

# What is Political about Political Economy: A Rejoinder to the Fuchs-Winseck Debate

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This paper uses the Winseck-Fuchs debate as a case study in assessing how value preferences shape definitions, predicate logic, and axiomatic reasoning, and in turn influence the analysis of institutions. The study identifies and contrasts the explanatory power behind different modes of institutional analysis often applied in the study of communication in advanced capitalist societies. Thereafter the study attends to how these modes account for capacity, frame collective actions problems, take account of trade-offs and coalition building, as well as describe behaviour of and within institutions. In the second half of the paper, the study uses critical political economic methodologies to examine the ideological coloring of these modes. The study highlights features often overlooked in reductive treatments of states and corporate conglomeration and seeks to supplement them with a more sensitive political economic analysis. In this respect, the researchers think there is much scope for communication researchers to contribute to the general analysis of the advantages and problems of political assessment of governance as it relates to the media more broadly.

**Keywords:** Institutional analysis, political economy, media conglomerations, Dwayne Winseck, Christian Fuchs

The Winseck-Fuchs debate provides a useful means by which to assess how value preferences shape definitions, predicate logic, and axiomatic reasoning, and in turn influence the analysis of institutions. This debate consisted of letters exchanged between political economists of communication Dwayne Winseck and Christian Fuchs after the two met at the 2011 International Association for Communication and Media Researchers annual conference. Fuchs had previously contributed a chapter to a collection edited by Dwayne Winseck and Dal Yong Jin (Winseck and Jin 2011), and disputes the ideas raised by Winseck in that collection. The aforementioned letters were collected, edited and published in *TripleC*, a journal Fuchs edits (see Fuchs and Winseck, 2011).

While Fuchs and Winseck agree on much, there are substantive disagreements, particularly on the status of Marxism in the political economy of communication research. Whereas Fuchs argues that its broad explanatory theory makes it appealing as a meta-framework, Winseck places it on par with several other kinds of approaches. This parity is predicated upon a critique of Marxist political economy's conceptual resources and research practice. As an alternative, Winseck offers what he terms the "political economies of media," by which he means a plural methodological approach to study large revenue "network media industries" and conglomerations (Winseck, 2011.)

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After presenting a delineated analytical account of this this debate, we move outside of communication studies and away from Winseck's 'political economies' approaches to review three institutionally predicated analyses that seek to understand resource distribution and allocation in advanced capitalism. These are Rational Choice Institutionalism, Historical Institutionalism, and Network Institutionalism.<sup>1</sup> Given the extent to which firms are part of (and set) global governance (Hall and Biersteker 2002), we think there can be utility in subjecting them to an institutional analysis (cfKanter 2012). We do this in an effort to understand the degree and areas in which ideological presuppositions inherent to these approaches influence or 'color' their findings. By more precisely delineating each approach's value preferences as applied to definitions, predicate logic, and axiomatic reasoning, our critique reveals their explanatory strengths and methodological shortfalls. This has consequences for the aforementioned debate regarding the study of media institutions for without an active awareness of these methodological assumptions of the different approaches to institutional analysis, an ideological 'color blindness' can plausibly presenting as an oversight or neglect of particular social forces, thereby weakening the study of collective actions problems, trade-offs and coalition building, as well as describing state-market interactions.

### The Winseck-Fuchs Debate

Barry Weingast and Donald Wittman's basic definition of political economy is "the methodology of economics applied to the analysis of political behaviour and institutions" (2006, 1.) As editors for the Oxford Handbook on Political Economy, it is fair to say that this definition is generally representative of American Political Economic analysis. Unfortunately this conception does give credence to the common criticism that the methodology is reductive (Kellner 1995, Kline 2003), or to use Dwayne Winseck's turn of art, "political economy comes in one flavor" (2011, 3).

At least with respect to political economy of communication research, Winseck seeks to push back against this narrow conception. This is because, for him, there is a paradox of communication in capitalism. While "essential to capitalist economies," the production and circulation of media commodities "don't conform to the standards of normal economics...[companies] produce immaterial things, from immaterial labour, for uncertain markets, fickle tastes" (Fuchs and Winseck, 2011, 249.) "Communications goods," he writes are "not like 'normal commodities' and that this has enormous implications for how markets are structured and work" (Fuchs and Winseck, 2011, 255.) Subsequently, the study of these commodities is best conducted via a detailed analysis of global media conglomerates as they pursue their interests via various "strategies, capital investment, ownership, technologies, uses, alliances, rights regimes," all the while residing within the "social ecology of information" (see Winseck, 2011, 3.)

