Workshop: Path Dependency and Process Tracing in the Social Sciences

3rd term 2018-2019

Organised by Stefano Bartolini and Anton Hemerijck

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Description
Path-dependence theory was originally developed by economists to explain technology adoption processes and industry evolution. Subsequently, the concept of path-dependence and the associated methodology of process tracing have spread throughout the social sciences, especially with respective qualitative comparative historical analysis with its emphasis on the timing and sequencing of events and interventions in ongoing change processes. Path-dependency analysis may be seen as a conceptual reformulation of traditional research concerns or as innovative perspective for the study of the staying power of past legacies and their critical impact on over-time developments. As a methodology, process-tracing assumes more rigour than traditional developmental and historical studies, with a strong focus on contextualization, which more variable-oriented approaches in statistical social science analysis commonly lacks.

This workshop’s primary goal is to critically review the main contributions of this literature in social and political science and the ongoing discussion of how to improve process-tracing methodologies.

Audience
The seminar is devoted to first- and second-year researchers, but everybody is welcome.

Requirements
By choosing to take this class you are taking on the obligation to reading all the materials and writing two ex ante response papers.

The workshop is worth 10 credits.

Schedule
Monday 13 May 10-13 – 14-16
Tuesday 14 May 10-13 – 14-16

Room
Seminar Room 2

Organization of sessions
The two days are organized in four half-day sessions. On Thursday morning we will discuss some of the classical texts on path-dependency in the social sciences. In the afternoon we focus on more recent publications on theorizing mechanisms of actor-centered institutional change. On Friday morning we shift our attention to the merits of methodologies of process-tracing. Friday afternoon concludes with a debate on how best to operationalized process-tracing research in the researcher’s own field of interest. For each of the half-day session, Stefano Bartolini and Anton Hemerijck will jump-start the discussion, beginning
on Thursday morning with the issues of path-dependency in politics (Bartolini) and path-dependency in policy (Hemerijck).

Readings

Class readings on path dependency (by year of publication) for session 1


Additional facultative readings (in alphabetical order)


Readings pertaining to theorizing critical junctures and process-change mechanisms (by year of publication) for session 2


**Readings on process-tracing methodologies (by year of publication) for session 3**


**Additional facultative readings on process-tracing (in alphabetical order)**


**ADDITIONAL WORKSHOP INSTRUCTION**

**PATH-DEPENDENCY AND PROCESS-TRACING**

**Aims:**

- Understanding of political evolution, policy stability and (path-dependent) change
- Critical assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of theories of path-dependence and policy change.
- Critical assessment of associated process-tracing methodologies.
- Thinking through theoretical insights and methodological tools for researchers’ own thesis-topics
- All the above so as to advance the theoretical and methodological foundations for PhD-research and thesis writing.

Your main task in this work-shop is to close-read all the assigned reading prior to the workshop session, write a synopsis of one of the assigned readings, and collectively discuss selected articles and chapters on path-dependent political change and process-tracing methodologies during the workshop. You fulfill the assignment of the workshop by means of *two short 1-to-2 page papers*, one based on a ‘state of the art’ synopsis of the assigned text for the two-day workshop, for group discussion, together with another *1-to-2 page methodological response paper* in which you explicate how you could operationalize a preferred process-tracing method for your own research. The second 1-pager is to inform the class-room discussion on Friday afternoon. In your presentation on the assigned reading you should also be able to articulate what theoretical perspective on path-dependency related to what method of process-tracing best suits your thesis-topic and why.

Given the fact that over twenty participants have been registered for the course, it is difficult logistically to have each participant select a text. We will assign texts to all of you individually, while at the same time making sure that key texts are covered by two researchers.
For the state-of-the-art synopsis of selected texts on path-dependency and process-tracing methodologies, a number of markers (12) seemingly apply to practically all the readings. We as instructors advise you to attend to these markers in your written synopses. Surely, there is overlap between the markers, and if you are able to articulate other critical dimensions, this is good for debate in class and our collective understanding of path-dependent institutions and process-tracing methodologies.

