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Reconfiguring Institutions
Across Time and Space
Syncretic Responses to Challenges of Political and Economic Transformation

Edited by
Dennis Galvan
and
Rudra Sil
CHAPTER ONE

The Dilemma of Institutional Adaptation and the Role of Syncretism

Dennis Galvan and Rudra Sil

Forced westernization generates both order and entropy; it imposes universal rules without being able to make them work; it enunciates a unification of worlds without unifying meaning.

Bertrand Badie (2000: 234)

It is the admixture of formal rules, informal norms, and enforcement characteristics that shapes economic performance... Economies that adopt the formal rules of another economy will have very different performance characteristics than the first economy because of different informal norms and enforcement.

Douglass North (1998)

Introduction: The Problematic of Institutional Change

Forty years ago, Reinhard Bendix (1967) attacked the “invidious distinction between modernity and tradition” upon which then-prevailing approaches to political and economic development were predicated. Around the same time, a number of other scholars began to identify processes through which quintessentially “traditional” social formations
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became resilient elements of new strategies and structures in the pursuit of "modern" developmental ends (Riggs 1964; Rudolph and Rudolph 1967; Whitaker 1967). Such studies undermined the spurious dichotomies, analytic universalism, and teleological assumptions of then-prevailing theories of "modernization," and eventually paved the way for newer approaches to the study of political and economic change. Collectively, these approaches would prove to be far more attentive to the significance of international demonstration effects, path-dependent historical trajectories, variations in institutional design, the role of informal norms and social networks, and the strategic calculations of individual actors.

Yet, the end of the cold war, the spread of democratization and economic liberalization, and, after 9/11, muscular notions of induced progress in troubled nations, have all contributed to the resurgence of universalist scholarship. This new universalism is evident in arguments touting the harmonizing effects of market discipline and capital mobility across national borders (Borio 2004; Bryant 1994; Ohmae 1999; Strange 1998), evolving technologies of communication and production (Mazzar 2002; Womack, Jones, and Roos 1991), the diffusion of democracy and human rights norms (Finnemore and Sikkink 1999; Payne and Samhart 2004), the expanded role of global governance structures (Muldoon 2004), and convergent modes of individual and collective rationality in a supposedly unprecedented "global" age (Albrow 1997; Cerny 1995; Giddens 2000). These newer expressions of analytic universalism emphasize transnational processes of change rather than the parallel evolution of independent systems. Yet, they too rest on teleological foundational assumptions in that they assign a priori epistemological and causal primacy to homogenizing forces of social transformation and uniform logics of social action rather than to sources of variation across space and mechanisms of historical continuity within locales. In the process, the new universalism implicitly or explicitly projects a vision of economic, political, and social harmonization worldwide not fundamentally different from the vision of evolutionary convergence once embedded in modernization theory (Alexander 1995; Sil 2003).

Political and economic elites in the developing world, for their part, have themselves contributed to this reification of the universal at the expense of the local and particular. In their search for international status and recognition, they frequently have sought to emulate particularly successful institutional models on the presumption that these can be transplanted across historical and social contexts essentially as they are, hermetically shrouded in abstract purity, disconnected from the messiness of national history and local social reality. While this tendency appears to have become more pronounced in the post-cold war era, the temptation to emulate or borrow institutional models from "advanced" referent societies has a long lineage dating back to the nineteenth century (Bendix 1993; Jansen 1979; Westney 1987). However, in contrast to Veblen (1954 [1915]) and others who saw the opportunity of foreign borrowing as one of the situational advantages of backwardness, the concern underlying this volume has to do with the unanticipated consequences wherever new institutions have been crafted by following the simplifying logic of emulation without commensurate attention to the particular social environment in which an imported or imposed institution is being constructed.

In this sense, we draw inspiration from the work of James Scott (1998) who has nicely characterized the vast chasms between the "high modernist" aspirations of state elites and the practical knowledge embedded in local communities (mêti). Privileging the former at the expense of the latter is an all too common tendency among ambitious elites in late-developing states, and this tendency has all too frequently resulted in the spectacular failure of grand developmental projects. The contributions to this volume expand upon Scott's observation by generating historically grounded and theoretically sound reasons for questioning the viability of institutions transferred without due consideration to locally embedded and historically transmitted constellations of interests, social norms, collective memories, and practical knowledge.

This volume also speaks to the contributions of new historical, economic, and sociological institutionalists who have already articulated the varied mechanisms and distinctive pathways of institutional evolution that have produced multiple equilibria across time and space (Ekiert and Hanson 2003; Friedland and Alford 1991; Hopcroft 1998; Knight 1992; Nee and Ingram 1998; North 1990, 1998; Petersen 2000, 2003; Crouch and Farrell 2004; Rothstein and Steinmo 2002; Schickler 2001; Thelen 2003; Thelen and Steinmo 1992; Zeitlin and Herrigel 2000). The understandings of institutional change contained in these diverse approaches to institutional analysis provide a necessary foundation for the chapters to follow. At the same time, the approach in this volume is distinctive in at least two ways. First, each of the essays, while considering quite different kinds of institutions in different historical and regional settings, is organized around a common problematic that has received only limited attention in the literature on institutional change: the dilemmas of deploying the rules, practices, and design of institutions that have been imported or imposed from external
environments in locales where actors are enmeshed in historically embedded complexes of interests, norms, collective memories, social relations, and knowledge structures. Second, in exploring how these dilemmas are manifested and addressed across a wide range of political, economic, and social institutions in different historical and regional contexts, the volume strives to illustrate the analytic power of the concept of “syncretism,” a concept that has demonstrated its value in the study of cultural practices across social contexts and can be fruitfully deployed to analyze common aspects of institutional change not easily captured in existing frameworks.