This task requires drawing upon diverse theoretical and methodological approaches including neoclassical economics. Uniting this diversity is that:

"All approaches to the political economy of media take it as axiomatic that the media industries—the structure of the markets they operate in, their patterns of ownership, the strategies of key players, trajectory of development, and so on—are important objects of analysis." (Winseck, 2011, 11)

For Winseck, one reason for this eclectic pluralism is that Marxism, which has dominated the political economy of communication, is "disconnected from reality and empirical analysis" (Fuchs and Winseck, 2011, 255.) Marxists, he says, "have spent more

time denouncing markets and commercialization than studying how they actually work, are structured, change over time, etc” (Fuchs and Winseck, 2011, 259.) Consequently, he accuses Marxists of pretending to undertake political economic analysis, and at their best are not well-positioned to provide a useful understanding of the paradox of communication in capitalism. At worst, it perpetuates harmful ignorance which, by inference, is detrimental to activism or intervention.

Marxist analysis is so weak because, Winseck argues, it is beholden to the concept of ideology which is simplistic and has low explanatory utility. For example, he thinks that canonical Marxist communication scholars have merely advocated that “those who own the means of production also own the means of mental production” (Fuchs and Winseck, 2011, 252.) This assessment also props up his dismissal of the concept of totality. Winseck writes: “The fragmentation of societies, social institutions, individual life trajectories/ biographies, etc. is key to understanding the complexity and instability that not only defines capitalism but the texture, fabric, structure and feel of our everyday lives” (Fuchs and Winseck, 2011, 255.) There is additional concern that a focus on totality necessarily superimposes the researcher’s values onto objects of research thereby providing a distorted account of the social relations thereunto.

As an alternative to ideological critique Winseck advocates for a focus on persons and practices, emphasising “the dialectic between exploitation and joy” is superior to a dialectic of “consciousness and ideology.” Moreover, a focus on ideological effects is a distraction from analysing economic realities. Supposedly, it is better to examine the role of firms and how they use infrastructure to coordinate their efforts within an economy. These tenets motivate him to instead examine how ideas circulate, especially with “specialized, elite knowledge” with access to particular “channels of communication” (Fuchs and Winseck, 2011, 258.) One of Winseck’s axioms is that “vast flows of capital investment into media doesn’t involve ideology but rather ‘fast circuits’ of data and knowledge production” that include analysts, standards and rating agencies (Fuchs and Winseck, 2011, 258.) This examines the

“interplay between top-down macro-level, deductive approaches that aim to synthesize complexity into a portrait of the social totality based on propositions versus a bottom-up examination of what Boltanski (2011) calls ‘situations’, or ‘contexts of action’, where emergent properties and how people actually think, act and so on arises out of empirical observation.” (Fuchs and Winseck 2011, 259)

This desire for pluralism is because Marxist analysis apparently sees everything subordinated by and rendered to capitalism. This brings us to the crux of Winseck’s line of argument, where multiple economies exist to produce things that are not offered to the market; the presumption of capital logic everywhere makes one blind to these joys, and well as the various kinds of harms caused by Capital.

Taking umbrage with these positions, Fuchs holds that a radical critique of capitalism organizes the study of ideology, capital accumulation, and business development with totality and class analysis serving as vital components in this study. For example, from the vantage of totality, the awareness of positive potentials in capitalist communication media do not outweigh the negative aspects. This is apparent when a class analysis attends to the distribution of resources, goods, and gains in wealth (Piketty 2014, Wright 2015.) He also cautions that joy cloaks exploitation insofar that Capital seeks out forms of joy to commodify and advance accumulation efforts. Gamification of the labour process would be an example of this point (see Dewinter&Kocurek 2014.)

Invoking Terry Eagleton's conception of ideology (1991), Fuch argues that is necessary component of political economic analysis:

"This is a topic that not only concerns capital as base of capitalism, because ideologies are sturdily anchored in the capitalist economy, but also because they concern the economy's and the political system's interaction with culture and the world of ideas. So ideology is a crucial topic of analysis for avoiding crude economic reductionism...Why should ideology be less important than capital accumulation when we study the media?" (Fuchs and Winseck, 2011, 256)

For Fuchs, "Ideology critique tries to show differences between essence and existence and between claims about reality and reality itself" (Fuchs and Winseck, 2011, 262.) So ideological critique can test literal truth claims, showing corporate deceptions and the general harms to human well-being.

