

## **THEORETICALLY THINKING AND RETHINKING THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER: THE NEW EMERGING INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS THROUGH NEO- INSTITUTIONALIST LENSES**

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### **Abstract**

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the emergence of various institutionalization processes of new informal institutional spaces (such as BRICS, IBSA, BASIC or P5+1) has been observed internationally, but little has been studied in depth. Accordingly, this paper seeks to rethink, through a theoretical approach standing between Political Science and International Relations, the theoretical concepts of neo-institutionalism in order to make a new critical theoretical-analytical contribution that accounts for the particular characteristics of such phenomena. We believe that it is of interest for the study of international institutions to expand the current field of analysis in order to explain how the emergence of these new institutions occurred and how they interact with already established formal institutions. This article examines two traditional forms of neo-institutionalism (rational choice neo-institutionalism and historical neo-institutionalism), making explicit what the starting points of each are and what elements each can contribute to the study. At the end of the work, a dialogue is held between the perspectives that allow us to establish a theoretical analytical criterion to study these new phenomena.

### **Keywords**

International Institutions, Neo-institutionalism, New Emerging Institutions, International Cooperation, International Organizations

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## **THEORETICALLY THINKING AND RETHINKING THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER: THE NEW EMERGING INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS THROUGH NEO- INSTITUTIONALIST LENSES<sup>1</sup>**

**Mario Guillermo Guerrero<sup>2</sup>**

The literature devoted to the study of international institutions is very prolific (Cox & Jacobson, 1973; Hass, 1964; Keohane & Nye, 1989; Martin & Simmons, 1998). However, the greatest criticism has been the fact that international institutions are understood as synonymous of international organizations and do consider the study of existing informal international institutions that are in constant interaction with formal institutions (Albaret, 2013; Reinalda, 2013; Simmons & Martin, 2002). Much has been discussed about the cases of the United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), but the emergence of new international institutions in the 21st century such as the BRICS<sup>3</sup>, the G20<sup>4</sup> or the P5 + 1<sup>5</sup>, which have diffuse temporal horizons, high levels of informality and flexibility, has been little studied (Albaret, 2013). In historical terms, the particularity of such institutions is that they arise at a time when large armed confrontations that shook the international sphere, such as the world wars did, did not occur. Still, critical events took place which questioned the power of Ikenberry's victorious States (2001). Examples include the attack on the twin towers in 2001, the establishment of large terrorist organizations as important international actors, such as the Islamic State (ISIS) or Al Qaeda, which came to dispute the state-centric dominance of the international arena, or the 2008-2009 economic and financial crisis that exposed the main weaknesses of the economic-financial governance in force (Guerrero, 2017a, 2017b; Patiño Villa, 2012). The informal institutions discussed

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<sup>3</sup> Institutional space composed of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, which emerged in 2001 within the framework of the Goldman Sachs' research programmes but which, over time, was appropriated by the member countries as their own space, organizing their own summits since 2009.

<sup>4</sup> It is a forum created by developing and emerging countries that seek to discuss issues related to international economic-financial cooperation. The member countries are: Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States (the latter known as the G8); together with Argentina, Australia, Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, Turkey, and the European Union.

<sup>5</sup> It is an *ad hoc* dialogue table established in 2006 for the purpose of negotiating the nuclear issue with Iran. It was composed of the five permanent members (China, France, Russia, United Kingdom and United States) with Germany, hence the acronym..



here have not only emerged from outside the existing formal institutional structure, but also their main engineers were emerging or developing countries. This article seeks to present a theoretical approach standing between Political Science and International Relations. We believe that it is of interest for the study of international institutions to expand the current field of analysis through the recovery of the neo-institutionalist tradition in order to explain how the emergence of these new institutions occurred and how they interact with already established formal institutions.

Interrogating ourselves on this point is to ask ourselves why the emerging States seek to build these informal institutions and how they carry out their establishment. To do this, it is necessary to reflect on the potentialities and weaknesses that neo-institutionalism presents as a theoretical tool to address the topic suggested here. This paper seeks to examine two traditional neo-institutionalisms, rational choice neo-institutionalism (from now on, RCN) and historical neo-institutionalism (from now on, HN), making explicit what the starting points of each are and what elements each can contribute to the study. At the end of the article, a dialogue is held between the perspectives that allow us to establish a theoretical analytical criterion to study these new phenomena.

