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What is This?

Rescuing Aunt Sally: Taking Institutional Theory Seriously in Urban Politics

Vivien Lowndes

Summary. **The sub-discipline of 'urban politics' has been constructed in opposition to a traditional version of 'institutional theory'—an approach that collapsed the political processes affecting urban communities with the workings of elected local government. Attention has shifted towards the broader influences on local decision-making and to the growing fragmentation of urban government and the rise of 'partnerships'. The article argues that recent developments, far from signifying the last gasp of 'institutionalism', call for a reformulated theory of the (diverse) institutional constraints within which urban political processes operate. Drawing on insights from the 'new institutionalism', the article discusses processes of institutional change and differentiation; the underlying shift from strong to weak forms of institutional constraint; and the challenges involved in redesigning local political institutions.**

1. Introduction

Across the social sciences, institutions are back in fashion, although not necessarily in their old guise. The 'new institutionalism' emerged in the 1980s as a reaction to the dominance of 'undersocialised' accounts of social, economic and political behaviour. Both behaviourism and rational choice theory had regarded institutions as epiphenomenal—the simple aggregation of individual actions. For behaviourists, institutions emerged out of the aggregation of individual roles, statuses and learned responses; for rational choice theorists, they were an accumulation of individual choices based upon utility-maximising preferences (Shepsle, 1989, p. 134). In political science, March and Olsen's (1984, p. 747) seminal article argued that "the organisation of political life makes a difference" and asserted a more auton-

omous role for institutions in shaping political behaviour.

Rather than returning to the descriptive and atheoretical style of an earlier generation of institutionalists, the 'new institutionalists' developed a more expansive (and sophisticated) definition of their subject matter, operating through explicit (if diverse) theoretical frameworks. The new institutionalists concern themselves with informal conventions as well as formal rules and structures; they pay attention to the way in which institutions embody values and power relationships; and they study not just the impact of institutions upon behaviour, but the *interaction* between individuals and institutions (Lowndes, 2001). By 1996, Goodin and Klingemann (1996, p. 25) were describing the 'new institutionalism' as "the next revol-

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ution" in political science. Yet, as Pierre (1999, p. 373) has noted

> Although institutional theory has become a *lietmotiv* in much of mainstream political science, the institutional dimension of urban politics remains unclear and ambiguous.[1]

This article argues that the reluctance to embrace institutional theory arises out of the way that the sub-discipline of 'urban politics' has been constructed. The very concept of 'urban politics' was constructed in opposition to the traditional 'institutionalist' treatment of local government and local politics within political science. From the 1960s onwards, the traditional institutional approach was criticised from all sides for collapsing the political processes affecting urban communities with the workings of representative local government. For two decades in Britain (and longer in the US), the label urban politics has served as a 'flag of convenience' for scholars studying broader influences on local decision-making (Stoker, 1998a, p. 120)—the role of business, new social movements, intergovernmental relations and systemic changes within capitalist economies and states. Developments 'on the ground' have added weight to the urban politics critique, as elected local governments have fragmented organisationally, public–private boundaries have become more blurred and new political actors have emerged.

The article argues that, paradoxically, such developments actually create a new demand for institutional theory, rather than signifying its last gasp. Students of urban politics are increasingly turning their attention towards informally constituted (yet relatively stable) networks, regimes and governing coalitions. There is an urgent need in this context for a reformulated theory of the *institutional constraints* within and through which urban political processes operate. The new-style institutions on the urban political scene call for new-style institutional analysis. This article argues that institutional theory needs to be rescued from its 'Aunt Sally' status in the

study of urban politics. New institutional perspectives provide powerful tools for understanding change inside local government bureaucracies and for conceptualising 'the strength of weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973) within an increasingly fragmented organisational landscape.

The article begins by reviewing the argument against 'institutionalism' within urban politics. It goes on to consider the differences between old, new and just plain vulgar institutionalism. The article then discusses the specific contributions that 'new institutionalist' perspectives can make to the study of current developments in British urban politics.

2. The Argument against Institutionalism in Urban Politics

Many of the key debates in post-war urban politics are constructed in terms of an argument with 'the institutional approach'. The US 'community power debate' of the 1960s sought to discover 'who (really) governs' when formal decision-making arrangements are questioned. Pluralists focused on actual decisions in urban politics and analysed the multiple and dispersed 'real life' influences upon decision-making (see, for example, Dahl, 1961). Elitists departed from the dominant 'institutional' tradition to study the fusing of business and political in urban decision-making (see, for example, Hunter, 1953). Despite their differences, both accounts declined to take at face value the official pronouncements of government bodies and their constitutional accounts of decision-making processes. As Goodin and Klingemann (1996, p. 11) explain

> behavioural revolutionaries … were devoted to dismissing the formalisms of politics—institutions, organizational charts, constitutional myths and legal fictions—as pure sham

From the mid 1970s, neo-Marxist approaches renewed the attack on 'institutionalism'. Attention was focused on the role of 'systemic power' in explaining local decision-making,

analysing the role of urban politics within broader economic and state systems (see Pickvance, 1995, for a review). Behaviouralists and structuralists were united in driving home the dominant message of post-war urban political theory—that urban politics could not be understood simply through the analysis of formal arrangements for representation, decision-making and policy implementation. As if to confirm the diagnosis, new political actors were emerging on the urban stage. Protest groups and 'new social movements' had little regard for the formalities of elections and party systems, and were mobilised less around distributional issues and more in relation to identities and causes (see Fainstein and Hirst, 1995). Normative political theory pushed against the 'institutional' straightjacket too. The classic debates about the efficiency and representativeness of local government (see Sharpe, 1970) were challenged by feminist and 'green' perspectives which explored new conceptions of citizenship, civil society and local politics (see Clarke *et al.*, 1995, and Phillips, 1996 for reviews of the feminist contribution; and Ward, 1996 on 'green' arguments).