Replying to Winseck's conception of 'elite knowledge' and myth, Fuchs says this "is exactly part of the domain of ideology" (Fuchs and Winseck, 2011, 262,) suggesting Winseck is already advocating and undertaking a partial assessment of ideology. This analysis is only partial because it is not guided by a larger body of theory that can account for how ideology sits in relation to capital accumulation, or how a particular ideology hegemonic success is not guaranteed, but contingent precisely because the presence of agency means it is a site of struggle.

As indicated, the main disagreement between Fuchs and Winseck is over the place of Marxism in political economic analysis. Whereas Winseck argues that it is but one approach among many, Fuchs contends that it provides an important meta-framework to guide the investigations and organize the findings of the other approaches. "Capitalism is a system characterized," he writes,

by the dialectical unity of diversity in its political economy. It has at the same time a unified political economy and diverse political economies; it is at the same time capitalism and many capitalisms. Capitalism is today at the same time to various degrees finance capitalism, hyperindustrial capitalism, crisis capitalism, new imperialistic capitalism, media/informational/communicative capitalism, capitalist patriarchy, a racist mode of production, etc. The danger for analyses of media, information, culture and communication in capitalism today is to overstate the relevance of specific phenomena of informational capitalism and to neglect the other capitalisms as contexts of informational capitalism and the interaction of these dimensions. (Fuchs and Winseck, 2011, 265)

Furthermore, "critical philosophy and social theory" he proposes, "allow research to be contextualized in a broader context." As it applies to communication research, Fuchs calls for a programmatic synthesis of several lines of inquiry. These are:

(i) capital accumulation organizations; (ii) advertising institutions, (iii) ideology producers and disseminators, and a connection to (iv) alternative media, their potentials and limits, (v) political struggles and their relations to the media; (vi) media and their use in the context of domination and liberation.<sup>2</sup>(Fuchs and Winseck, 2011, 252)

This agenda calls for communication research to become more Marxist, not less. This subsequently led Fuchs, with Vincent Mosco, to organize a conference, and edit a special issue around the theme, "Marx is back" (Fuchs & Mosco, 2012.)

## **Approaches to Institutional Analysis**

Now that Winseck's and Fuchs' positions have been tabled we turn and examine the claim that institutional analysis writ large is generally able to deliver on the goals that Winseck claims, while also assessing the degree to which these approaches do or do not give attention to the very items Fuchs is concerned about. To make that assessment, we undertake a decompositional conceptual analysis of various institutional approaches. Once we have outlined these approaches and assess their political quotient we will offer a rejoinder to the debate.

### **Rational Choice Institutionalism**

American political scholars abandoned formal and legalist approaches between the 1950s and the 1970s in favor of the grand theorization and comparative analysis promised by quantitative social science. According to Theda Skocpol, this reorientation favoured "society-centered ways of explaining politics and governmental activities" over socio-cultural factors which had ignored how the accrual of realist political calculations shaped institutions (1985, 4.) Of the methods of examining institutions which emerged from this re-orientation, rational-choice theories using rational self-optimization as a behavioral heuristic to explain interactions within both formal and informal institutions are the most well established. This establishment coincides with Chicago School Economics supplanting Keynesianism in the 1970s, and the incorporation of these ideas into political science via the work of Kenneth Arrow, Mancur Olson, and Gary Becker (Fleury, 2012.)

Subsequently, rational-choice institutionalism has served as the canonical approach in the study of institutions due in part to its attempt at providing an objective, scientifically rigorous method. This approach is necessarily narrow, restricting itself to the presumption of rationality under the auspices of political impartiality. While the degree to which strict rationality can be presumed has been a source for much criticism of rational-choice institutionalism, such critiques poorly reflect the contemporary perspective. Slavish adherence to assumptions of perfect rationality has given way to the acceptance of bounded rationality, the optimization of preferences within the limited capacities of the individual or institution to achieve near optimal results (Giocoli 2003, Hands, 2014.) This less rigid rational actor assumption broadens the explanatory power of rational-choice institutionalism, and provides deeper insights into the workings within heretofore less critically analyzed informal institutions.