## **I. Stirring in the box of conceptual tools of neo-institutionalisms: strengths and weaknesses**

It is difficult to identify with precision the date when the institutional tradition is born. To determine which was the first work that addressed this theoretical line is very complicated, since it is possible to identify various studies capable of being considered "classical" in the study of institutions. Books such as Plato's "Laws" or Aristotle's famous study of the "Athenian Constitutions" are simple examples of how far one can go in an attempt to identify the roots of this theoretical tradition. According to Rhodes, "[old] institutionalism is one of the main pillars of political science that focuses on the formal rules, procedures and organizations of a system of government. Its methodology has an institutional-descriptive, formal-legal and historical-comparative nature, uses historians' and jurists' techniques, and aims to explain both the relationship between structure and democracy and how rules, procedures and formal organizations determine or not the political behaviour." (1997, p. 65).

However, with the passage of time, the consolidation of Political Science as a scientific discipline aroused among its scholars a growing interest in delimiting with greater precision the theoretical scope of the theoretical perspectives that composed it, thus obliging the successive discipline research to be (or at least seek to be) more precise about what they wanted to study and how they would carry out this study. At this point, the intervention of behaviourism played a very important role, marking a before and an after in the way the standards of scientificity in Political Science were conceived (Sanders, 1997). For this perspective, these criteria went hand in hand with the emphasis on observable behaviour. Political behaviour was defined as "an orientation or point of view that seeks to raise all the phenomena of government in terms of observed and observable behaviour of men" (Immergut, 2006, p.389). That is, the interest was placed in the quest to answer the question of why individuals, institutional actors and nation-states behave as they do. All these criticisms led to attempts to adapt and/or reformulate the old



institutionalism. The new institutionalism was born from these attempts. This perspective seeks to respond to behavioural criticism, while trying to recover the centrality of institutions for the discipline. The first step was the reconceptualization of the concept of institution, understanding it in a broader way. However, the broad sense in which institutions are approached by this perspective is more flexible regarding the old institutionalism, since they are not perceived in the normative sense they were previously understood. It is no longer a matter of studying the ideal institutions, but of understanding the plurality of existing ones and how they affect political behaviour. According to neo-institutionalism, political behaviour cannot be understood outside the institutional framework. The latter not only affects (to a greater or lesser extent) the preferences that guide the actors to act, but also affect the decision-making processes that they carry out. The breadth with which the concept of institution is worked on in the new institutionalism resulted in the emergence of a plurality of research programmes that differ both theoretically and methodologically in the study of institutions, either understanding them as dependent variables (explaining the emergence and change of the institutions) or independent ones (explaining what are the effects both in the political results and in the preferences of the actors that these institutions provoke), according to the interest of the researcher.

### **I.a. Rational Choice Neo-institutionalism (RCN)**

Within the institutionalist tradition, rational choice neo-institutionalism (RCN) is one of the most discussed and used institutionalisms in Political Science (Cook & Levi, 1990). The particularity of this institutionalism is the theoretical debate it has with the neoclassical theory of political economy, mainly with its behaviour theory and efficient markets (North, 1990, North & Weingast, 1989). The idea of this dialogue is to overcome the weakest elements of the perspective by incorporating an institutional theory, which would allow maintaining what North (1990a: p. 112) considers the two most significant conceptual blocks of neoclassical theory (which are scarcity/competition and incentives as driving forces). At the same time, the theory is modified by recognizing the existence of incomplete information, subjective models of reality and institutions. For this, North (1990) proposes an institutional theory based on two pillars: a) a new theory of human behaviour; and b) a theory of transaction costs.

First, North (1990, 1991, 1998) begins by discussing the concept of instrumental rationality inherited from neoclassical theory. By such it is understood that "the actors have correct models to interpret the world that surrounds them; or, that they receive information that allows them to revise and correct their initially incorrect theories." (North, 1998: p. 98). Understanding the rationality of the actors implies that: a) all players can identify without any problem which are the sources of loss in the search for the maximization of their benefits; and b) each has equal access to the decision-making process (North, 1998). Accordingly, given the case of existing actors and organizations that were not able to have an adequate (i.e. rational) interpretation of the market, they would be destined to perish in competitive markets due to their inefficient behaviour (North, 1998).