The concept of 'urban politics' has, then, been constructed in opposition to an 'institutional' tradition that collapsed the political processes affecting urban communities with the workings of representative local government. 'Urban politics' has become academic shorthand for 'more than local government'. In Britain, where the structure and role of local government was more extensive than in the US, the urban politics critique took longer to bite. In the mid 1970s, Crewe bemoaned the absence of community power studies (cited in Harding, 1995, p. 48); Stoker (1998a, p. 121), reflecting upon the literature of that time, notes that its concerns were firmly with the "humdrum of routine local representative politics". Commentators have remarked on the special attachment of British specialists to "a narrow institutional approach" (Harding, 1995, p. 48). Saunders (1979, p. 328) summed up the dominant tradition thus

The assumption has usually been made that the contours of political power at the local level correspond to the formal institutions of local government; that power resides in the town hall … and nowhere else.

The 1980s saw a series of landmark studies that challenged the 'institutional' tradition—in terms of its scope of study (elected local government) and its tools of analysis (legal and historical). Saunders (1979) studied the role of business leaders in shaping local agendas; Dunleavy (1980) and Rhodes (1988) emphasised the role of public agencies beyond local government in influencing decisions. Neo-Marxist writers like Cockburn (1977) and Duncan and Goodwin (1988) developed an analysis of the 'local state' within advanced capitalism. There was also an increasing recognition that local government itself could not be seen as a unified entity. Studies started to open up the 'black box' of the town hall and analyse the interactions (and conflicts) between politicians and professionals, managers and 'workers', and officials and citizens (see Stoker, 1991; Laffin, 1989; and Gyford, 1991, for early analyses of these relationships).

The traditional institutional approach has been undermined further in the context of 'real life' developments in British local government. The organisation of local government became increasingly fragmented from the early 1980s (Stewart and Stoker, 1989, 1994). Functions have been passed to non-elected agencies; private and voluntary bodies have gained new roles as contractors and 'partners'; and the internal management of local authorities has been transformed through decentralisation, 'down-sizing' and the creation of internal markets. By 1999, any academic still looking for the 'single lonely organisation' (Clegg and Hardy, 1999) of local government was unlikely to find it.

Recognising the multiplicity of actors now involved in urban politics, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to problems of co-ordination or 'governance' within the

fragmented organisational landscape. Policy network theorists look at the informal, but relatively stable and sector-specific, relationships that link governmental and non-governmental actors in policy formation (see, for example, Rhodes and Marsh, 1992). Analysts of the 'new public management' show how integrated bureaucratic hierarchies have been transformed through external contracting, internal markets and multi-agency partnerships (see Lowndes, 1997 and 1999; Walsh, 1995; Leach *et al.*, 1994). Urban regime theory explores the conditions under which locally specific partnerships between political and business élites are created and maintained (for a review, see Stoker, 1995). Social capital theory provides a framework for linking associational activity within civil society to the performance of urban governments (Maloney *et al.*, 2000). Governance theorists study how 'order' emerges out of the interaction of autonomous self-governing networks (see Rhodes, 1997; and Stoker, 1998b for reviews). Clearly, British urban politics has come along way from the limiting 'institutional' assumptions identified by Saunders in 1979.

The coming together of theoretical and empirical developments has served to consolidate the urban politics approach in its new guise as the study of 'local governance' (see, for instance, Stoker, 1996). This does not signify, however, some final triumph over institutionalism in the study of urban politics. My argument is that institutional theory actually needs to be rehabilitated in order to analyse the emerging arrangements for governance within what Rhodes has called the 'disaggregated polity' or, more recently, the 'hollow state' (Rhodes, 1988 and 1997). The fragmentation of elected local government and the growing importance of multi-actor networks serves to clarify what has, in fact, always been the case: that 'institutions' are not the same as 'organisations' and that 'weak ties' can be as important as formal constitutions. As Harding points out, informal coalitions have become more visible now that 'partnership' is on every policy-maker's lips (Harding, 1995, p. 49). For stu-

dents of urban politics, it is now neither intellectually defensible *nor* practically possible to engage in vulgar institutionalism. Yet analysis of the institutional constraints—old and new, formal and informal—through which urban politics operate remains as important as ever.

3. Rescuing Aunt Sally—and Taking 'New Institutionalism' Seriously

'Institutionalism' has been discursively constructed as the 'other' within the study of urban politics. 'Institutionalism' is the analytical framework against which new approaches react, establishing their identity and legitimacy through being 'not institutionalism'. Although rarely explored, this version of institutionalism is a sad and misleading caricature of the state of institutional theory today. The continuing influence of 'vulgar institutionalism' can be illustrated with reference to a recent analysis of regime formation in Manchester and Edinburgh. Harding explores the ways in which governing regimes are constructed and maintained through 'informal bargaining', 'tacit understandings' and incentive structures—the very stuff of a sophisticated institutionalist analysis. Yet Harding (2000, p. 71) concludes his otherwise useful piece thus

> Whatever the future of coalitions in the two cities, however, one thing is certain. A research framework based on URT (urban regime theory) will be a more appropriate tool for comparing and contrasting their experience than *institutionalist* and policy-oriented approaches to urban politics (emphasis added).

Mine is not a plea simply for redescription—to substitute one label for another or to claim urban regime theory, or any other perspective, as institutional theory in disguise. I wish to highlight the *de facto* attention to changing institutional forms that is arising in several sub-fields of urban politics; and to show how insights from new institutional theory might be fruitfully applied to their analysis. First, it is necessary to clarify the differences be-

tween old, new and just plain vulgar institutionalism.

Rod Rhodes (1988, 1995, 1997) has stalwartly defended the institutional approach in urban politics and the study of government more generally. He describes it as the "historic heart" of the subject and "part of the toolkit of every political scientist" (Rhodes, 1997, pp. 5 and 64). Rhodes seeks to tease out the main elements of traditional institutional analysis as applied, for instance, by Finer and Robson in the early part of the century and, more recently, by scholars like Johnson and Ridley

> the institutional approach is a subject matter covering the rules, procedures and formal organizations of government. It employs the tools of the lawyer and the historian to explain the constraints on both political behaviour and democratic effectiveness, and it fosters the Westminster model of representative democracy (Rhodes, 1997, p. 68).