The chief historic strength of rational-choice institutionalism has been in its ability to examine formal institutions by breaking them down into component parts. This creates a game-theoretical model containing a defined set of actors with identified preferences and behavioral strategies, operating within a formal set of rules with established outcomes and sequences of actions to serve as a heuristic for formal institutional outcomes (see Cherrier 2010.) Refusing to take as axiomatic Marxist sociological assumptions that individuals will participate in informal collective action by virtue of a common interest, these rational choice models have likewise been applied to informal institutions to account for the free rider problem. To address this apparent contradiction of collective political action, rational-choice institutionalism suggests that some actors are incentivised towards participation beyond only the collective interest, enjoying member-only social and material benefits (Olson, 1965), or in the form of 'political entrepreneurs' who envision a potential for future personal benefit predicated on their present sacrifice (Wagner, 1966).

With regards to the origins of political institutions, rational-choice theory concerns itself less with how institutions came about than how they shape human behavior. While recognizing that institutions which are imposed as an exogenous constraint on society may differ in form from an institution which emerges as a reflection of societal preferences, these differences matter less as time goes on as bargaining will gradually pull institutions towards the median preferences of stakeholders. This historical trend towards an equilibrium point means that institutional rules achieve a pareto-optimal balance of institutional constraints, with small variations bounded by shifts in power and actor interests.

Many criticisms of rational-choice institutionalism are largely self-imposed, as the desire to hold true to a strictly analytical analysis precludes a deeper treatment of the social or environmental conditions present in other forms of institutional analysis. Often found to be ahistorical, transitions within the rational-choice framework to 'analytical narratives' provide an attempt to bridge this divide through "the use of analytical models—a spatial representation, a game form, an optimization set-up—as a framework in which to embed the case." (Shepsle, 2006, 34). Succinctly put, analytical narratives are an attempt to bridge the somewhat self imposed divide between rational-choice institutionalism and its frequent counterpart: historical institutionalism.

### Historical Institutionalism

It is difficult to assess historical institutionalism without a comparison to its frequent co-traveller, rational choice. Both were responses to the social, economic, and intellectual crisis that touched Western Society in the early 1970s, a confluence of events lead to a legitimization crisis, creating a distinct culture that moulded historical institutionalism. Intellectually, the realization that Parsonian structural functionalism presumed social equilibrium of institutions did not match reality, other recently collected empirical data suggested Robert Dahl and other pluralists had misconstrued the nature of power in American life, whilst simultaneously Chomsky's devastating critique of Skinner weakened the behavioural grip on the research imagination of political science. Altogether, these methodologies offered limited understanding of social changes occurring in the 1960s and 1970s.

Instead, a faction of political scientists turned to history to understand institutional structures because this direction was deemed "obvious and noncontroversial," but this re-emergence came with "more analytical, epistemological characteristics" (Sanders, 2006, 40.) Historical institutionalists' main qualifications were that states develop over time, maintain a path dependency until circumstances or social pressure create a new institutional order. This attention to the tension between structure and agency, continuity and change meant that it is best to study institutions in light of their long causal antecedents. It also meant not treating the state as a black box that efficiently processed social demands into policy, but rather looking at the contention over and in institutions and entrenched interests.

The core methodological goal is to "search for agents of institutional maintenance and change" (Sanders, 2006, 40) and examine "critical junctures" and "policy feedbacks" (Thelen, 1999, 371). To do so, historical institutionalism generally adopts the methods and maxims of comparative historical sociology and applies them to institutional cases (cf Tilly's methodological writings.) This approach examines whether institutional actions and decisions were appropriate given the available information at the time, an assessment that demonstrates how and why the deliberate skewing and insertion of interests into decision-making occurs, and, complex as they may be assess these arguments against the conditions of the era.

Another important aspect to study is the impact of the state on politics where competition for authority between the state and other institutions, such as markets and civil society, is a proxy for a struggle over the production of and control for social life. This makes simplistic models of domination and resistance inadequate for understanding contention. Rather, as Skocpol (1985) contends, the focus should be on the rationale for state promotion of economic development and redistribution, determinates of state capacities, all the while holding on to the view that states are not unitary organizations, and rest within historical circumstances. She notes that one cannot disassociate that the state evolved into a competitive, turbulent, and historically fluid geopolitical system that includes patterns of trade, investment flows, and international finance. As Skocpol writes “States necessarily stand at the intersections between domestic sociopolitical orders and transnational relations within which they must maneuver for survival and advantage in relation to other states:” (1985, 8). So a state’s system of rule has an extra-national dimension while attempting to maintain a domestic order.