However, according to North, understanding the rationality of the actors in these terms would be denying the effect produced by both the motivations and the environment on



the actions conducted by the actors. If these two elements are not taken into account, the fact that the actors present particular subjective structures that determine their order of preferences would be denied, the same applying to denying the existence of problems when collecting and processing the necessary information to make an efficient decision in terms of neoclassical theory. It would be tantamount to denying that ideas and ideologies play an important role in the mental structuring of individuals regarding the world and how actors act accordingly (North, 1990).

Thus, North proposes a new behaviour theory that refers to a procedural rationality instead of an instrumental one. The main difference between them is that in the former the actors "learn by doing" (1998). Through learning by doing, actors carry out decision-making processes in contexts of imperfect information (due to the subjective models used, or the impossibility of fully processing information or acquiring all the information), which prevents them from fully maximizing their benefits in a single movement. But as the actors participate in various successive games, they are able to obtain more information about the prevailing rules, which are the most rewarded behaviours (and which are not), who are the various actors who also intervene in the decision-making process of a given situation. In short, what should be done to continue maximizing the benefits (North, 1998).

Secondly, and in a complementary way to the new theory of behaviour developed above, North (1998) starts by considering a political theory based on the notion of transaction costs that is built on three assumptions: a) information is expensive; b) the actors use subjective models to explain their environment; and c) the agreements are only imperfectly fulfilled. Decisions made using such subjective models have high transaction costs and make political markets imperfect. Neoclassical theory starts from the consideration that there is no interference between what an actor needs, his desires and his action. As proposed by Elster (1990), identifying a certain action as rational implies recognizing three operations in it: 1) finding the best option for a certain set of beliefs and desires; 2) creating the best-founded belief set according to the available evidence; 3) Collect the amount of evidence just needed for a certain set of beliefs and desires. However, the transaction costs theory allows us to understand that the relationship between desires, beliefs, evidence, and action is not as harmonious as it was believed. Such a scheme finds its weaknesses in reality facts such as: the non-existence of an action, evidence or unequivocally optimal belief in a particular case; the possibility that people may fail either to implement a certain action, form their beliefs, collect evidence and/or process such evidence (Elster, 1990, North, 1998).

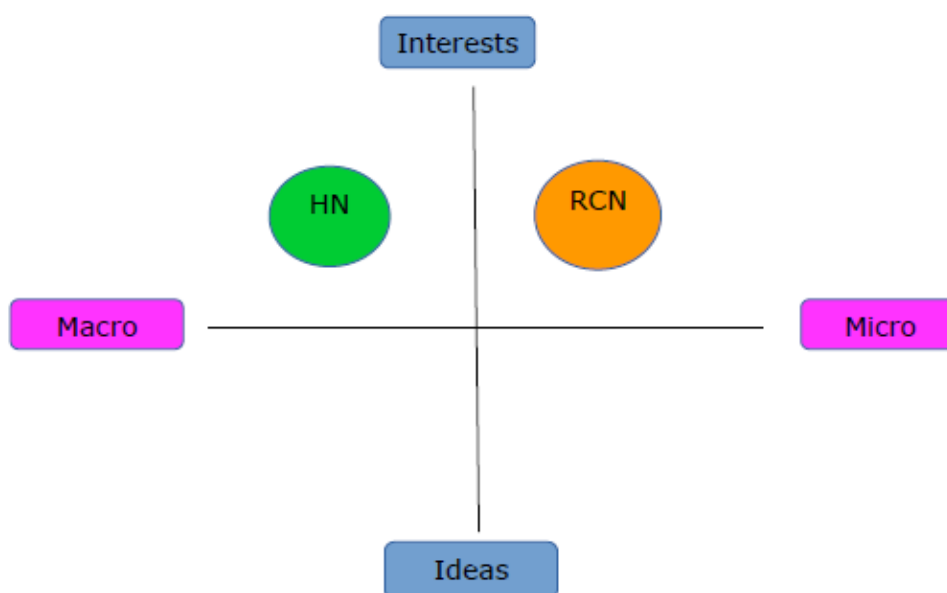
Another aspect that is intimately related to North's transaction costs theory is the "cooperation problem" (Olson, 1998). In a context where the actors have important incentives to distrust what other actors can do due to lack of information, inability to process the available information, existence of high risks regarding future payments, difficulty in identifying the free-riders inside a large collective body and the clear non-identification as to who and how to punish uncooperative behaviour, what incentives could the actors have to display cooperative behaviour? (North, 1990, 1991, 1998, North & Weingast, 1989). That is why, based on his theory of procedural rationality and his transaction costs theory, North believes that an institutional theory would solve the weaknesses mentioned in previous paragraphs.