Eckstein notes that practitioners of this approach "were almost entirely silent about all of their suppositions" (cited in Rhodes, 1997, p. 63). Peters (1999, p. 2) characterises their methodology as

> that of the intelligent observer attempting to describe and understand the political world around him or her in non-abstract terms.

The silence regarding theory and methods actually tells us something about the approach—that it was generally unreflective on issues of theory and method, took 'facts' (and values) for granted and flourished as a kind of 'common sense' within political science (Lowndes, 1996, p. 181).

Critics of traditional institutionalism point to its limitations in terms of both scope and method. It was concerned (of course) with the institutions of government rather than political behaviour and yet operated with a restricted understanding of relevant 'institutions'. The focus was upon formal rules and organisations rather than informal conventions; and upon official structures of *govern-*

ment rather than broader institutional constraints on *governance* (in public, private and civil spheres). Critics also take issue with the assumptions that lurked behind the descriptive method and disdain for theory. Peters (1999, pp. 6–11) characterises the 'proto-theory' of old institutionalism as: normative (concerned with 'good government'), structuralist (structures determine political behaviour), historicist (the central influence of history), legalist (law plays a major role in governing) and holistic (concerned with describing and comparing whole systems of government). John (1998, pp. 40–41) points to a functionalist tendency, too—that particular institutions are the "manifestations of the functions of political life" or "necessary for a democracy". For the modern reader, the old institutionalists' claims of objectivity and 'science' sit uneasily alongside their polemical idiom and desire to foster the 'Westminster model' (see Rhodes, 1997).

Traditional forms of institutional analysis should not, however, be automatically equated with the vulgar institutionalism against which 'urban politics' reacts. Herman Finer in the 1930s went out of his way to show that the study of constitutions extended far beyond written documents (see, for instance, Finer, 1932). Nevil Johnson's work in the 1970s reveals a concern with procedural norms as well as formal structures (see Johnson, 1975). Exponents of the historical-comparative method from Woodrow Wilson onwards understood that the values underlying one system become clearer when contrasted with another. Indeed, the 'new institutionalist' perspectives that have emerged in political science from the mid 1980s reassert key tenets of the earlier institutional tradition: that political structures shape political behaviour and that political structures are normatively and historically embedded. But they move away from the restricted definitions and implicit theory of their predecessors. More expansive, yet more sophisticated, definitions of 'institution' are being developed and the formalism, functionalism and holism of the old school are under challenge. In contrast to their 'older'

cousins, new institutionalists are concerned with the central paradox, or 'double life', of institutions, which are both "human products" and "social forces in their own right" (Grafstein, 1988, pp. 577–578).

The vulgar institutionalism against which urban political theory reacts is actually no more than an amalgam of the worst bits of traditional 'institutionalism'. However, because vulgar institutionalism retains its discursive power within urban politics, it is important to clarify the points of departure represented by the 'new institutionalism'. There are significant differences among new institutionalist positions (as reviewed by Peters, 1999; John, 1999; Hall and Taylor, 1996; Lowndes, 1996), but the key shifts represented by this "broad, if variegated, approach" (Peters, 1999, p. 149) can be represented in terms of movement along six analytical continua

(1) from a focus on organisations to a focus on rules;
(2) from a formal to an informal conception of institutions;
(3) from a static to a dynamic conception of institutions;
(4) from submerged values to a value-critical stance;
(5) from a holistic to a disaggregated conception of institutions; and
(6) from independence to embeddedness.

These six themes are discussed in turn below. In attempting briefly to distil useful knowledge for scholars of urban politics, my approach is consciously ecumenical and yet inevitably disrespectful of the variety and subtlety of new institutionalist positions.[2] The discussion that follows is in the spirit of Goodin's (1996, p. 20) project "to capture the moving spirit of the new institutionalism".

3.1 From a Focus on Organisations to a Focus on Rules

New institutionalism represents a departure from what Fox and Miller (1995, p. 92) call the "brass name-plate" tradition of institu-

tional analysis. Political institutions should not be equated with political organisations; rather, they are the sets of rules that guide and constrain actors' behaviour. Such rules provide information on the likely future behaviour of others and on sanctions for non-compliance (Knight, 1992, p. 17). For the 'sociological' wing of new institutionalism, rules work by determining 'appropriate' behaviour (March and Olsen, 1984, 1989); for the rational choice wing, they determine the basis of exchanges between utility-maximising actors (Weingast, 1996). Institutions, then, provide the 'rules of the game', while organisations—like individuals—are players within that game. At the same time, organisations have their own internal institutional frameworks that shape the behaviour of people within them. Institutions are sets of rules that exist "within" and "between" organisations, "as well as under, over and around them" (Fox and Miller, 1995, p. 92). While organisations are not 'the same as' institutions, they remain an important focus for new institutionalist analysis—in their role as collective actors subject to wider institutional constraints and also as arenas within which institutional rules are developed and expressed.

3.2 From a Formal to an Informal Conception of Institutions

In contrast to vulgar institutionalism, new institutionalist perspectives focus upon informal rules and conventions as well as those rules that are consciously designed and clearly specified. Informal institutions may provide the 'raw material' for the development of formal institutions (or delimit their development) or they may exist alongside formal rules, in concert or contradiction (see Lowndes, 1996, pp. 192–193; Knight, 1992, p. 172). Critics have argued that an expanded definition of 'institution' runs the risk of 'conceptual stretching'—its meaning and impact diluted as it comes to include everything that guides individual behaviour (see Rothstein, 1996; Peters, 1999). Douglass North (1990, p. 83) refers to tradition, custom, cul-

ture and habit as informal institutional rules; for March and Olsen (1989, p. 17) there is no clear distinction between institutions and norms. Peter Hall's use of 'standard operating procedure' offers a helpful way forward: the aim should be to identify the rules of political behaviour that are actually agreed upon and followed by agents, whether explicitly or tacitly agreed (see Rothstein, 1996, p. 146). Political institutions are thus distinguished from broader customs and habits, although a proper subject for study remains the interaction of political institutions and the institutions specific to other areas of civil or social life. (This is discussed in relation to 'embeddedness' in section 3.6.)