There are other differences between rational choice and historical institutionalism. Whereas rational choice uses econometric modeling tools to focus on the preferences of utility seeking individuals in micro events bound by institutional constraints, this kind of rationality can be contrasted to the empiricism of historical institutional which adopts a larger scope and examines the “construction, maintenance, and adaptation of institutions” (Sanders, 2006, 42) in relation to human goals, collective action, and (un)intended outcomes. Whereas rational choice attends to preferences, historical institutionalism researchers construe ideas as relational, and encumbered by normative priors. Moreover, as Sanders describes, “ideas serve as mobilizing forces for collective action by social groups that want to create or change institutions; and for institutional actors themselves” (2006, 42.) These ideas bond interests together, and help to evaluate their goals and policy prescriptions (see Thelen, 1999, Bannerman and Haggart 2014,) which itself entails evaluative and normative questions.

Critical of the narrow focus on the origins of political institutions and how their structures limit the parameters of political choice within historical institutionalisms, a somewhat distinct constructivist institutionalism has emerged to address these perceived methodological shortcomings. Constructivists allege that a ‘path-dependent’ view of institutions inadequately addresses the importance of post-formative institutional change. The constructivist approach then, is the study of ‘path-shaping’ events, such as the aforementioned critical junctures, seeking to understand in greater detail how institutions differentiate between periods of normal and exceptional policy-making. While an emergent approach, the extent to which this represents a distinct form of institutional analysis is contingent upon the degree to which historical institutionalism is interpreted as narrowly restricted to antecedent historical conditions or more broadly applied to include the study of ‘path-shaping’ events.<sup>3</sup>

Still, the prime insights from historical institutionalism literature broadly construed is that state politics tend to be informal and conducted away from the eyes of citizens, and that within this politics, plural kinds of connections, associations and exchanges fuel state decision making particularly at critical junctures. Furthermore, the state is not a monolithic enterprise—different agencies may advance different practices and pursue different visions of the state. This approach opens space for analyses of the production of differentials in state functioning and public authority, reasons for or against economic appropriation or redistribution, and how state actions stoke or reduce contention and conflict.

## Network Institutionalism

While network analysis developed in the interwar years, only towards the end of the 20th century when increased computational capacity was combined with the intellectual tools developed by physicists did the approach take form (Freeman 2014.) Initially the combination of networks and institutions may seem counter-intuitive, for institutions are often seen as formal and distinct, whereas networks are informal and disparate. But such a rooted understanding of institutions is precisely what network approaches wish to correct. As Castells proposes, “power relationships are the foundation of society, as institutions and norms are constructed to fulfill the interests and values of those in power” (2011, 773) while “network society [is] the social structure of our time” (2011, 774.) Part of the effort to reveal the power relationships that prop up the institutions in this kind of social structure involves demonstrating that networks can be stable and recurring: As Ansell (2006) writes, “a network can be thought of as an institution to the extent that it represents a stable or recurrent pattern of behavioral interaction or exchange between individuals or organizations.” These are enduring relationships that account for the appearance of formal and distinct characteristics.

Presently there is no definitive network paradigm. Rather there are “overlapping discussions in political science, organization theory, public administration, and economic sociology” that share a belief that “networks [act] as critical mediating variables that affect the distribution of power, the construction of interests and identities, and the dynamics of interaction” (Ansell 2006, 75.) While the network is a metaphor and method for the understanding of relationships, there are roughly four key principles (cf Freeman, 2004.) The first is that relationships between social, political, and economic actions are the basic unit of explanation, “not reducible to individual attributes” (Ansell 2006, 76.) Second, these relationships form a complex interdependency with many “overlapping and cross-cutting” linkages. So networks are not assumed to be neat. Third, networks offer resources for (and constraints on) behaviour. Fourth, networks as kinds of organization and administration variegate “access to resources, information, and support” (Ansell 2006, 76.)

This kind of approach is said to be amenable to the study of institutions because it attempts to systematically and precisely trace how “power and influence work through channels of personal connections” (Ansell 2006, 76.) It is also said to overcome the stale structure-agency debate. In this regard, the approach posits “that individual behavior must be understood contextually, but rejects the assumption of unitary groups” (Ansell 2006, 76.)