The following section examines the origins of the term syncretism and offers a definition for “institutional syncretism” that may be systematically applied to the study of institutional change in different domains and regions. In the process, we draw attention to important, but often underappreciated, aspects of institutional change in processes of political, economic, and social transformation worldwide. We then consider the epistemological underpinnings of institutional syncretism as an eclectic intellectual construct that transcends more narrowly framed understandings of agency, rationality, and structure in competing approaches to institutional analysis. Finally, we provide a brief overview of how the contributions to this volume makes use of the concept of syncretism in developing original interpretations of quite different kinds of political, economic, and social institutions across time and space.

**Institutional Syncretism: A Definition and Hypothesis**

The term syncretism first appeared in the humanities, originally in the context of tracing how a “pure” endogenous ritual or art form might be exposed to “contamination” by imported symbols or practices (Stewart and Shaw 1994: 1). As fields such as cultural anthropology and comparative religion became more relativistic and context-sensitive, syncretism came to be increasingly viewed in a more positive light as an “inventive and creative process” (Balme 1999: 8), leading to novel combinations of religious beliefs and practices (Stewart and Shaw 1994) or novel linguistic or artistic conventions reflecting foreign influences accompanying colonialism (Balme 1999; Kullick 1992). In this way, the notion of syncretism came to be widely used in the humanities to emphasize the tolerance, creativity, and intellectual vigor required to “cement all the elements together into a new type of tradition and, further, to maintain the combination of the erudite and the popular” (Colpe 1987; cf. Balme 1999: 7–8). The use of syncretism in these expressive contexts emphasizes observable processes of change in art forms or religious practice; less emphasis has been placed in this literature on systematic examination of the individual agents, institutional constraints, or historical processes shaping the character and durability of new combinations of belief and practice.

In the social sciences, the term syncretism has made its appearance relatively recently, usually to capture the distinctive quality of processes through which actors delicately balance heterogeneous interests (Di Palma 1978), or to characterize ideologies that establish a meaningful relationship “between the diverse substantive rationalities of religious legitimation and religious solidarities and the formal rationality of uniformity of worldview” (Haas 1997: 51). More recently, syncretic change that “grabs onto what exists” has been credited for the successful consolidation and legitimation of nascent democracies (Eckstein 1998: 267) and for the reconciliation of political orders otherwise seen as distinct in terms of evolutionary phases of change (Sabel and Zeitlin 1996: 4). In these treatments, syncretism appears to suggest some sort of synthetic blend among disparate structures, interests, or value systems; but what appears to have been overlooked to some extent are the processes of interpretation, translation, negotiation, and mutual adjustment through which such a synthesis might be constructed, legitimized, and maintained.

Our own understanding of syncretism, initially articulated in quite separate studies (Galvan 2004; Sil 2002), combines attention to the complexities of adaptive interpretation with the systematic examination of the conditions under which particular strategies of adaptation produce more viable and meaningful institutional constructs. We thus define institutional syncretism for the purposes of this volume as: a set of interpretive processes through which actors in local settings selectively transform newly imposed or transplanted institutional features (norms, rules—formal and informal—organizational principles, and operational procedures) while adapting portable elements of preexisting social institutions to produce innovative institutional configurations.

This understanding of institutional syncretism underscores the need and value of research programs that systematically explore the direction, origins, and intended and unintended consequences of development by increasing our ability to recognize and understand the processes and resilience of local diversification and cross-regional variation. Indeed, a rich literature on institutional evolution has already drawn attention to such processes as “hybridization” (Zeitlin and Herrigel 2000), “institutional layering”
The Dilemma of Institutional Adaptation

local norms, roles, and institutional models. In this way, institutional syncretism provides a means for coping with the intensified pressures to adapt practices originally developed in foreign settings without provoking the crises of legitimation associated with the absence of a sense of historical continuity and cultural distinctiveness on which all communities ultimately rely (Galvan 2004; Sil 2002).

Such a conception of institutional syncretism is necessarily general and abstract. Given the emphasis placed on local contexts and specific sets of actors, norms, and interests, it is only in relation to concrete substantive problems that the concept of institutional syncretism can be given a specific operational definition. Nevertheless, the concept is portable in that it can be fruitfully applied to a range of institutions across time and space, with the possibility that empirical observations about these institutions can be cumulated to generate some inferences about the extent, dynamics, and direction of institutional adaptation. In fact, all of the contributions to this volume may be read as an attempt to explore a collective hypothesis: that syncretic institutions, whether deliberately engineered from above or emerging through incrementally altered practices from below, will generate more viable, durable, and legitimate institutions over the long run than would be the case with borrowed or imposed institutions that are transplanted without significant modification of core organizational ideals, routines, structures and practices. This is chiefly because syncretic modes of adaptation reflect the creative intervention of local actors who are themselves motivated by a need to reconcile institutional rules and practices with locally embedded sets of interests, values, and social structures. As a result, syncretic institutions generate a sense of familiarity, consistency, and local authenticity in the eyes of local actors. In the absence of successful syncretism, borrowed or imposed institutions are likely to lack moral or practical significance in the eyes of many individuals, and may well give rise to divergent, potentially conflicting sets of norms and practices in arenas wherever actors happen to enjoy some discretion of their own.