For this author, an institution is the set of "humanly designed constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction. They are both informal constraints (sanctions, taboos, customs, traditions and codes of conduct) and formal rules (constitutions, laws, property rights)"<sup>6</sup> (North, 1991: p. 1). Institutions make it possible to reduce uncertainties in the exchange. They define the set of available options and therefore determine transaction and production costs for a given time and space. The latter does not mean that the actors' wishes or beliefs are structured by the institutions, but rather that the preferences continue to be thought of as exogenous within the institutional analytical framework of the author (North, 1990a: p. 111).

However, if the actors intend to maximize their benefits, they must take into account the incentives (both positive and negative) that the institutional (particularly economic) structure presents. In particular, what interests North is to see how the relationship between the subjective frameworks of the actors and the institutions occurs, since understanding this relationship means understanding how it has translated into various economic-political institutional frameworks throughout history. This way, if we take the schematization made by Fioretos, Faletti & Sheingate (2016), who drew a chart that shows two central dimensions (on the one hand the structure-actor continuum, and on the other the interest-idea continuum) to be able to compare the two neo-institutionalisms, we can affirm that the RCN is a theoretical perspective focused on actors and that it adopts a base centred on interests (see Chart 1).

Figure 1. Neo-institutionalisms according to the two central dimensions of analysis in the social sciences.



Source: Fioretos, Faletti & Sheingate, 2016: p. 21

<sup>6</sup> Author's own translation



In North's institutional theory, institutions are a tool to solve the cooperation problems between actors. This is due to the fact that institutions allow reducing the uncertainties that surround all human actions. The norms, the rules and the procedures (whether formal or informal) make it possible to simplify the process according to which the actors make decisions in a changing context, where obtaining information is costly even in the processing of the information one has. In particular, institutions allow solving the cooperation problem, since they establish incentives (both positive and negative) that reward and punish the actor's behaviour. This forces the actors who seek to survive and continue to maximize their benefits to comply with the established set of norms, rules and procedures: otherwise, they will be sanctioned and the competitiveness itself would be seriously deteriorated.

For North, the central axis of Political Economy is to be able to account for the evolution of economic and political institutions that create an economic environment capable of inducing increasing productivity (North, 1990, 1991). Within this analytical scheme, what happens with history? Although North intends to explain how the evolution of political and economic institutions occurs, in his analyses history is a tool to illustrate his hypothesis and not so much the main element of institutional analysis. At this point, it is interesting to bring back the comments made by Pierson (2004) regarding the various ways history can be used in an analysis. One of the most used, and particularly in regard to rational choice theories, is the concept of "history as the hunt for illustrative material". History is used as a reservoir of illustrative cases where the researcher seeks to find examples that allow him to account for the theoretical-empirical scope of his explanatory models. However, in these cases the analyses say very little (or nothing) about the temporal dimensions of the political-social processes (Pierson, 2004: p. 5). The latter is very often seen in North's works. Examples include the work carried out by North & Weingast (1989), where they question the constraints placed by the English Parliament on the Crown during the seventeenth century, or the use of merchant caravans or Souks in the Arabian Peninsula as examples of "primitive" and unproductive markets (North, 1990, 1991). Therefore, in North's analysis there is not much interest in giving an account of what the explanatory role of the temporal dimension in the development of institutions is, but rather in identifying what the different institutions that have developed in history have been and how they have contributed (or not) to an increase in productivity in a particular society.