In practice Network Institutionalism, in an effort to avoid the reification of groups, can resemble structuralism insofar that it treats networks as objects, inadvertently reifying them (cf Ohanian 2012.) Interrelated is inattention to the cultural or interpretive elements of relationships. Furthermore, there is the extent to which network heuristics are “innocent of power effects,” meaning that the method focuses “social critique on the problem of exclusion to the neglect of processes of exploitation” (Prey, 2012, 270.) Together, these weaknesses mean that the analysis has difficulty accounting for agency and meaning, regulated dispossession and power in turn overlooking variegated class struggle. This raises a second related criticism, that network analysis, at least as it is practiced by social scientists, is more descriptive and explanatory, and “less useful for deriving testable causal arguments” (Ansell 2006, 85,) to which network advocates reply that “a good description is the necessary foundation of a good explanation” (Ansell 2006, 85.) Still, as Chomsky is fond of saying, “incline planes tell you something about the rate of fall, but if you take a look at Newton’s laws, they don’t say anything about incline planes” (in Katz 2012, 1.)

## **What is Political about Institutional Analysis?**

While aspiring to comparative quantification and grand theorization, uniting these theoretical orientations was, ironically, a parochial behaviourist account of administrative action (see Lecours 2005.) But, the weakness of excessively analysing local behaviour is that it does not appreciate the extent to which institutions follow a particular logic that is not tied to any specific location (cf Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol, 1985.) So the half-hearted attempt to understand material dynamics is a limitation that require redress.

While there is much to admire in rational institutionalism, the crucial oversight is that social interactions are assessed in relation to the market while conceding little to how specific social relations may influence the market itself. Economic culture, for example, is explained away as but local contouring of a prevailing rational system. Rational institutionalism claims that the market is social, but tends to account for all that is social as kinds of extended economic exchanges, treating all social interactions as transactions rather than different social forms. Having set all relations to the market metronome, the market is presented as an omnipresent system of distributing goods, rewards, and privileges. In other words, rational institutionalism does not provide adequate, nor even acknowledge the need to provide, space for other kinds of social motivations. But this presumption is unwarranted, rational institutionalists make the mistake of presuming what ought to be proven, and a case must be made for relating things to the market rather than the reverse. For instance, human preferences are malleable and sit in relation to the social formation of the person.

These oversights exist because of the basic presumptions built into institutional analysis. While institutional analysis say that markets are housed in political and legal institutions which themselves evolve in history, they disproportionately over emphasis the role played by political and legal institutions, presuming them to be important factors in determining long term growth, allocation of resources, economic development, as well as shaping of the means of production. For example, consider Douglas North:

I wish to assert a fundamental role for institutions in societies: they are underlying determinants of long-run performances of economies – Third World countries are poor because of the institutional constraint define a set of pay-offs to political/economic activity that do not encourage productive activity. (North 1990, 107)

The same logic can be found in the attempt to understand early capitalist institutions and politics. However, it would be extremely difficult to do so without the specific practices and history of industrialism in Europe. If not, one assumes a ‘propensity to trade, truck, and barter,’ means that capitalism is a natural progression on earlier economic systems, but with added technological advances and political innovations reducing barriers to trade, and thus an advancement in terms of geographic scope and complexity. In this line of thought Capital is understood to be historically relatively spontaneous that follows institutional reorganization which remove political and technological barriers. This is the capitalism-as-commercialism model.

These views are mistaken because they put the cart before the horse. Institutions do not create a reliable framework for economic development and the improvement in the means of production, rather, it is other way around: Improvements in productive capacities allows for institutional change. Put otherwise, the mode of production delimits the institution. The point is that to understand economic development, one cannot study the relationship between economic growth and institution in isolation. Rather one must be attentive to things like history, culture of exchange, knowledge, technological developments, and specific economic activities. So to a large extent, institutional analysis is myopic

because by quibbling over the suitability of comparing diachronic data it loses sight of the big structures”, “large processes”, and “huge comparisons” to borrow Charles Tilly’s phrases (1984.)

Ironically, this presents a challenge for rational institutionalists. If exchange and markets automatically sow the seeds for capitalism, then there is no need to investigate the history of market societies. Nor is there any need to show that the market society is a particular kind of society; the presumption removes historical difference and variation. In this kind of history, nothing changes.