Some sense of the significance we attach to the presence or absence of syncretic forms of adaptation is implicitly or partially anticipated in recent studies on such diverse topics as state-formation, democratization, and economic development. Badie (2000), for example, has suggested that much of the political disorder accompanying state formation in non-Western societies has stemmed from recurrent conflicts between those seeking to directly import models of the state that proved viable in the West and those seeking to offer a competing understanding of statehood founded on principles supposedly derived from distinct histories and cultures. While skeptical of what he calls “reactive” or “revivalist” strategies
that reject imported institutional forms altogether, Badie calls for greater attention to the innovative process of “creative deviation” to cope with the internal tensions and conflicts spurred by failed universalist efforts to reproduce the image of Western states in diverse non-Western settings. Similarly, in a study of democratic consolidation in Senegal, Shaeffer (1998) demonstrates how existing social norms and imported notions of democracy combined with the intentions, sensibilities, and actions of ordinary Senegalese to produce a distinctively Wolof understanding of demokaraas. He concludes that “even when democratic ideas are diffused throughout the world, local communities assimilate imported ideas selectively and transform them to fit their own life conditions” (Shaeffer 1998: 146). In the study of property rights and new legal orders in postcommunist Eastern Europe, Stark and Bruszt envision not a teleological march toward freehold, but the emergence of “recombinant” forms of ownership and exchange that result from the creative putting together of new liberal-market forms and Soviet-era models of property (Stark and Bruszt 1998). In treatments of economic development, we find references to the positive consequences of a “synergy” between the economic objectives of firms and nations and preexisting “norms of cooperation and networks of civic engagement among ordinary citizens,” accompanied by the expectation that the social trust fostered by the latter can serve as a valuable resource in enhancing cooperation while reducing transaction costs (Evans 1997: 178; Granovetter 1992). Such a perspective on economic change is also consistent with the emphasis that some new institutionalists place on the logic of “adaptive rather than allocative efficiency” (North 1998: 256) that result from flexible institutional structures being supported by preexisting cognitive maps and informal norms in a given environment. Despite their quite different foci, these treatments of state-formation, democratization, marketization, and economic transformation all anticipate the main dynamic we seek to draw attention to in this volume: that preexisting local norms, networks, and practices—rather than being inevitably opposed to, or transformed by, exposure to external influences—can be reconfigured to provide valuable resources and interpretive templates for achieving new kinds of developmental ends, so long as new institutional constructs introduced to achieve these ends are themselves disaggregated, selectively modified, and reconstituted in distinctive ways across varied social settings.

The concept of institutional syncretism as used in the chapters that follow incorporates this fundamental insight and also provides a framework for systematically identifying, distinguishing, and evaluating the manner in which very different kinds of institutions are interpreted and adapted in particular social contexts. The authors draw attention to the importance of interpretive, sense-making processes—what Scott (1998) terms “re-complexification”—inherent when local actors respond to new institutional forms in real, experiential contexts, trying to make new routines and practices comprehensible in terms of existing rules, behaviors, and values. In any locality, these ubiquitous processes of sense-making may lead to multiple and divergent understandings of particular institutional principles or practices.

Thus, central to our understanding of institutional syncretism is the creative process of transformation, negotiation, and recombination that ultimately yields not merely a variant of an original institutional model but a new design that has been created by actors working with diverse sets of social expectations and cultural repertoires. To be sure, elites have the power and resources to designate official institutional ideologies and practices, and thus can often take the lead in shaping the content of syncretic adaptation, while ordinary people often lack the means to systematically institutionalize their own syncretic formulations beyond very limited local scales. Nevertheless, we recognize that syncretic adaptations undertaken by nonelite actors may subvert, support, or sometimes supplant the more empowered programs of institutional change articulated by elites. It is important to proceed from a particular substantive question concerning a particular institution in a given region, and then to identify the relevant interests, norms, templates, and social relations that influence local actors’ perceptions, interpretations, and evaluations of the particular roles, rules, and practices identified with a newly imported or imposed institution.

The Epistemological Significance of
Institutional Syncretism

As defined, the context-sensitive character of institutional syncretism effectively precludes its use in parsimonious models, elegant general explanations, or definitive predictions. At the same time, the concept of syncretism presumes a common problematic at work whenever institutional forms from one context are imported into another, regardless of the specific regions, time periods, and institution types involved. Thus, the possibility of institutional syncretism can be regarded as a core element of an overarching analytic framework for identifying, problematizing, comparing, and evaluating adaptive processes across social contexts and
types of institutions. In this sense, the concept does permit one to draw modest inferences and contingent predictions about the sources and effectiveness of different approaches to the consolidation and legitimation of transplanted or imposed institutions across societies. Thus, arguments about institutional syncretism are neither likely to be nested in a unified theoretical framework nor are likely to be axiomatically derived from covering laws or parsimonious models—rather they encourage the construction of middle-range inferences on the basis of “contextualized comparison” (Locke and Thelen 1995) of interpretive processes and institutional outcomes across social contexts and types of institutions. In that sense, institutional syncretism, like recent historical institutionalist work on the welfare state, follows Hall’s (2003) notion of “systematic process analysis,” turning attention away from mechanical and simplistic links between cause-effect dyads toward sensitivity to complex interaction effects among historic structures, interests, processes of preference formation, and the ideas and capacities of creative agents played out over time in particular settings.