3.3 From a Static to a Dynamic Conception of Institutions

Stability is a defining feature of institutions. Huntington (1968) defined institutions as 'stable, valued and recurring patterns of behaviour'. Institutions stabilise expectations and structure social, economic and political life. Although 'old' institutionalists *were* concerned with patterns of historical development, vulgar institutionalism treats institutions as unchanging 'facts of life'. New institutionalist perspectives highlight that institutions are not things but processes and that institutional rules have to be sustained over time. An ongoing process of institutionalisation creates stability; what drives—and interrupts—that process is a matter of debate (Lowndes, 1996, pp. 193–194). Rational choice scholars argue that institutional arrangements will persist only as long as they serve the interests of utility-seeking rational actors (crucially as a means of solving collective action problems) (Shepsle, 1989, p. 134). Those on the sociological wing argue that institutions, in general, change incrementally through responding to environmental signals (March and Olsen, 1989, p. 34). Those adopting a network perspective emphasise that institutional stability is dependent upon a continuing process of consensus and coalition-building (Rhodes and Marsh, 1992). Goodin (1996, pp. 24–25)

argues that there are three basic ways in which institutions arise and change over time: as a result of accident, evolution or intentional intervention.

3.4 From Submerged Values to a Value-critical Stance

As we saw earlier, the 'old' institutionalism had an explicit concern with 'good government' and an implicit commitment to a particular set of values and model of government. In contrast, new institutionalists seek to identify the various ways in which institutions embody—and shape—societal values, which may themselves be contested and in flux. On the sociological wing, seemingly neutral procedures and arrangements are seen as embodying particular values, interests and identities (March and Olsen, 1989). On the rational choice wing, institutions are not seen as affecting preferences and yet must reflect some relatively common set of values if incentives are to function equally well for all participants (Peters, 1999, p. 19). The value-critical stance is summed up by Pierre (1999, p. 390) who argues that

> the structure of governance—the inclusion or exclusion of different actors and the selection of instruments—is not value neutral but embedded in and sustains political values.

Offe (1996a, p. 685) notes that institutions typically change when "their value premises have changed or because they are considered incompatible with other values". Turning the issue on its head, scholars like Goodin (1996) and Rothstein (1996, 1998) consider how political institutions can be designed in order to cultivate desired values within society at large.

3.5 From a Holistic to a Differentiated Conception of Institutions

In contrast to the 'old' institutionalists who tended to describe and compare whole systems of government, new institutionalists focus upon the component institutions of

political life: electoral systems, tax and benefit systems, cabinet decision-making, arrangements for budgeting or policy-making, intergovernmental relationships, or contracting rules (Peters, 1999, pp. 8–9). Such 'institutions' are expressed through formal structures and official procedures, but also through tacit understandings and conventions that span organisational boundaries—both inside and outside the public sector. Institutions are understood as 'differentiated' in the sense that they do not necessarily 'fit' together to form a whole, or represent functionally desirable solutions. Institutions are also differentiated in the sense that they

> embody, preserve, and impart differential power resources with respect to different individuals and groups (Goodin, 1996, p. 20).

Institutions embody power relations by privileging certain courses of action over others and by including certain actors and excluding others. A third source of internal differentiation arises to the extent that institutions are never fully 'closed' or complete (March and Olsen, 1989, p. 16). Institutional rules may produce variation and deviation as well as conformity and standardisation. They evolve in unpredictable ways as actors seek to make sense of new or ambiguous situations, ignore or even contravene existing rules, or try to adapt them to favour their own interests. When purposive institutional change is attempted, 'old' and 'new' rules may exist in tandem, governing interactions in different parts or at different levels within political systems (Lowndes, 1999, p. 24).

3.6 From Independence to Embeddedness

Parodying the best of 'old' institutionalism, the vulgar version treats institutions as free-standing, out of place and out of time. New institutionalists confirm that political institutions are 'embedded', albeit from a variety of angles. Historical institutionalists focus upon 'path dependence' in the development of political institutions (Hall, 1986; King, 1995; Pierson, 1996). Rational choice scholars have

developed an analysis of 'nested' institutions: Kiser and Ostrom (1982), for instance, distinguish between operational (day-to-day), collective (legal) and constitutional rules. According to Goodin and Klingemann (1996, p. 18), institutional rules are

> nested within an ever-ascending hierarchy of yet-more-fundamental, yet-more-authoritative rules and regimes and practices and procedures.

Elsewhere, new institutionalists are turning their attention to the 'bottom–up' influence of locally specific institutional constraints. The social capital debate is concerned with the relationship between institutions of civil society and the performance of political institutions (Putnam, 1993). From an organisation theory perspective, Clegg (1990, p. 163) shows how locally specific institutional environments serve to reinforce or undermine society-wide institutional frameworks. The diversity of political institutions arises at least in part from their interaction with non-political institutions at the local level, which creates opportunities "to do not only different things but also the same things differently" (Clegg, 1990, p. 151). To paraphrase Karl Polanyi (1992), politics is an 'instituted process', embedded in institutions political and non-political.

4. New Institutionalist Contributions to Understanding Urban Politics

In the remainder of the article, I draw upon the six themes discussed above to discuss the contribution of new institutionalism to a range of debates in urban politics. I am concerned here with the value of new institutionalism as a broad conceptual framework (rather than as a specific causal or 'empirical' theory), able to offer the kind of contribution identified by Judge *et al*. (1995, p. 3)

> Conceptual frameworks … provide a language and a frame of reference through which reality can be examined and lead theorists to ask questions that might not otherwise occur. The result, if successful,

is new and fresh insights that other frameworks or perspectives might not have yielded.