But history does matter, and the inevitability of the market society cannot be presumed; its outcome was contingent upon deep the assemblage of choices that presented themselves at certain places and at certain times. To this extent, institutionalism underplay that all institutions have a *social* quotient; the economy comprises of and is a result of social relations. But this kind of rendering is not extended to the market itself. While ideology, culture, power, attitudes, human nature in the form of greed, self-interest, security, even reason itself are all pointed to bear the mark of capitalism. The main point is that institutions are a product of history (and historical contingencies), and are the secondary effects of economic activity.

## **A Rejoinder to the Winseck-Fuchs Debate**

By contrast to the aforementioned institutional approaches, a Marxist political economy offers a wider horizon by attending to Capital’s complex modes of accumulation, circulation, and allocation. This makes geopolitical economic policy generally intelligible presenting specific targets and sites for contention. Ironically, the downside is that while seeking to open space for political contest, it presents a history of politics without the politics. Absent are discussions of options, circumstances, choices, alternatives, trade-offs, politics is rendered epiphenomenal and the state is presumed captured by a dominant class. In other words it is not sufficiently empirical or rigorous in ways that can persuade those not wedded to similar first principles. For example, by glossing over how a neo-liberal state, as a generic category, genuinely differs from other state types, the approach does not present a sophisticated theory of the state. These kinds of questions are crucial to answer if one is to comprehend the politics within, in, of, for, and against institutions. So doing neglects a discussion of how governance and political practice attend to competitive interests, whether various policy prescriptions were appropriate given the circumstances, or what hindered ideal implementation. Instead there is much naming, blaming, and shaming for consequences of policy. But blame requires good grounds to make counterfactual claims about what other avenues were actually politically feasible. On this dimension Winseck is correct in his assessment of selected aspects of Marxist political economy of communications research.

We agree with Winseck is that one must take care not to reify neo-liberalism as a simple cohesive ideology. While the concept works well as a general descriptor, it offers little precise explanatory power because there is little agreement as to the boundary of the concept. Where possible, it is better to drop into the complexities of institutional formation and reasons for actions. As an example of this kind of analysis consider the work of Jamie Peck (2010.) He proposes an analysis of neo-liberalism as a set of relations between interacting forms. His varicose and multifaceted rendering of neoliberalism points to the possibility that we should talk about the neoliberal modalities which pay close attention to the logic which spawns diverse constructions. As a construction, this delimited version acknowledges agents who nevertheless work within the social structure of capitalism.

Still, there is value in acknowledging that there are common presumptions motivating the specific kinds of reasons for actions that institutions rely upon to make

decisions. In this respect Fuchs is correct, but it is equally important to prove how these presumptions shape particular sets of actions. An alternative approach would be to have a thorough discussion of the politics of regulation, but this is one item missing from Winseck's conception of the political economies of media. To echo what was said before, absent are discussions of options, circumstances, choices, alternatives, and trade-offs. Somewhat more modest in his ambition, his proposal neither accounts sufficiently for capitalism and ideology on the one hand, nor the politics of industry-state-society actions on the other. In other words, Winseck strives for a more constrained analysis than he asks of Marxist political economic researchers.

By contrast Fuchs is less interested in economic history *per se*, but rather an attempt to trace how modes of accumulation co-articulate with institutional changes, i.e. not a history of prices, but rather how prices come to exist. This makes his approach relatively more sensitive than Winseck to the ever expanding range of commodification of communication goods, and the specific social relations that spring therefrom. Subsequently, this is better able to understand the institutional assisted reproduction of capitalism while maintaining a materialist stance.

Fuchs argues that Winseck misses the larger point about the *political* nature of political economy and the struggle over political development, organization, and the like. We are inclined to agree. This oversight exists because of the basic presumptions built into Winseck's 'political economies of media.' While he grants that conglomerations have a history, he nevertheless over-emphasises the role played by institutions whether they be businesses or bureaucracies. While correctly identifying network media industries as important factors in shaping the allocation of resources and economic development, without reference to considerations such as ideology and class struggle over the means of production this becomes a narrow study of various firms' accumulation strategies. In short, Winseck offers necessary components, but because he misses history, his is an insufficient vision of communication research.

This narrowness is evident when Winseck's refuses to concede that methods shape results despite insisting that ideological priors can shape results. Winseck has put himself in this bind because he has doubled down on the fact value distinction, insisting that front-loading values "risks obscuring too much empirical detail" (Fuchs and Winseck, 2011, 255.) Fuchs, by contrast, correctly argues that values shape facts: That senses are encumbered by prior conceptualizations makes it impossible to have an observation that is value-free. There is no such thing as a non-normative method. All research design includes value-laden choices that impact interpretation. In this respect, Winseck has made a grave error that limits his ability to appreciate ideology and the necessity of ideology critique.