In view of this modest function, the institutional syncretism approach articulated in this volume does not claim to unify, replace, or subsume contemporary metatheoretical traditions such as historical institutionalism, rational-choice theory, or interpretive analysis. In fact, our approach shares with all of these approaches the view that earlier work on economic, political, and social change was sometimes predicated on false dichotomies, illegitimate teleologies, and a flawed functionalist logic, and that such work neglected to offer a balanced consideration of the role of actors, the significance of historical configurations, and the diversity and functionality of preexisting cultural norms and practices. At the same time, we find that such a balanced consideration also tends to elude the most paradigmatic incarnations of rational-choice analysis, cultural interpretation, and historical institutionalist analysis. The ontologies undergirding each of these approaches essentially privilege some component of social reality over others on the basis of unexamined foundational assumptions (Lichbach 2003; Sil 2000). The result is that complex adaptive processes that contain elements of rational action, cultural framing, and historically-grounded structural constraints are reduced to simplified expressions of a single, all-embracing explanatory logic that can be applied only by proponents of one research tradition or another.

By contrast, the foundations underlying the concept of institutional syncretism may be loosely identified with perspectives considered to be “structurationist” (Giddens 1984; Sewell 1992). This perspective, while abstract in its formulation, provides an ontology that permits an open-ended examination of the processes through which agency is evident in the reproduction and transformation of structures over time, and through which material and ideal dimensions of social reality (for example, the distribution of resources and shared normative frameworks) impinge upon each other and constrain individual behavior in everyday social relations. In effect, “structures” represent “mutually sustaining schemas and resources that empower and constrain social action and that tend to be reproduced by that said action. But their reproduction is never automatic...because structures are multiple and intersecting, because schemas are transposable, and because resources are polysemic and accumulate unpredictably” (Sewell 1992: 19). Such abstract foundational statements do not yield parsimonious explanatory models (in marked contrast, say, to the methodological individualism underlying game theory); but it is precisely because structurationism refrains from defining categories that incorporate implicit hypotheses about their causal significance (Sewell 1992) that it is able to avoid the a priori reification of agency, culture, or structure, enabling the investigator to explore the relative significance of each of these as variable objects of investigation given the questions and contexts involved (Cohen 1986; Sil 2000).

Thus, our understanding of institutional syncretism—while rejecting restrictive assumptions and programmatic assertions associated with some variants of historical institutionalism—shares core historical institutionalist assumptions that institutions represent “middle-level mediations between large-scale processes and the microdynamics of agency and action” (Katznelson 1997: 84) and that differences in the historical origins and emergent configurations of institutions account for consequential variations in norm-governed behavior, preference orderings, and patterns of cooperation and conflict among actors (Katznelson 1997; Rothstein 1998; Thelen and Steinmo 1992). We concur with Rothstein and Steinmo (2002) when they note that a careful, context-sensitive approach to history thickens our understanding of how self-interested agents realize preferences as a result of their structural position, yet are not fully able to transform structures to suit those interests. The historical sensitivity required to trace processes of institutional syncretism can likewise help account for the diverse origins of variation in preferences among those situated within the same institutional context across locales, thus adding the missing link to organizational and cultural approaches to institutions. In this way, the comparative study of syncretic process also shares the basic foundational assumptions of
pragmatism adopted by some historical institutionalists (cf. Berk and Galvan 2004), emphasizing the situated and creative agency of actors who recognize, develop, and shape preferences as tools to refashion structures, even as their positions within given social and institutional structures inform and shape their values, goals, and resources.

To the extent the approach in this volume differs from some historical institutionalist work to date, this can be accounted for by the types of institutions and the political or economic domains within which they function. Whereas the best-known work in the historical institutionalist tradition tends to focus on national-level actors, social policies, laws, and administrative organizations (as evident, for example, in historical treatments of Latin American regime structures or the European welfare state), our focus on institutional syncretism requires attention to processes of adaptation in different types of institutions operating in different domains, ranging from the national-level (such as the military or a national political party) as well as the local-level (such as local government bodies or industrial firms). Moreover, much historical institutionalist work in practice tends to either emphasize agency among political, economic, and administrative elites competing for influence in institutional arenas, or among the collective attributes of institutions, such as particular rules or organizational routines. In contrast, the careful consideration of local context in any search for syncretic processes of institutional change requires a broader consideration of a wider range of dialectical social processes linking different categories of actors located at different positions within and outside a given institutional arena. This serves to draw attention to processes of negotiation, sense-making and rule-changing that draw together institutional actors as well as actors defined at the level of individuals and grassroots communities. In this sense, while we wholeheartedly agree with Rothstein and Steinmo that "history matters, we do not see this history as pushing "evolutionary development along specific historical paths" (Rothstein and Steinmo, 2002: 16); rather, we see history as mediated by hermeneutic processes whereby the very characterization of that history is part of the story through which a range of complex acts of contestation, negotiation, and sense-making occur simultaneously and set the stage for diverse evolutionary possibilities along multiple paths. Syncretism, in effect, provides an alternative, localistic, sometimes chaotic mechanism for the study of institutional change, drawing attention not to a highly constrained notion of path dependency but rather to what might be called "path contingency" (Johnson 2003).

