutionalism* implies, in our view, a fixing of the category in ways that have deleterious political consequences. As stated above, with such fixing, we lose the opportunity to loosen ‘the grip’ of their ‘present facticity’ (Shapiro 1992: 12).

On the question of the possible ‘blending’ of various institutional approaches (Campbell and Pedersen 2001), is it feasible to ‘add’ poststructural insights to more conventional political science forms of analysis, as Kulawik (2009) appears to want to do? In our opening comments we raise this question as relevant to other attempts, such as Kathy Davis’s (2008), to smooth over theoretical differences among feminists. Such propositions in our view neglect a key issue and a key part of our argument – that approaches to political studies are not simply forms of analysis; rather, they are techniques of ‘truth’ production and forms of political intervention. Hence, if we start thinking about our theoretical ‘tools’ and disciplinary methods in this way – in terms of the forms of politics they make possible – we have to consider if there are forms of political alliance among the varied approaches that make sense and others that simply do not work. To decide about possible alliances we need to assess the political ‘realities’ reinforced (or crafted) by particular forms of analysis, and whether we have concerns about those ‘realities’. If we do have concerns, such as those expressed above about the ‘crafting’ of nation-states, then alliance appears unlikely. The intention here is not to be obstructionist but to encourage a different kind of conversation about methodology and politics. The ‘performativity of method’ (Law 2004: 149-150) implies responsibilities to reflect on the ‘realities’ one’s methods create. As Mol and Mesman (1996: 421) state, ‘We want to be/come more articulate about this unbounded, unfinishable project; that of doing politics in theory’.

To be clear we are not suggesting that poststructural perspectives are the only useful form of political analysis. Moreover, we would certainly be severely remiss to imply that other forms of feminist political studies, including feminist discursive institutionalism, do not have a critical political agenda in mind. Indeed it is for this very reason that we press our desire to create a space to engage theories at the level of politics, to ask how they *are* political and what sorts of politics they make possible. If, as we have argued, ‘to choose a method is to begin to construct a reality’ (Rowse 2009: 34), we need to consider the limitations of looking to new institutionalisms for ‘conceptual tools and conceptual frameworks’, or of asking what a ‘gendered perspective’ can ‘add’ to institutional approaches (Mackay, Krook and Kenny 2010: 13, 18). Instead, we may want to ask

what would happen to institutional analyses if seen through the plural lenses of contemporary feminisms. This conversation, we suggest, is certainly one worth having.

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ⁱ We would like to thank Susan Goodwin from University of Sydney for drawing this point to our attention.