Still, Winseck's downplaying of ideology is odd given he claims to be influenced by Boltanski. In *The New Spirit of Capitalism* Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) argue that Capitalism has an "imperative to unlimited accumulation of capital", which is conducted "formally by peaceful means." These peaceful means are maintained by ideologies, to which persons become committed and which they do the local work to justify.<sup>4</sup> How Winseck reconciles this is unclear, but it does point to a problem where Winseck seems to conceive of ideology as akin to a force with observable behavioural media effects as opposed to a discourse that shapes beliefs and values.

Winseck is certainly not a Marxist theorist. His analysis and research agenda do not include surplus labour, socially necessary labour time, exploitation, or class struggle. And that is certainly his prerogative. Nevertheless he does claim to be informed by Marx. Echoing Pareto's adage that "Marx's words are like bats. One can see in them both birds and mice" (1902, 332), Winseck says,

“We must each have our Marx, so to speak, carefully and judiciously selecting the things from him that we think still apply – expansionary and dynamic tendencies of capitalism, pressures toward consolidation, congenital instability and crisis tendencies, power and class distinctions – while rejecting other elements that we don’t believe work: e.g. base/superstructure model of society, ideology, labour theory of value, etc.” (Fuchs and Winseck, 2011, 260)

Still his beliefs are not that far from the orbit of Analytical Marxism. John Roemer (1985) holds that “Marxian analysis requires micro-foundations” and that these can come from a repurposing of rational choice models; these being “general equilibrium theory, game theory, and the arsenal of modeling techniques developed by neoclassical economics.” (Roemer 1985, 1439) In co-opting these analytical tools Marxism transitions from the abstract to the concrete, using its broad teleological claims to inform and direct an analysis of the participants and practices involved in institutionalized exploitation. Far from an endorsement of their ideological presuppositions, the re-purposed tools of the neoclassical models provide immanent critique to the very persons who produced them, identifying where class struggle occurs within institutions with regard to income disparity, unemployment, and the like.

Were Winseck to move in the direction of Analytical Marxism he would encounter the class analysis of Eric Owen Wright (1989, 1996.) With brevity in mind, Wright refines the concept of exploitation to consider various kinds, types, and means of exploitation, as well as multiple, aspirational and affiliatory positions in a class structure. This variegation is well described by Fuchs when he says that

“Theorizing class as a foundation for understanding knowledge work and “digital labour” on the Internet needs to be attuned to the idea of multiple class positions: the flexibilization, dynamization and pluralization of class positions, and the antagonistic class character of knowledge production/producers themselves.” (Fuchs and Winseck, 2011, 266)

These remarks indicate that Winseck—with very little effort—can increase his explanatory scope by adopting a few principles of analysis from Marxist political economy. A summary list includes pinpointing exploitation and oppression in the accumulation strategies of network media industries and similar kinds of institutions. Overall, however, the biggest dividend would come from analyzing institutions in light of their political nature. That means conceding that Fuchs is correct on almost all of the substantive issues in their debate.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For reasons of focus and constraint we direct our attention to the ways of studying institutions currently found in the North-American tradition. Necessarily these need to be complemented and compared with approaches developed elsewhere.
- <sup>2</sup> We have made minor changes to punctuation to facilitate clarity.
- <sup>3</sup> While still in its infancy, Hay (2006) believes that constructivist institutionalism will distinguish itself as a distinct branch of institutional analysis in the coming years due to its different ontological preferences. We reserve judgement until more work in this field emerges.
- <sup>4</sup> The heuristic offered by Boltanski and Chiapello is concerned with “spirits of capitalism”. Each spirit (i.e. periodization) of capitalism matches a strategic change in the prevailing mode of accumulation, accompanied by a particular kind of ideology. The entrepreneurial spirit began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and lasted until the Great Depression. The second spirit appealed to professionals and lasted until 1968. Growing out of the interwar year, the second spirit bought off the middle class by providing dividends

from wealth and creating the impression that capitalism was fair. Since 1968, the third spirit has appealed to a combined freedom and social responsibility discourse, which has appropriated egalitarian and radical theories and promised to reshape capitalism for the better. As such, it has successfully stalled radicalism and created a false impression that capitalism is humane.

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