Our understanding of syncretism also speaks to the methodological individualism undergirding the new economic institutionalism and "thin" versions of rational-choice analysis. These approaches emphasize how particular agents define their material and ideal interests within particular social contexts and how they engage in iterated strategic interactions that can produce both multiple equilibria and "subversions of rationality" that can, in turn, reinforce or undermine preexisting structures (Elster 1983; Kiser 1996; Bates et al. 1998). As North (1990: 101) puts it, the same fundamental change in relative prices can affect two societies differently because "preceding institutional arrangements" in specific contexts generate different patterns of "adaptations at the margins." Adaptations that reflect the different configurations of bargaining power and different subjective models guiding the choices of actors in their respective environments. Our conception of institutional syncretism can be reconciled with these adaptive processes as actors seek to frame their bargaining situation in ways that reflect preexisting subjective understandings of power, risk, costs, and payoffs in a given institutional context.

Moreover, our conceptualization of institutional syncretism incorporates individual-level motivational assumptions, but these are broader, more flexible assumptions reflecting the combined influence of concepts found in the new economic institutionalism and in certain strands of organizational psychology. In relation to the former (North 1990; Williamson 1993), institutional syncretism can be viewed as a dynamic mechanism that can produce the familiarity and "social conditioning" necessary for the long-term efficacy of institutions. Without these transaction costs increase and collective action problems multiply as individuals are less likely to rely on expectations of trust and reciprocity in new environments characterized by cognitive uncertainty (Ensminger 1997). From an organizational psychology perspective, institutional syncretism reflects the tendency of actors to filter new information and simplify complex or unpredictable environments through "mental maps" and "basic social understandings" previously constructed by groups or communities (Arthur 1994; Denzau and North 1994; cf. Pierson 2000: 260). These simplifying constructs can serve to reinforce those elements of a social environment that appear most comprehensible and that produce the least amount of cognitive dissonance. Thus, we conceive of institutional syncretism as a continuous process, with possibilities for further adaptation or refinement through "positive feedback" and "learning processes" (Pierson 2000: 260-1) as triumphant successes or dramatic failures allow institutional elites and other local actors to strengthen, adjust, or reject emergent syncretic formulas.
In relation to the renewed attention to culture in the new sociological institutionalism, we adopt the position that culture is more of a category than a variable consisting of a large number of subjective elements, some of which are more essential to defining communities and thus less malleable than others. Thus, despite the attention given to the role of shared values and memories among local actors involved in syncretic processes, the use of syncretism as a core construct does not suggest a reified notion of culture as a static determinant of social acceptance and institutional efficacy. Rather, culture is seen as a set of specific and adaptable norms and orientations that can be reshaped and redeployed by individuals in the framing of new institutional practices and new modes of collective action (Archer 1988; Swidler 1986; Zald 1996). Following Young (1994) and Laitin (1986), we recognize that the limited analytic traction of culturally oriented work in comparative politics, from Almond and Verba (1963) to Huntington (1993), stems from unquestioned and sometimes unconscious primordialist assumptions about the origins and transformability of culture. What anthropology has understood, at least since Sahlins (1981), we extend to the study of norms, habits, and values as constitutive elements of institutions. These are plastic social constructs, moldable within limits set by historical precedent, by the structural position of actors, by the resources available to them, and by the interests animating their efforts to rework systems of meaning. The ongoing business of reimagining culture is a crucial site for the transformation of preferences and orientations, in turn setting much of the terms for how people react to and reformulate institutions themselves. Thus, ours is a culturalist approach only in the sense that what is normally understood as culture offers insights into where and how institutions are decomposable and subject to ongoing social construction by various categories of actors who view themselves and their environments through the lens of partially adjustable subjective models and cognitive maps.

At the same time, we accord local culture the same analytic weight that we do to the interests of actors, the structure of rules and the distribution of power. In fact, we categorically reject the relegation of local sociocultural factors to stories or contextual circumstances that do not ultimately hold the same epistemological status as universal models of social action, even in the case of “analytic narratives” purportedly aimed at combining local narratives with game-theoretic models (Bates, Greif, Levi, Rosenthal, and Weingast 1998; Kiser 1996; cf. Sil 2000). In our understanding of institutional change, local actors and their subjective orientations toward their institutional environments are viewed as a fundamental and ubiquitous aspect of institutional change, even if variations across time and space require the operationalization of the local to be highly specific. Scholars examining political, economic, and social change in different areas of the world have long sensed that the peculiarities of local experience, history, norms, and habits matter, but the concept of institutional syncretism provides a language and a focal point for the systematic exploration of just how fundamentally these shape diverse institutional trajectories. Understood in this way, the comparative study of institutional syncretism allows for the juxtaposition of sufficiently similar narratives to permit comparative analysis and modest inferences, but without the rigid formalism and mandatory methodological individualism that undergird other efforts to link analytic models to local narratives.

Such a conception of the material and ideal dimensions of agency and structure speaks to recent calls for the accommodation of “analytical eclecticism” as a complement to research traditions that confer epistemological primacy either to individual-level interests, collective identities, or the distribution of power in institutional arrangements (Katzenstein and Sil 2004; Sil 2000). In such a view, power and interest are as much a part of the conceptualization of institutional change as shared identities and local norms. Indeed, the politics of contestation over culture and historical memory—who is able to define authentic local tradition in terms that are socially acceptable and emotionally compelling—can set the terms for adaptation, rejection, or acceptance of new institutional forms. At the same time, it is important to recognize that individuals’ sense of their preferences and resources are shaped by the lenses through which they view their social environment, with the value attached to particular outcomes influenced by familiarity with particular practices, social structures, and patterns of authority. The very notions of power and interest are mediated by subjective norms and understandings, while, at any given point in time, the renegotiation of meanings attached to institutional practices reflect a particular distribution of power and a particular set of preferences embraced by actors possessing varying degrees of influence and status. Thus, the concept of institutional syncretism essentially draws attention to the interface between the least dogmatic and most sophisticated versions of rationalist, structuralist, and culturalist approaches to institutional change for the limited purpose of gaining analytic purchase on a given problem and a given time- and space-bound context.