Even the non-consideration of the temporal dimension in the political-social processes as an explanatory variable Pierson speaks of can be observed if we take into account North's explanation of why institutions change (or not). The institutions persist because they are useful for the actors. When these ceases to be, the actors decide to change them for another set. But this change is gradual and occurs as a result of the actors' incessant actions. The latter is possible because North assumes the concept of a Schumpeterian entrepreneur, who, as he gains more knowledge and develops greater capabilities, together with great advances in the technological structure and prices, changes his preferences and seeks to make institutional changes that allow them to be maximized (North, 1990). However, in the short term the maximization of the actors' interests is guaranteed by institutional stability. The source of this stability is the institutional path dependence. Here the path dependence concept is not understood in the terms of historical neo-institutionalism, but rather as the institutions' ability to generate increasing





returns and give stability over time to the norms, rules and procedures that constrain the performance of the actors (North, 1990, p.83). Accordingly, through successive games, the actor can acquire information that allows him to understand not only the behaviour that a certain institutional framework rewards but also the ways such institutional frameworks can be altered in order to maximize other types of interests.

In short, the main wealth of the RCN as a theoretical perspective is that it adopts an analysis based on actors and interests, in which the actors, according to their exogenously established preferences, decide to select and build (formal and informal) institutions that allow them to reduce transaction costs and the information costs they face on a daily basis when it comes to maximizing their benefits. Thus, institutions are presented as synonyms of stability, a stability that limits the range of actions available to actors when deploying their behaviour, but under no conditions such institutions shape preferences, ideas and/or interests (Hall & Taylor, 1996, Immergut, 2006). Perhaps the main difference between the RCN and the HN is precisely how they understand the establishment of preferences (Orfeo Fioretos et al., 2016).

### **I.b. Historical Neo-institutionalism (HN)**

Historical neo-institutionalism (HN) is characterized by understanding institutions as procedures, routines, norms and formal and informal conventions of politics and political economy (Hall & Taylor, 1996). However, the biggest difference from the RCN is that here institutions "are always constellations that combine rules with cultural, geographic and historically specific norms, value beliefs, formal organizations, and social practices. Institutions are complex structures that link action. An institution is not a monolith, but a system of social factors that together generate a regularity of action" (Katznelson, 2009, p. 109). Seen from this perspective, institutions are presented as structuring preferences and choices (paths) (Hall & Taylor, 1996, Immergut, 2006, Katznelson, 2009, Pierson & Skocpol, 2008; Thelen, 1999).

For this perspective, the various institutional schemes that characterize political-economic structures in a given historical context are the product of the struggle of various actors for the distribution of scarce resources. Therefore, the institutions reflect the crystallization of the results of these struggles. For this reason, historical institutionalism considers it interesting to carry out an analysis at meso-macro level that allows identifying the multiple institutions in an interaction that operate in broader contexts. Institutions are not considered in an isolated and separate way, but as being in constant interrelation and superimposed on each other, configuring a framework or institutional network (Orfeo Fioretos et al., 2016, Hall & Taylor, 1996). The historical institutionalists

*"analyse how groups of organizations and institutions relate to each other and shape the processes or results of interest. (...) The results are generated not by some apparent universal principle characteristic of a given type of actor or area of activity, but by intersections of organized practices. These practices often originated at different times and, therefore, configurations that give advantage to certain key actors would have developed. These actors work to*





*maintain the configuration while the economic, cultural and geopolitical circumstances change"* (Pierson & Skocpol, 2008, p. 20).

The key question that historical institutionalism asks is: why do certain structures or patterns take shape at certain times and places, while others do not? Historical institutionalists are interested in developing time-based arguments that allow understanding the temporality and sequence of the various political phenomena that we intend to study, since these are understood as political processes. The fact that they are perceived as such implies that these phenomena are not studied as a simple "photograph" of a given situation, but rather intend to trace transformations and processes of varying scale and temporality. "Historical institutionalists go through a constant back and forth movement between cases, questions and hypotheses" (Pierson & Skocpol, 2008, p. 10). Accordingly, the problems that matter come from identifying real-world variations previously unexplained or from noticing that empirical patterns go against popular and academically established concepts. As previously mentioned, historical institutionalists do not have totalizing ambitions, nor do they seek to understand the historical-universal dynamics of the political phenomena. Instead, they seek to identify the historical dimensions of causality. This means that "statements about the existence of causal relationships should be supported not only by a correlation between two variables, but also by a theory that would show why this connection should exist, as well as by evidence that would support this theoretical connection" (Pierson & Skocpol, 2008, p. 12). To this effect, the analyses start from the consideration of a small N, which allows a detailed examination of the processes that can facilitate the evaluation of assertions about causal mechanisms; and, on the other hand, of causal arguments, with a theoretical basis on causal relations that generally imply particular time-based relationships between variables, where one precedes the other, or both take place essentially at the same time.