1. Most academic papers, especially theoretically ambitious ones, present their key argument in juxtaposition to (often mainstream) standing theories. For the synopsis it could be relevant (if applicable) to say something about the ‘straw men’ theories under review. This applies equally to the articles on path-dependency and process-tracing. It can be helpful to explicate what the author(s) under review highlight as limits to the existing literature to which their alternative theoretical insights and associated methodologies hold new promise.

2. Most questions of path-dependency stability and change hark back to at least three understandings of key sources of institutional stability, raging from frozen norms (as in sociological institutionalism), frozen contracts (economic institutionalism) and frozen policy legacies and political rules of the game (political institutionalism), and through what kind of mechanisms sources of institutional stability are reproduced over time, leading to institutional lock-in effects. Which of these is relevant to the text at hand?

3. Next, most contemporary perspective on the welfare states, are steeped in what they conceive of as the ‘weight of history’ or path-dependency, harking back to many landmark studies, such as Esping-Andersen on the “three worlds of welfare capitalism” and Hall and Soskice’s “Varieties of Capitalism”. It is quintessential to give due attention to institutional origins of prevailing institutions! Inadvertently, some authors veer towards institutional determinism, whilst others believe that institutional lock-in can be overcome.

4. After a better understanding of institutional origins we want to know more of later or contemporary institutional effects and the extent they are intended by today’s policy makers and whether unintended effects are negative or positive and how policy feedback – especially increasing returns - shapes dynamics of institutional change later on. Institutional effects are often times unintended. To the extent that authors address unintended consequences, they often relate to how institutional origins shape later developments.

5. The political world is very ambiguous with respect to institutions. More than any realm of social life, politics is about both rule-following (status-quo biased) and rule-making (reformist). Related to perceptions of the staying power of welfare programs, authors are therefore likely to have differences of opinion of the discretionary policy space of key actors as (path-dependent) rule followers or institutional rule engineers and reformers, less inhibited by the force of history and institutional status-quo biases. From this follow important differences in understandings of what and who is guaranteeing stability: institutions independently of actors and/or institutional insiders who have a stake in the status quo and are best resourced to defend and upkeep existing institutions. Alternatively, in the case of reform and transformation, the relevant question is whether sources change mature from within existing institutional environments and privileged actor constellations or that breakdown and reform is triggered from without, as in the case of a deep economic crisis, and what these developments do to key political actors.

9. Process-tracing methodologies have progressed in tandem with the rise of ‘strong’ and more ‘contingent’ and ‘adaptive’ theories of path-dependent institutional change. Elementary distinctions between different methodologies of process tracing relate to deductive and inductive uses of
process-tracing methodologies or, similarly, process-tracing as **theory-testing** and **theory-building** variants.

**10.** Process-tracing methodologies focus by and on **small-n** case country-comparison and case experiences. Process-tracing methodologists are apt to defend small-n case comparisons for a variety of reasons, ranging from the need to make detailed qualitative comparisons behind quantifiable observations, to move from correlation and causation, to making the claim that process-tracing methodologies are particularly well-suited to advance theory-development (also for successive large-n studies).

**11.** Some process-tracing methodologists (and sometimes even philosophers of science) have developed process-tracing tests, such as **Hoop and Smoking Gun tests**, to give their causal claims more **hypothetical panache**. The question remains whether such tests really improve on the validity of causal claim on path-dependence and process-tracing.

**12.** Characteristically, process-tracing methodologies are often explicitly **related to existing** – but faltering – institutional **theories** and **methodologies**. This kind of ‘standing on the shoulders’ of previous research stand out, also for theories of path-dependency, making the research exercise a cumulative and **collective undertaking**.

GOOD LUCK WITH READING ARTICLES AND SYNTHESIZING SYNOPSES FOR ALL OF US!

*Last updated 16.04.2019*