In so doing, we want to be clear that our intention is not to suggest any kind of unified theoretical synthesis that might “inevitably masquerade as singular objectivities” (Lichbach 2003: 145). In fact, the very
definition of syncretism suggests that it cannot be operationalized as hard blueprint for characterizing or engineering institutional change; instead it suggests a fluid set of strategies for disaggregation, reinterpretation, and recombination that will be recognizable and comparable across cases of successful institutional adaptation. Thus, our understanding and use of institutional syncretism points to a modest effort to formulate an intellectual construct that can draw attention to processes and mechanisms shaping the interactions between actors’ material and ideal interests, their shared social relations and subjective mental maps, and the distribution of power and authority across different categories of actors within the limited context of assessing the consolidation, legitimacy, and performance of newly imported or imposed institutional models in a given locale.

Institutional Syncretism across

Time and Space

The chapters assembled here reveal how institutions imposed or imported from elsewhere are more capable of marshaling commitment, trust, and sacrifice when they are rendered legible and meaningful through a process of syncretism. The institutions examined range from local democratic institutions, military organizations, and political parties to industrial firms, development strategies, and laws regulating family life. In all cases, the authors use the concept of institutional syncretism in comparable ways to shed light on unanticipated challenges and distinctive dynamics not associated with original institutional models. Specifically, the way the authors use the concept of syncretism draws attention to three frequently underappreciated features of institutional change: (1) how norms and practices embedded in preexisting local institutions, when incongruous with those embedded in imposed or borrowed institutional models, can undermine the efficacy and legitimacy of the latter in the course of development; (2) how preexisting cognitive maps and interpretive frameworks provide communities with distinctive templates through which to reinterpret and reconfigure features of new institutions to make them more recognizable and meaningful; and (3) how these adaptive processes become self-reinforcing mechanisms that yield continuous institutional innovation, preserve the distinctiveness of institutional forms, and limit the prospects for the wholesale replication of modern or global institutional models. Part One of the volume consists of four chapters addressing political institutions of various types, and Part Two consists of five chapters addressing a range of economic and social institutions, broadly defined.

In the following chapter, Dennis Galvan follows efforts over the last three decades to syncretically modify local-level democratic institutions in one region of rural Senegal. At one level, this chapter’s longitudinal frame permits a quasi-experiment within a geographically bounded case setting: when peasants were able to syncretically adapt elected local councils, these institutions proved more politically legitimate, and more effective with regard to their primary goal (land and natural resource management). When state officials cut short peasant adaptation of the local councils, local people became more likely to resist, ignore, or sabotage the efforts of these councils to manage land and other resources. At a deeper level, Galvan uses this case to show that syncretic adaptation does not entail a singular, uniform reinterpretation of new institutions in terms of a timeless or homogeneous tradition. Rather, syncretism opens the door to political contestation over diverse notions of history and culture, permitting a messy range of versions of creative adaptation. In the Senegalese case, this has resulted in the fractal multiplication of various divergent variations on the rural councils, and over time, variations on the variations. This multiplication of syncretic institutional forms leads to a third layer of analysis, in which Galvan considers a range of social and political selection mechanisms through which a particular syncretic variant may become more widespread than others, and sometimes may emerge as a dominant new institutional form.

Chapter three by Thomas Bickford explores how the coherence and adaptability of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) of China, both as a military organization and an economic actor, is a product of the effective blending of pre-1949 Chinese military traditions and practices with the formally modern organizational features adopted from western (and Soviet) military organizations. Bickford notes that the exportation of the Western model in later developers was not as uniform or complete a process as some scholars argue. He views the PLA as an excellent example of how traditional features of Chinese society not only coexisted with, but were used to interpret and indigenize the rational–legal features of the military. Bickford’s analysis explores how western ideals and principles of military organization were adapted to make the PLA intelligible to a peasant society, and proceeds to characterize the PLA’s military–economic functions as a case of syncretism engineered by communist party elites in their effort to use recognizable prereligious–military traditions in combination with the formally modern organizational characteristics of the military. This syncretic approach is
responsible for distinctive features that, while seemingly contradictory, served the PLA well in making it an authoritative vehicle for social transformation for a period of time.

In chapter four, Pierre Ostiguy uses the concept of syncretism in a manner that combines elements of social engineering by institution builders (emphasized in the approaches of Bickford and Sil) with the more interpretive and grassroots reworking by local actors (emphasized in the approaches of Diamant and Galvan). Ostiguy interprets Argentina’s Peronist party as a locally syncretic variation from an ideal-typical Euro-American model of party organization and mobilization emphasizing the role of class culture in the process of party consolidation. Ostiguy demonstrates how the initial formations of Peronism and anti-Peronism freely borrowed from a nineteenth-century repertoire of antinomies constructed in the period of nation formation, a repertoire that included the dichotomy of civilization and barbarism, opposing attitudes toward caudillo rule, and contrasting views of the relationship to Europe and the hinterland. In the late 1980s, this repertoire also provided the basis for the politically powerful use of Peron and Peronist symbols to legitimize, among the lower sectors, economic policies that effectively reversed those carried out by Peron himself. Thus, Peronism’s syncretic character as a cultural movement not only accounts for its continued resonance with the working class but also for the Peronist party’s success in eliciting working-class support even as its leadership embraced IMF-sponsored, probusiness economic neoliberalism.

