activities of the section. As I see it, the job of this section is to represent a broad range of methodologically relevant perspectives and to do so in a productive fashion—so that contending ideas meet one another in specific terms, rather than simply restating philosophical positions, engage in abstract labeling exercises (“positivist,” “interpretivist,” et al.), or ad hominem attacks. Speaking for the section (at least to the extent that I am entitled to do so), let me say that we really don’t care about the views of your pastor, or whether you were greeted with sniper fire at last year’s convention. We do, however, care about including your views on social science methodology in the section’s activities.

A broad view of methodology is essential to the conduct of a professional body whose purposes include facilitating debate, encouraging the development of new methods, and helping to disseminate them. This commitment to diversity is reflected in the section’s recent name-change—from “Qualitative Methods” to “Qualitative and Multi-Method Research.” Although something of a mouthful, the new label is more capacious, as well as more in keeping with the actual diversity of methods and methodological perspectives that we find among our current membership. Well worth the extra syllables!

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**Symposium: Historical Causation**

**Causation in Time**

**Tulia G. Falleti**
University of Pennsylvania
fallesi@sas.upenn.edu

**Julia Lynch**
University of Pennsylvania
jjflynch@sas.upenn.edu

Social processes are rarely instantaneous. **Periodization**—specifying the beginning and ending of the temporal context within which causal process plays out—is essential for a great many of the political processes that we study. Historically oriented political science research, in particular, is notable for its theoretically based expectation that various aspects of the temporal context matter for explaining outcomes. If comparative historical research is insufficiently attentive to the methodological importance of specifying completely the temporal context within which causal mechanisms work, then we can be sure that fault plagues other modes of political analysis, as well. We consider here some of the pitfalls inherent to the standard periodization techniques utilized by even those researchers most sensitive to temporal context.

As Pierson (2004) notes, a variety of aspects of time may be relevant to political explanation—not least because of the way they affect the functioning of causal mechanisms. Sequencing—**when things happen**—either in world-historical time (Wallerstein 1974), in relation to signal events in political development like the development of working-class parties, or in relation to more contingent events or processes closer at hand (e.g., the availability of certain policy models), may affect how and whether a specific mechanism works. Falleti (2005), for example, shows that if a process of decentralization begins with what she terms “political,” rather than “administrative,” decentralization, the process will likely activate a policy-ratchet mechanism—the creation of a group of subnational supporters—that will affect the second round of decentralization reforms and lead to an increase in the amount of power transferred to subnational officials. The policy-ratchet mechanism is typically absent, however, if political decentralization occurs **after** administrative decentralization, a sequence that results in a lower degree of autonomy for subnational authorities. In this example, the sequencing of different types of decentralization policies affects which causal mechanisms come into play and its effect on the outcome of interest.

**Tempo and duration—how long things take**—may also suggest a likely set of plausible mechanisms. Outcomes that come about slowly, gradually, or after a long lag are likely to be produced by different kinds of mechanisms (policy drift, increasing returns) from those that produce outcomes that occur swiftly or suddenly (tipping points, rational choice) (see Pierson 2004, Chapter 3). Indeed, those political scientists who focus on longue durée processes have tended to emphasize structuralist, systems-oriented, and/or macro-social causal mechanisms, while scholars interested in the consequences of shorter-term processes often are more attuned to mechanisms posited at the level of individuals or collectivities of individuals.

In this essay, however, our focus is on a third aspect of temporality: **when things start**. Starting points have particular relevance for historical institutionalist analysis because the notion of path dependence, which is at the center of many such analyses, relies on a well-specified starting point. Historical institutionalist scholars typically use starting points and critical junctures to delineate one context, “before,” in which a mechanism does not function, from a second context, “after,” in which it does function. We argue, however, that the act of periodizing as a way of marking shifts in context is often insufficiently theorized in historically oriented research, and runs into particular difficulties when confronted with causal mechanisms that operate at the aggregate- or structural-level rather than the individual level.

**Context and Periodization**

In our previous collaborative work, we define causal mechanisms as relatively abstract concepts denoting processes that can travel from one specific instance or “episode” (Tilly 2001: 26) of causation to another, and that explain how a hypothesized cause creates a particular outcome in a given context. In turn, we define context as the relevant aspects of a setting (temporal, spatial, institutional, or analytical) in which an array of initial conditions leads to an outcome of a defined scope and meaning via a specified causal mechanism or set of
causal mechanisms (see Falleti and Lynch 2007). In other words, causal mechanisms are portable, but operate in a context-dependent fashion. Then, in order to develop causal theories we must be able to identify analytically equivalent contexts and from the temporal perspective specify where one context ends and another begins. For historical researchers, the passage of time is often the most obvious indication that a context has changed. So it is no surprise that in historically informed analyses, periodization plays an important role in the development of causal theories. But even self-consciously methodological works examining periodization in causal analysis often fail adequately to specify how one should place the markers that designate contextually homogeneous periods in time, or which aspects of a context must be constant within a given period and which may be allowed to vary.