This modest project has particular value in the light of urban political theorists' suspicion of 'institutional' explanations and in the context of the emergence of new forms of institutional constraint within urban politics.

4.1 Urban Governance as an Instituted Process

New institutional theory provides us with new ways of understanding structure—or constraint—in urban politics. As noted earlier, this is particularly timely given the emergence of new arrangements for urban governance in Britain. When monopolistic elected local authorities were responsible for policy-making and service-delivery within localities, it was easy for the old institutionalist fallacy to persist—that local governance could be equated with the workings of local government. With the internal reorganisation of local governments, the proliferation of new agencies and new roles for the private and voluntary sectors, the constraints within and through which urban politics operates become more problematic. The practical separation of governance from government calls for clearer analytical distinctions too.

It has become fashionable in British urban politics to refer to a transition from 'local government to local governance' (see, Rhodes, 1999; Wilson, 1998; Stoker, 1996). While the phrase provides a nice rhetorical flourish, it rather misses the point. The process of local governance is not new, it has just become progressively delinked from the representative and bureaucratic institutions of local government. Empirical changes in the *institutional framework* of local governance are serving to direct our attention towards governance-as-process and away from government-as-organisation. While 'governing' refers to purposive acts of 'steering' a society or polity, 'governance' refers to the instituted process that is both created by these acts and serves to guide and constrain future governing behaviour (Kooiman, 1993). The ways in which governance is instituted, or institutionalised, vary over time and space.

The process of institutional transition underway within British urban politics is far more complicated than the 'local government to local governance' formulation implies. Two key processes can be identified. First, there is a process of institutional differentiation that is leading to a greater variety of institutional arrangements for urban governance. Secondly, there is an underlying shift in urban politics from 'strong' to 'weak' institutional constraints.

4.2 Institutional Differentiation in Urban Politics

Integrated bureaucratic hierarchies, while still very important, are no longer the defining institutions of local governance. Market and network institutions—with their distinctive roles and norms, rules and incentives—are of growing importance in shaping and constraining local political behaviour (see Stoker, 1999, pp. 2–4). 'Quasi-markets' and internal networks are operating inside the increasingly hollow shell of the public sector; and public, private and voluntary bodies are linked through contractual and 'partnership' arrangements.

Because it is able to distinguish analytically between organisations and institutions, a new institutionalist approach is well suited to the study of plural modes of governance and of systems of governance in transition. To take an illustration, multi-organisational partnerships are organisational forms that cannot be considered synonymous with network-style institutional arrangements. My own work on urban regeneration partnerships shows how actors' behaviour is shaped by hierarchical, market and network institutions at different stages of a partnership's development (see Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998).[3] Different institutional

arrangements overlap and co-exist through-out a partnership's life.

—Pre-partnership collaboration is character-ised by a network mode of governance based upon conventions of informality, trust and interdependence.
—Partnership creation and consolidation is characterised by hierarchical rules based upon an assertion of status and authority differentials and the formalisation of pro-cedures.
—Partnership programme delivery is charac-terised by market (or quasi-market) institu-tions of tendering and contract, with low levels of co-operation between providers.
—Partnership termination or succession is characterised by a re-assertion of a net-work mode of governance as a means to maintain relevant programmes, community involvement and staff employment.

Such an analysis serves to challenge the static and 'benign' picture of multi-organisa-tional partnerships that has dominated the academic and practitioner debate. Partnership working does not necessarily deliver new relationships of trust and mutuality—or at least, not all of the time. The balance and tensions between different institutional frameworks shift as the agenda for action and the relationship between partners (with dif-ferent interests) changes. There are lessons for institutional design too: partnership work-ing will not itself deliver what Rhodes (1997) calls a new 'governing code'. Rather, the growth of partnerships draws attention to the range of institutional resources out of which such a code could be fashioned. One of my interviewees referred to the 'irregular heart-beat' of the partnership organisation she was involved in, as new institutional frameworks were negotiated across organisational boundaries and cultures. Another explained that: "We are learning to accommodate mess". A healthy partnership is probably a place in which institutions collide. As Rhodes acknowledges, the search for a new operating code

involves choosing not only between gov-

erning structures but also the mix of struc-tures and strategies for managing them (Rhodes, 1997, p. 42).

4.3 Institutionalising 'Weak Ties'

We are witnessing, then, a proliferation of institutional forms within urban politics rather than any simple transition from 'government to governance'. The conven-tional narrative about changing modes of governance is also too simplistic—from bu-reaucracy (1970s) to markets (1980s) and on to networks (1990s). In fact, the institutional repertoire of urban politics has simply ex-panded; institutional design increasingly in-volves mixing and matching institutional forms in pursuit of practical and normative ends. However, the dominance of a pro-part-nership policy discourse should not be dis-missed as mere rhetoric. I have outlined elsewhere the contextual factors that have alerted urban policy-makers to the benefits of partnerships linking public, private and vol-untary bodies (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998, pp. 315–316). In short, these relate to a search for efficiency within an organisation-ally fragmented and fiscally constrained government landscape; and to a search for new responses to the 'wicked issues' facing government—complex and intransigent problems (like community safety or environ-mental sustainability) that cannot be tackled by one department or agency alone. Partner-ships are promoted in a context which is 'strategically selective' (Hay and Wincott, 1998) in favour of network-style institutional forms. While hierarchy and market arrange-ments remain an important part of the institu-tional mix of urban governance, the new ingredient is networks.