A series of central concepts allow establishing this set of causal arguments: sequence, path dependence, and critical conjuncture.

On the one hand, a key concept in the present perspective is that of "sequence". The order in which events occur matters, since a fundamental difference can arise from it. The answer to the question why one phenomenon occurred at a given moment and not another may lie in the sequence (Falleti & Mahoney, 2016, Pierson & Skocpol, 2008). Therefore, the sequences have a lot to do with the positive feedback process. This is due to the fact that depending on how the order of events takes place, this will influence the different reproduction mechanisms adopted for a given trajectory.

When the HN uses the concept of path dependence (or trajectory dependence), it refers to the dynamics of positive feedback processes in a political system" (Pierson & Skocpol, 2008, p.12). This means that institutions are consolidated as they are set in motion. The implementation of a particular institution makes it adopt an institutional inertia that leads it to strengthen the chosen institutional trajectory. Thus, institutions become less prone to change over time, and this is only possible in the presence of critical conjunctures. The richness of this concept allows us to study how the actors choose different paths and how, with the implementation of various institutional decisions, the institutions move away from, or approach what the actors thought in the first instance.



As already mentioned, for the HN the institutions should not be understood as "monolithic" structures that are completely rigid against any type of change (Katznelson, 2009). The concept of critical conjuncture introduces a dynamic argument in the institutional historical analysis, since it suggests that a series of small or large events can reconfigure the path or trajectory that had been chosen in the beginning and give rise to a new dispute over resources involving the various actors, resulting in a new institutional configuration. There are many works that use this concept to refer to large scale phenomena or events to explain the emergence of new path dependence dynamics, but such dramatic situation is not a necessary nor sufficient condition to be considered a critical conjuncture: what makes a particular conjuncture critical is the fact that it triggers a positive feedback process, regardless of its "size" (Pierson & Skocpol, 2008).

Taken together, all these concepts allow us to study the weight of the temporal dimension within a given explanation that accounts for a relevant socio-political phenomenon. Such concepts force us to think about the causal sequence that connects our phenomenon-result of interest (dependent variable) with those events and processes that intervened in such result (Falleti & Mahoney, 2016). Thinking about causal mechanisms like this enables understanding why a certain institutional framework emerges at a certain time and place, while in others it does not. The path dependence permits understanding how institutions endure over time and space, even though the initial conditions that facilitated their emergence have disappeared. The critical conjuncture allows us to study how institutional changes occur in those institutions that were believed to be difficult to change. In addition, it allows understanding how actors seek to create new institutional frameworks that make them keep the new power obtained after a critical conjuncture and how such frameworks tend to be established in a completely different way from those originally conceived (Thelen, 1999). All these are just examples of how, by introducing temporality as an explanatory dimension, we can obtain a completely different analysis than what is proposed by the RCN.

An aspect to take into account when carrying out an institutional analysis from the perspective of the HN is to avoid falling into the trap of explanatory rigidity that "institutions explain everything" (Acuña & Chudnovsky, 2013). When conducting a study of institutions resorting to HN, it is often tempting to think of institutional changes and reproductions as devoid of actors, since the latter are subsumed to the dynamics of institutions that overcome them, which often leads to thinking tautological causal relationships. This difficulty can be overcome if one establishes precisely which are the elements that make up the causal mechanism that links the independent variable(s) with the dependent variable (Falleti & Mahoney, 2016).

## **II. What contributions can neo-institutionalism make to the study of the new emerging international institutions?**

The specialized literature suggests that the institutionalization of the associative dynamics among the agents increases their cooperation and collective action (Hall & Taylor, 1996, Immergut, 2006, North, 1990, North & Weingast, 1989), even when we talk about international cooperation between nations (Axelrod & Keohane, 1985). However, little has been done to study the institutionalization processes of informal institutions initiated at the beginning of the century. Faced with this, it becomes relevant



to (re)think about the theoretical contributions of neo-institutionalism in order to have a critical theoretical-analytical criterion that accounts for these new phenomena.