In chapter five, Stacey Philbrick Yadav examines the evolution of Hizballah (Party of God) from a program of militant resistance to Israeli occupation in southern Lebanon, to a politico-military bloc defending particular Shi’i Muslim interests, to the largest political party in the Lebanese Chamber of Deputies. This transformation has been accompanied by a process of syncretic adaptation involving (1) a reinterpretation of Shi’i principles of governance under guardians schooled in Islamic scriptures (wilaya’ al-faqih), principles originally imported from Khomeini’s Iran; and (2) a reconfiguration of archetypal political parties founded and organized in formally liberal-democratic settings. Transcending simplistic arguments about whether Islam and democracy are compatible, Yadav’s analysis demonstrates how imported Islamic ideals of governance have been translated into practice to support the organizational and strategic requirements of a modern political party seeking electoral success. At the same time, parliamentary participation has provided a motivation and framework for the movement to integrate transnational Shi’i principles on governance with a nationalist message that resonates with its local constituency. Yadav concludes with a look at the difficulties Hizballah has experienced in recent years in maintaining its original syncretic ideology and self-image within changing contexts, suggesting that particular syncretic strategies of institutional adaptation need to be reconstructed and updated over time for an institution to maintain its coherence and efficacy.

Part Two shifts the focus to economic and social institutions. In chapter six, Rudra Sil examines the efforts of managerial elites in prewar and postwar Japan to appropriate foreign, largely American, management principles while seeking to build authority in the eyes of a restive workforce. Sil’s analysis focuses on the challenge of forging common understandings between managers, who seek to establish formal rules, principles, and practices on the basis of imported management models, and regular workers whose informal social relations reflect the influence of norms and practices embedded in local communities. To deal with this challenge, prewar managerial elites initially strained to juxtapose a rigid ideology of traditional familism alongside “scientific management” principles imported from the United States, but without gaining the commitment of a workforce increasingly frustrated by the gap between rhetoric and reality. In contrast, postwar elites came upon a syncretic approach that, while not necessarily empowering workers, helped to produce a stable understanding among managers and workers along with a marked increase in productivity and a decrease in labor unrest. This managerial syncretism was reflected in employment practices that simultaneously represented a creative adaptation of existing management doctrines and resonated with preexisting notions of fairness, reciprocity, and collective participation held by ordinary workers. Thus, for Sil, what is replicable about Japanese-style management is not its specific set of organizational structures and practices but the broader attempt at syncretizing portable social legacies with borrowed management models.

In chapter seven, Neil Diamant focuses on the dynamics of grassroots syncretism in the story of China’s 1950 Marriage Law. In this case, largely illiterate peasants reinterpreted and used the new law on the basis of preexisting norms and interests embedded in tight-knit patriarchal rural communities. In contrast to previous studies that view the marriage law as a failure among the unsophisticated rural masses, Diamant argues that peasants were more strategic than full-fledged urbanites in creatively using the law’s liberal provisions in terms of their own preexisting assumptions and interests. Resulting judgments undermined the state’s intention of using the law to abolish feudal marriage practices and replace them with modern marriages. Many features of rural life, such as
access to land, community, and sexual practices were subject to syncretic recombination with some of the modernist premises underlying the law; and ironically, many modern features of urban life, such as higher education, individualism, and separation from community militated against such a concerted effort to engineer family change.

In chapter eight, Parakh Hoon, drawing on original fieldwork in rural Zambia, traces syncretic transformations of labor pooling institutions from precolonial times into the present era of structural adjustment. His chapter shows a range of syncretic reformulations of what began as festive beer parties, celebratory gatherings akin to U.S. barn-raising, whereby community members pooled scarce labor at crucial times in the agricultural cycle. As the money economy took hold in the mid-twentieth century, labor pooling became partly commodified, with workers being paid more often in cash than beer. In the last decades of the twentieth century, as structural adjustment brought increased income inequality, rich farmers moved to fully commodified wage labor, while the majority poor found themselves more reliant on what remained of the old labor pooling practices, which become a stigmatic marker of marginalization. However, the material need for shared labor at bottleneck moments in the agricultural cycle remained, resulting in new, syncretic labor pooling systems that tap into and reproduce the logic of hosting a “work party,” but now are undertaken by groups of people with common interests, rather than bonds of kinship or identity. The poor, through churches and clubs, rely heavily on these arrangements, while the state, elite farmers, and international aid and environmental organizations have also tried to set up similar labor pooling associations to get work done or promote new farming techniques, with varying degrees of success. Hoon’s contribution nicely integrates both subaltern and elite efforts to syncretically recraft and deploy new institutional forms in ways that tap into historical patterns of legitimation and social mobilization.