In the context of increasing institutional differentiation, urban politics are witnessing a growth in the role of 'weak' *vis-à-vis* 'strong' forms of institutional constraint. 'Weak' does not imply 'ineffective'; it refers to the *manner* rather than the *impact* of con-straint. Within urban regimes and policy net-works, for example, actors are not bound by common organisational rules, coming as they

do from different agencies and sectors. Formal agreements or terms of reference may at times be drawn up to regulate the behaviour and contribution of different parties. However, the real institutional 'glue' arises out of what Granovetter (1973) calls "the strength of weak ties"—the tacit understandings about appropriate behaviour and the terms of exchange between parties. The research on formal partnerships described above found that the sustainability of interagency relationships over time depended upon the underlying presence of network-style rules and relationships (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998, p. 331).

As Granovetter (1973, p. 1376) explains, 'weak ties' link members of different social groups, while 'strong ties' are concentrated within particular groups. Weak ties are less time-consuming, less intense and less intimate than strong ties but serve to create 'bridges' between actors with different interests and identities, generating a potential for collective action. It is the institutionalisation of weak ties that constitutes the challenge for governance within the disaggregated urban polity. When students of urban politics identify the importance of informally constituted governing coalitions—involving public- and private-sector actors—they are not discovering any declining significance of 'institutions'. Rather, they are directing our attention towards new institutional frameworks for urban governance. Institutions—as we have seen above—do not always take an organisational form; rather, they are comprised of rules that are both created by, and constraining of, political actors. The advantage of a new institutionalist perspective is that it leads us to problematise the *nature of constraint* within urban politics. It guards against any conflation of structure with organisation—the absence of formal organisation does not mean the absence of ties that bind. Weak ties may be as powerful in shaping and constraining urban political behaviour as the 'iron cage' of bureaucracy.

New developments within urban regime theory illustrate the growing interest in the process of institutionalising weak ties. Despite its evolution within structuralist political economy (see, for example, Fainstein and Fainstein, 1983; Elkin, 1987), urban regime theory has come to adopt an increasingly voluntaristic and inward-looking focus, emphasising élite actors' cost–benefit analysis in building and subsequently maintaining governing coalitions. As noted earlier, there is a reluctance in the literature to conceive of regimes as institutional arrangements: élite actors from business and government work 'across institutional lines', separated from their 'institutional base'. The 'power of social production' that characterises urban regimes is contrasted with the 'power of social control' that characterises 'institutions'. Institutions are assumed to be formal organisations and 'strong power structures' (Mulgan, 1994). Lauria (1997, p. 5) has pointed to the tendency to reduce regimes to "the stochastic microeconomic investment calculations of individual actors"; Stoker notes the focus on "the internal dynamics of the governing coalition to the detriment of contextual forces" (Stoker, 1995, p. 66).

In response to what Lauria (1997, p. 5) calls the "volunteerist return" in urban regime theory, scholars influenced by regulation theory have sought to reconnect the study of urban regimes with wider institutional constraints characterising phases of capitalist development. They argue that urban regimes (of different types) should be seen as "institutional and practical *responses*" to wider changes (Goodwin and Painter, 1997, p. 28). Clarke (1995, p. 514) argues for the importance of local context in shaping urban regimes

> A narrow focus on regime composition … obscures the important ways in which the overall structure of the local institutional terrain affects the ability of groups to influence policy.

Clarke notes (1995, p. 527), for example, the more inclusive conventions of interest representation within regimes located in cities with a history of close contact between local government, neighbourhoods and local groups. While national institutional constraints remain pervasive, Clarke points to

the importance of "local institutional over-lays and accretions" in shaping urban regimes. Pierre (1999, p. 375) makes a similar point when he argues that arrangements for urban governance are

> embedded in a myriad of economic, social, political and historical factors pertaining to the exchanges between the local state and the local civil society.

In problematising the issue of regime transition, Orr and Stoker argue for the importance of both local and non-local contexts. Regime change, they argue, involves more than actors debating ideas and bargaining over costs and benefits; it depends upon longer-term processes of 'institutionalisation' whereby material incentives and normative frameworks assume rule-like status (see Stoker, 1995, pp. 68–69). There is growing recognition, then, that urban regimes are themselves informally constituted arrangements of rules that shape actors' behaviour and are embedded within wider institutional frameworks. To understand urban regimes as 'not institutions' is perverse: the import of the argument lies precisely in the way in which regimes impose stable, regularised and effective constraints upon local political behaviour.

4.4 Inside the Machine: 'New Management' and Institutional Change

New institutionalist insights are valuable not only for understanding emerging multi-agency arrangements for urban governance; they also provide powerful conceptual tools for analysing continuity and change within the bureaucracies of the local state. As Rhodes (1997, p. 182) comments: "bureaucracies may change but they are still with us". The analysis of management change in local government is an area in which new institutionalist insights have been self-consciously applied, although often more in passing than as a systematic structuring device (see, for instance, Lowndes, 1999; Pollit et al., 1998; Walsh et al., 1997; Clarke and Newman, 1997). British local government has been subject to a massive programme of institutional redesign over the past two decades, involving countless policy initiatives and several hundred pieces of legislation (Wilson and Game, 1998). Thus, it provides an opportunity to examine the process and outcomes of institutional change provoked by 'radical shock' and 'persistent political will' (March and Olsen, 1989)—a far less common scenario than change through 'accident' or 'evolution' (Goodin, 1996, pp. 24–25). At least four conclusions can be drawn from new institutionalist-inspired research on management change in local government.[4]

There is no one 'new public management' but different, and potentially contradictory, streams of ideas and practices. While this may seem an obvious conclusion, it is radical in the context of the dualistic discourse that dominated among policy-makers and consultancy-oriented academics during the 1980s and early 1990s (see, for example, Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). This discourse compares features of 'old' and 'new' management as a series of binary oppositions (centralisation versus decentralisation, hierarchy versus empowerment, monopoly versus competition, etc.); management change is viewed as the (beneficial) movement from one 'side' to the other (Clarke and Newman, 1997, p. 49). Research has highlighted the ways in which the discourse imposes an artificial coherence on both 'old' and 'new' management practices and overstates the discontinuity between them (Lowndes, 1999, p. 25). My own content review of practitioner journals confirms that public management is being 'rethought', but also highlights the range of (often-conflicting) 'new management' concerns and the degree of variation between service areas and over time (see Walsh et al., 1996). Research shows that some of the ideas at the heart of the journal debates have made little practical impact and that practitioners' own views of 'good' management involve a mix of 'old' and 'new' elements. There is no simple process of 'isomorphism' (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983); rather, different combina-

tions and arrangements of management rules and norms are becoming institutionalised within different local government organisations.