To begin with, the concept discussed here is that of an international institution. Although there is diverse literature that expands and works on the concept, the conceptual discussion suggested here brings back three approaches: idealism, liberal institutionalism and historical neo-institutionalism.

The traditional idealist school of international relations emphasizes formal international institutions (Judge, 1977, Schechter, 2010, Simmons & Martin, 2002). An international institution is defined as any institution in which the following three elements can be identified simultaneously (Judge, 1977): 1) be based on an agreement which is formally implemented by the governments of different nation-states; 2) include three or more nation-states as members of the agreement; 3) have a permanent secretariat with its own autonomous tasks and activities. As can be seen in the previous definition, the literature associates international institutions with international organizations (Simmons & Martin, 2002). The latter is not surprising since the greatest proliferation of the formal literature emerged in the period between world wars, and the main elements of empirical observation are the League of Nations (LN) and the United Nations Organization (UN). In addition, one notes that the concept is thought in terms of being able to evaluate the autonomy of a particular organization with respect to the States that create them. This is described by Schechter (2010) as the greater or lesser capacity on the part of the organization to establish and develop a bureaucracy that works separately and is functionally autonomous with respect to the countries that created it. This is so because such organizations were thought of as third parties in the resolution of peace and war conflicts. The greatest weakness of this concept is the confusion between institution and organization. The latter not only does not allow us to observe the effects that rules, procedures and norms can produce on international actors, but also it does not allow us to observe the role of rules, norms and informal procedures that come into play and of the formal ones in the international scenario.

A second tradition is related to institutional analyses known in International Relations as liberal institutionalism (Axelrod & Keohane, 1985, Keohane & Martin, 1995). Since the beginning of the 21st century, the international scenario has seen an exponential increase regarding the creation of international institutions that do not have the three previously mentioned characteristics (Albaret, 2013, Reinalda, 2013). Observing this phenomenon is only possible if the concept of international institutions previously presented is broadened. According to Keohane & Nye (1989: p.3), international institutions are the persistent and interconnected set of rules (formal and informal) that prescribe roles of behaviour, constrain the actors' activity and define their expectations. The greatest weakness of this concept is that international institutions are understood as static elements. Most of the literature in this tradition has been dedicated to the study of the effect that international institutions have on the commercial exchange between countries (McLaughlin Mitchell & Hensel, 2007) or on armed conflicts (Keohane & Martin, 1995, Keohane & Nye, 1989). In all these works, the absence of temporality as an explanatory dimension of the phenomena to be explained is constant.

It is for this reason that studies from a historical neo-institutionalist perspective have gained important ground in recent years in the study of international institutions. In this



tradition, we have authors such as John Ikenberry (2001) and Orfeo Fioretos (2011). For example, a large part of the work of John Ikenberry (2001, 2014) has focused on how the processes of establishing international political orders occurred throughout history. In his book *After Victory* (Ikenberry, 2001), the author begins by wondering about what the States that have just won great wars do with the newly acquired power. Taking these questions as a basis, *After Victory* is a work structured around the consideration of three critical global conjunctures (1815, 1919 and 1945), which allow explaining the consequent emergence of institutional frameworks as a deliberate product of the victorious states. Ikenberry's hypothesis is that each of these critical junctures, by being a point of completion of major armed conflicts worldwide, presented unique opportunities for the establishment of international institutional agreements that were capable of tying-linking states to each other. The main characteristic of such institutional frameworks was that they generated a lock-in effect with respect to the dominant and favourable position obtained by the victorious states. At the same time, they left certain institutional spaces in which the loser and/or weaker states could deploy strategic behaviour. Accordingly, the international institutions allowed the victorious states both to maintain control over the international agenda and the orientation of the main foreign policies with the consequent primary action on these issues and to grant the other states some credible and institutionalized control tools that limit the power gained by the victorious states (Ikenberry, 2001). As a result of these dynamics, international organizations like the United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Bank (WB) were created, which sought to become the main channel for resolving all types of international conflict but which, at the same time, reproduced inside the victorious condition obtained by some countries after each conjuncture (for example, the establishment of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia and China as permanent members of the United Nations Security Council).