In chapter nine, Cheng Chen explores why, in spite of a host of common institutional legacies, some post-Leninist regimes have made more progress toward liberal democracy than others. Drawing upon a comparative study of Hungary and Romania, Chen’s answer focuses on how the core institutions of Leninism, originally constructed in the USSR, and imposed in standard fashion across Eastern Europe under Stalin, ultimately evolved along different pathways in different social settings. In Romania, Leninist institutions were modified in a syncretic manner; the original Soviet model of Leninist development was incrementally modified, but at the same time, preexisting institutions and symbols were adapted to support an original Leninist formula that was rigorously and consistently implemented over a period of several decades. By contrast, in Hungary, Leninist symbols and practices came to be thinly layered over preexisting formal and informal institutions, taking full advantage of the latitude afforded by Khrushchev’s “many roads to socialism.” Ironically, the syncretic adaptation of Leninist institutions in Romania made the extrication from Leninism far more difficult and generated ambivalent responses from both elites and masses to liberal institutions. The extrication from Leninism was easier in Hungary, where the removal of a layer of Leninist symbols and practices revealed a pre-Leninist economy and society that had been more open to liberal political and economic institutions. Chen’s argument thus draws attention to the possibility that the successful syncretization of one set of institutions can have the unintended consequence of impeding the adaptation of a new set of institutions in the future.

Finally, in chapter ten, Christine Kearney examines the role of syncretism in the emergence of the 1964–67 anti-inflation policy reforms that preceded the Brazilian economic miracle of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Conventional wisdom treats these policies as radically monetarist and IMF-inspired, a kind of preview of the neoliberalism to come in later decades. Kearney’s careful historical reading of the reform plans shows how this is an oversimplification that misses the creative adaptation behind the plan. While the 1964–67 plans called for sudden reductions in inflation and wages, the government allowed these targets to slip. It did so because designers of the plan were deliberately trying to come up with a Brazilian solution to inflation that would balance external demands for money supply control with a strong belief among Brazilian elites that the state must aggressively pursue industrial growth as a means to address Brazil’s perceived historic backwardness. Kearney painstakingly disentangles the economic plan and the discourse surrounding it to show how policy instruments like price indexation (which automatically adjusted certain prices to keep pace with inflation) and the plan’s emphasis on gradual, rather than sudden reform, were the direct results of policymakers’ efforts to creatively balance international economic orthodoxy, the structuralist economic theories dominant in Brazil in the 1960s, and a commitment to progress through industrial growth. Kearney shows how institutional syncretism, as opposed to material interest, international power, or ideas–based approaches, provides explanatory payoff in making sense of the emergence of this crucial set of economic policies in Brazil.

The differences in outcomes evident across the cases examined here suggests that syncretic processes may either help to adapt and legitimize.
new institutional practices or, left unfinished, may unintentionally widen the gap in the expectations and understandings of different groups of actors. In some instances, as in the case of the truncation of the Senegalese Rural Councils, the prewar Japanese firm, or China’s 1950 Marriage Law, while generic mixtures of old and new, or alien and local, circulated, these did not lead to the evolution of a stable normative consensus between elites and less powerful actors in terms of appropriate standards of behavior in a given institutional context. On the other hand, as in the case of the Chinese PLA, the postwar Japanese enterprise, the Peronist party in Argentina, and some Zambian labor arrangements, we find an emergent syncretism that more effectively fused the functionality and scope of modern institutions with the legitimacy and authenticity that local actors associate with long-established and more familiar norms, practices, and social relationships.

Moreover, the emergence of syncratic institutional forms in one environment does not necessarily suggest that coherence, legitimacy, or performance will remain high in the long term. Thus, while the Japanese firm did prove to be a successful model of labor peace and productivity in postwar Japan’s drive for catch-up development, it did not have the flexibility to immediately adapt to the changing requirements of the post-cold war global economy. Similarly, although Romania was more successful than Hungary in engineering the syncretic adaptation of Leninism, this also locked Romania into an institutional framework that made the adoption of liberal reforms more problematic after the fall of Leninism. And, China’s push to become a regional or global power means that the PLA has had to move away from its long-standing strategy of embedding military practices in local socioeconomic relations. These cases suggest that the concept of institutional syncretism must ultimately be treated in a context-sensitive manner, both in regard to examining arguments about how particular institutional models are initially adapted in a given environment, and how emergent syncratic models might or might not prove effective in achieving different types of objectives in changing domestic and international environments.

However, despite these different outcomes, the chapters collectively serve to underscore the significance of syncretism as an integral aspect of any theoretical framework that purports to provide a sophisticated mapping of the processes through which institutions borrowed or imposed from elsewhere are adapted in varied local circumstances. The authors challenge the tendency to equate institutional development with evolutionary paths of convergence upon some universal “end of history” (Fukuyama 1992), and they draw inspiration from the growing attention
to diverse historical pathways and modes of institutional change in pursuing open-ended investigations into the particular sources, dynamics, and implications of institutional design in specific contexts. But the chapters are not intended to simply demonstrate that historical inheritances and local conditions pose an obstacle or counterweight to the uniform reproduction of institutional models and practices across developing societies. Rather, the authors collectively reveal how distinctive historical legacies, specific constellations of material and ideal interests, and particular processes of agency in a given locale, all contribute to a dynamic process of interpretation, legitimation, transformation and, sometimes, failure, of imposed or imported institutional models.

The common focus on the extent and implications of syncratic change means that all of the chapters, in spite of their different institutional and regional foci, systematically pay attention to the diverse strategies through which actors redeploy particular combinations of interests, norms, memories, and social knowledge within preexisting local institutions while trying to make sense of and creatively reconfigure newly imported or imposed institutions. In the process, the chapters reveal how the coherence, legitimacy, and long-term viability of a given institution can be profoundly affected by the affinities or discrepancies between the formal rules, procedures, and organizational routines embraced by institutional elites, on the one hand, and the resilient constellations of interests, norms, memories, and social practices reproduced in informal relations among local institutional actors, on the other.

References

The Dilemma of Institutional Adaptation


Dennis Galvan and Rudra Sil