There is no one process of 'management change', as individual organisations and service sectors respond differently to system-wide triggers for change. Management change in local government has been driven by new ideas and changing values—both "the transfer of private-sector ideas" (as one of my respondents put it) and the "general push from central government to do things differently" (as another recalled) (Lowndes, 1999, p. 28). However, the process of embedding new ideas in new institutions is shaped both by external institutional frameworks (see Walsh *et al.*, 1997) and by distinctive 'implementation habitats' (Pollit *et al.*, 1998). External 'higher-level' institutional constraints structure the range of possibilities for developing new rules and are expressed through legislation, policy frameworks, resource regimes and the regulation of 'standards'. At the same time, locally specific institutions either reinforce or undermine institutional 'templates' circulating in the wider environment. A local authority's approach to public participation, for instance, is affected by its own traditions and conventions of engagement and by levels of 'social capital' with the locality. Service-specific institutional frameworks also shape responses to new management ideas. Research has shown that different innovations tend to take root in different service areas, due to the constraints (and opportunities) embodied in specific technologies, professional practices or legal and regulatory requirements (Lowndes, 1999; Pollitt *et al.*, 1998; Stewart, 1993).

Management change is non-linear, involving continuities between old and new approaches, movements forwards and backwards, and change at different levels. My research shows how management innovations often became effectively 'incorporated' into existing institutional frameworks. Individuals defend 'old' institutions sometimes to protect vested interests but often out of attachment to underlying values. As one respondent told me: "there is a breakdown of social values in the way that people treat each other—reorganisation is very traumatic" (Lowndes, 1999, p. 33). Bedding-down new institutions requires that old practices are 'deinstitutionalised'—something on which the dominant 'new management' discourse is silent. Normative exhortation of the sort championed in the 'change' literature is not enough to establish new 'logics of appropriateness'. New institutional rules have to be operationalised beyond the 'mission' or 'vision' statement and actors have to be sure of new incentives and sanctions. My research found actors acutely aware of different levels of management change, distinguishing between change in the 'formal' and 'real' organisation, at the 'surface' and 'deeper down', and between 'leaders' and 'laggards' among departments (Lowndes, 1999, p. 33). 'Management change' only becomes *institutional change* through a contested and dynamic process of embedding new rules and disembedding old rules. As predicted by March and Olsen (1989) and Brunsson (1997), such processes are hard to control and have uneven, often unpredictable, results.

Management change has political significance, impacting upon relationships between government and citizens at the local level. Up until 1997, purposive institutional change in British local government had had an almost entirely managerial focus. This is not to say, however, that it has not had political impacts. Just as bureaucratic and professional institutions have traditionally structured local political behaviour, new management arrangements are presenting a new set of constraints and opportunities for the exercise of local democracy and citizenship (Lowndes, 1995; Prior *et al.*, 1995). Management innovations in local government are destabilising power relations within the locality—relations between elected members and paid officers, between local authorities and non-elected bodies, and between

users and providers of local services. New rules for 'customer responsiveness', for instance, concentrate key rationing decisions in the hands of managers rather than politicians, whilst also emphasising accountability to 'customers' rather than their elected representatives (Lowndes, 1999, p. 35). New 'partnership' institutions leave elected members unclear of their authority *vis-à-vis* that of private-sector 'experts' and community representatives (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998, p. 325). Once again, the 'nested' or embedded nature of institutional life is made clear—changes in institutional rules at one level (or in one arena) are both influenced by, and impact upon, institutional rules at another. At the same time, because institutional arrangements embody power relations, the process of institutional change is always 'politically charged' (Pierre, 1999, p. 390).

4.5 Democratising Urban Politics: 'New Local Government Requires New Ways of Working'

The formal political institutions of British local government are in crisis. Within the restructured bureaucracies of elected local government, there is confusion and anxiety over councillors' roles. New management institutions are according local authority officers new roles in terms of securing 'responsiveness' to individual service users and undertaking consultations with communities. Institutional change has also cast officers in the lead role within the ever-increasing number of contractual relationships and interagency partnerships. The role of elected members is being squeezed in relation to representing the public, and decision-making over strategy and day-to-day service delivery. As one of my interviewees put it

> The elected member's position is being eaten away at both ends (Lowndes, 1999, p. 36).

Criticism of the institutional rules through which local democracy takes place is gaining ground—for instance, with regard to the time-consuming committee system that is structured around professional rather than political concerns, the set-piece council meetings that rubber-stamp committee decisions and the 'whipping' of decision-making within party groups (see Pratchett and Wilson, 1996; DETR, 1998). The public is voting with its feet—local election turn-out is in free-fall and the recruitment and retention of councillors have become a serious problem (DETR, 1998). Vibrant local political activity (for instance, on environmental issues) is increasingly to be found in 'arenas without rules' (Dudley and Richardson, 1998)—far away from the ballot box and the meeting room. Elected politicians continue to exercise power within their localities, but increasingly through the sort of 'shadow' institutions identified by urban regime theorists (see above). Critics draw attention to the 'democratic deficit' involved in decision-making through informal governing coalitions or policy networks, whilst also raising questions about accountability and ethical standards within formal partnership bodies (Lowndes *et al*., 1997, p. 342).