Regarding the new emerging institutions, since the beginning of the 21st century, the international scenario has seen an exponential increase in the creation of informal international institutions that do not have Judge's three characteristics (Albaret, 2013, Reinalda, 2013). From a conceptual point of view, these new informal institutions have the following characteristics:

- ⇒ Non-existence of a selection process open to all states: participation in such institutions is voluntary, but not universal, since to be part of them is subject to invitation.
- ⇒ They are multilateral but with small N: this means that these institutions are not thought about in the same universalist way that the main international institutions of the period between war or post-cold war were seen, but rather as smaller number of states than the UN or the WB and usually closely linked to the theme or function for which the institution was created.
- ⇒ They are highly flexible: they do not denote the high levels of bureaucratization that the UN or the WB have, but they are spaces for deliberation where the member states can establish rapprochement policies on particular topics and in an *ad hoc* manner.



All these elements do nothing but raise questions such as: why do states create this type of international institutions? What changes did occur in the international scenario that facilitated their emergence? What is the role of these new informal institutions? What changes did take place in the functional dynamics of traditional international institutions, such as the UN, the IMF or the WB, that facilitated the emergence of these new international institutions? What were the main obstacles and difficulties that the states had to address when creating these new institutional spaces? Observing this phenomenon is only possible if the concept of international institutions that was previously presented is expanded, alongside the approach with which their study is carried out.

As can be seen, the study of international institutions has been carried out from different perspectives. In the first place, there has been a confusion between the concepts of international organization and international institution, which meant that research programmes only studied the characteristics of international organizations in force at that time. On the other hand, in Keohane's & Nye's approach (1989), the agency capacity of the states begins to play a central role in the explanation of the various international institutions that prevail. However, the greatest weakness of this analysis is that it has difficulty in explaining the emergence and evolution over time of institutions due to their static view of them. The latter is a point that historical neo-institutionalism seeks to strengthen, suggesting the study of the international institutional framework through its instituting dynamics, such as path dependence and its change moments through critical conjunctures. But in many of their explanations, the agency capacity of the actors loses explanatory weight, often going to the extreme of affirming that the institutions can explain everything (Acuña & Chudnovsky, 2013). At this point, the dialogue between perspectives seems to suggest that there is analytical richness in the conciliation of both perspectives. Given the particularities of the institutionalization processes led by the emerging countries, resorting to the states' agency capacity without renouncing the temporality of the phenomenon would allow identifying how such processes are similar or distant from those initiated by central countries.

This article suggests addressing the problem through the revival of the state's centrality in the construction of institutions proposed by liberal institutionalism. It also rationalizes the historicity of the phenomenon through the incorporation of temporality into the study of the emerging states' action involved in the constitution of these new institutional spaces. Accordingly, one could study the effect of the important variables that came into play during the negotiation period regarding a given institutional project, such as: 1) the existence of a homogeneity of interests in the member states; and 2) the establishment of a feeling of trust between the member states. In addition, as regards temporality, the sustained increase in the interactions between member states is suggested as the third variable. A fourth, and last, variable could be the fulfilment of the previously established institutional objectives. This would be a key dimension in terms of explaining whether there was a positive or negative development or even stagnation in the process of institutionalizing such initiatives. For example, keeping these variables in mind could address with greater precision the institutionalization processes of the various regional institutions, such as the Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR), the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), and the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) in South America without having to fall into the "N = 1 problem" generated by



the European Union as a normative model in the explanation of any type of regional integration (Malamud, 2011).

Taken together, these variables would make it possible to account for the political-institutional conditions according to which emerging countries have constituted these new institutional spaces, since they address the phenomenon taking into account their informal institutionalization in high volatility contexts in the international scenario, while at the same time addressing them in their historical rationality.

### III. Brief Final Comments

In a field of study where the idealist and realistic perspectives have hegemonized the theoretical-empirical discussion, any approach to international problems from an institutionalist perspective implies a novel work. The latter increases its novel character if one takes into account the few studies carried out about the informal international institutions that emerged at the beginning of the 21st century. Understanding how international actors, mainly states, resolve their collective action dilemmas in the international arena from a view that rationalizes the historicity of such processes involves conducting studies that go beyond the traditional study of international organizations. This article aimed to discuss new conceptual tools that allow studying how the sequences of changes in the international institutional framework occur and identifying in particular the role played by international actors, institutions, and temporality in such a sequence.

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