Since Labour came to power in 1997, an ambitious programme of 'democratic renewal' has been launched in British local government. The reform programme is self-consciously normative—it does not disguise its intentions behind a legitimising 'rational' discourse of efficiency (although a discourse of 'modernisation' helps to create a sense of necessary progress). The intention is to secure a shift in values through the redesign of local political institutions. In contrast to the Conservatives' attempted 'managerialisation' of local politics, Labour sees local democracy as the normative *raison d'etre* for local government

> At the heart of local government's new role is leadership … It will mean councils using their unique status and authority as directly elected bodies to develop a vision for their locality … provide a focus for partnership (and) guarantee quality services for all (Blair, 1998, p. 13).

Clearly a new institutionalist at heart, Tony Blair argues that "New local government requires *new ways of working*" (Blair, 1998, p. 16; emphasis added). Unusually for a reforming government with 'big ideas', New Labour has been scrupulous in its attention to the *minutiae* of local political procedure and convention—so confident is it in the premise that 'institutions matter' (March and Olsen, 1989). Its prescriptions are rich in organisational detail, whether in relation to reforming local elections, separating executive and representative functions, ensuring public consultation and deliberation, or regulating both ethical and quality standards. Whether these are the 'right' institutional arrangements to achieve the government's normative goals is a subject of continuing discussion (as in the heated debate on elected mayors—see Hodge *et al.*, 1997). But what is clear is that the government places great faith (in urban politics and elsewhere) in the Rawlsian notion that just institutions can create a just society. As Rothstein (1996, p. 138) explains

> If social norms … vary with the character of political institutions, then we can at least to some extent decide which norms shall prevail in the society in which we live, because we can, at least sometimes, choose how to design our political institutions.

For students of institutional theory—and urban politics—it will be fascinating to study the project as it unfolds. Will New Labour, like their Conservative predecessors, demonstrate the 'persistent political will' necessary for radical institutional redesign (March and Olsen, 1989)? Will New Labour, in their reforming zeal, recognise the importance in urban politics of local institutional variation and of weak as well as strong ties? Will they be prepared to practise 'institutional gardening' rather than 'institutional engineering' (Offe, 1996b, p. 219)? Whether, and in what form, Blair's 'new ways of working' are taken up in local government will depend upon the outcome of contested and embedded processes of institutional change, which are inevitably unpredictable and hard to control.

5. Conclusion

The concept of 'urban politics' has been constructed in opposition to something called 'institutional theory'—an approach that collapsed the political processes affecting urban communities with the workings of elected local government. During the 1980s and 1990s, scholars focused attention upon broader influences on local decision-making—the role of business, social capital, intergovernmental relations, uneven development and so on. Developments 'on the ground' have served to consolidate the urban politics (or 'local governance') perspective, as elected local governments have fragmented and public–private boundaries blurred. I have argued that these developments, rather than signifying the last gasp of 'institutionalism', actually call for a reformulated theory of the (diverse) institutional constraints within which urban political processes operate.

Institutional theory has, however, found it hard to shake off its Aunt Sally status within urban politics. This article has sought to distinguish between the old, the new and the ugly in institutional analysis. I have shown how new approaches depart from the vulgar institutionalist assumptions against which urban politics react. Trying to capture what Goodin (1996, p. 20) calls the 'the moving spirit' of new instituitonalism, I have underlined its concern with the dynamic, contested and embedded nature of institutional constraint. The article explores the contribution that new institutionalist insights can make to current debates in British urban politics. It discusses processes of institutional change and differentiation; the underlying shift from strong to weak forms of institutional constraint; and the challenges involved in redesigning local political institutions. I have argued for the rehabilitation of institutional theory within urban politics. The institutions of urban politics provide both a normative and a practical framework for the exercise of

citizenship—their importance reaches far beyond the local arena. As de Tocqueville (1835/1946, p. 57) wrote in the 19th century

> Town meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science: they bring it within people's reach, they teach men how to use and enjoy it.

Notes

1. Although this paper is largely concerned with developments in political science, it is important to note that urban institutions have received significant attention within political geography (see Warf, 1991, for a review). Influenced by both regulation theory and urban regime theory, urban geographers have studied the persistence of local particularities in the context of global pressures for the homogenisation of urban institutions (see the collection of essays edited by Lauria, 1997). With a focus upon the impact of industrial restructuring (or 'uneven development'), such research has inevitably concentrated more upon economic and cultural institutions (and the built environment) than upon the political and service-delivery arrangements of local governance (see Harvey, 1989a and 1989b; Peck and Tickell, 1994; Cox, 1995; Painter and Goodwin, 2000).

2. Indeed, some critics have objected to any attempt to find common currency between 'sociological' and 'rational choice' versions of the new institutionalism. Hay and Wincott (1998, p. 953) argue that the distinction "represents an intractable divide between two contending and incompatible approaches to institutional analysis" and counsel against the "cobbling together of institutional insights from differently-informed institutionalisms". My view is closer to that of Hall and Taylor (1996) who argue that, with increased 'intellectual borrowing' between the different strands of institutionalist thinking, the ontological distance between sociological and rational choice approaches is narrowing. Goodin and Klingemann (1996, p. 11) believe that the special significance of new institutionalism lies precisely in its capacity to defuse the unconstructive stand-off between structuralism and behaviouralism that has bedevilled not just political science, but social science in general.

3. The research focused upon British urban regeneration partnerships in three contrasting metropolitan areas, involving local authorities, City Challenge boards, 'task forces', Urban Development Corporations, Training and Enterprise Councils, chambers of commerce and a wide range of voluntary and community organisations. Interviews were held with 60 key informants, 9 of whom also kept diaries recording and reflecting upon partnership activity. Thanks are due to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation for funding the work. (For further details of the research methodology and findings, see Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998.)

4. The discussion that follows draws heavily upon an ESRC-funded research project, 'New management, citizenship and institutional change'. The research involved a content analysis of leading practitioner journals in British local government at key points during the 1980s and 1990s; a survey and interview programme involving 200 local government managers (at different levels in their organisations); and a case-study analysis of partnership activity involving 150 respondents from the public, private and voluntary sectors. (For further details of the methodology and research findings, see Lowndes, 1999.)

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