Büthe (2002), for example, issues a plea for more careful attention to the placement of starting and ending points in research that utilizes historical narratives as case material. Büthe sees a tension between formal models, which provide “an explicit, deductively sound statement of the theoretical argument, separate from a particular empirical context” (482), and the analysis of complex causal processes over time, which often involve feedback loops or other forms of endogeneity. Decontextualized formal models may lead to invalid causal claims if they fail to consider sequencing. Büthe sees the analysis of historical narrative as a solution to this problem, but recognizes the difficulty of knowing where to start and end a narrative. In particular, he asks “how do we delineate a sequence of events so as to justify the imposition of a narrative beginning and end onto a continuous empirical record? How does the imposition of a narrative closure affect the generality of our conclusions?” (482). Ultimately, however, he is only able to offer the advice that “the specification of the *explanandum*…provides the criteria for choosing the beginning and end of the narrative” (488). Where the process to be explained does not have a “clear starting point (e.g., an exogenous shock)” and/or has not “run its course,” Büthe himself notes that even this advice will prove inadequate (487).

Büthe advocates delineating the beginning of a new context with reference to the onset of the causal mechanism that produces the outcome. Analyses that use critical junctures to delineate the beginning of a period are one example of this strategy. Critical junctures are often defined *ex post* as the starting point of a path-dependent causal process that leads to the outcome of interest. Many analyses situate the critical juncture at the point of some exogenous shock (war, depression, shift in commodity prices, etc.); nevertheless, some of the most widely read classic examples of critical junctures analysis (Moore 1966; Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Collier and Collier 1991) embed critical junctures in a richly detailed context, and make it clear that the outcome of the causal process that begins with the critical juncture may also be influenced by a variety of other features of the environment. Collier and Collier (1991, Chap 1), for example, note that the duration of a critical juncture need not be short, and that longer critical junctures often incorporate background conditions and cleavages into the production of the outcomes in question.

Some more recent analyses employing critical junctures, like these classic works, also recognize that although a juncture may be the starting point of a new “path,” it is also a product of what came before (see, for example, Hacker 2002). However, a new strain of theorizing about critical junctures tends to emphasize the contingency of such moments, highlighting their status as distinctive break-points with the previous context. Mahoney (2000) demands that the start of a path-dependent process be “contingent,” by which he means that “its explanation appears to fall outside of existing scientific theory.” Examples of these unpredictable events that may constitute critical junctures include exogenous shocks or particular decisions made by political actors, often with proper names (514). While Mahoney does not insist upon the equiprobability of pathways out of a critical juncture, his formulation does depart significantly from Collier and Collier’s (1991) notion that critical junctures may have strong links to the past, and that the outcome of interest may in fact be predictable given the weight of history that lies behind the critical juncture.

Similarly, Capoccia and Keleman (2007) emphasize the *delinking* from context that occurs at a critical juncture: “Critical junctures are characterized by a situation in which for a relatively short phase the ‘structural’ (i.e., economic, cultural, ideological, organizational) influences on political action are substantially relaxed” (3). Capoccia and Keleman distinguish their conception of a critical juncture, quite rightly, from Lipset and Rokkan’s (1967) and Collier and Collier’s (1991), who “embed” their critical junctures in antecedent conditions (Capoccia and Keleman 2007), and in so doing downplay the agency of individual actors.

The periodization strategies advanced in both Büthe’s (2002) framework and in critical junctures analysis following Mahoney (2000) and Capoccia and Keleman (2007), implicitly or explicitly, define the initiation of a path-dependent process or historical narrative as the starting point of the context within which the causal mechanism unfolds. In other words, the start of the context surrounding the input→mechanism→output (*I*→*M*→*O*) pathway is bounded precisely by the beginning of the *causal mechanism of interest*. This conceptualization of a starting point is a useful tool for identifying the beginning of a path-dependent process and may also highlight mechanisms that take place at the level of individuals or groups. It is not a good guide, however, to continuity and change in *other* important aspects of the context in which the causal mechanism plays out and that may have an important effect on the outcome of interest.

Lieberman (2001), in an article devoted to periodization strategies in historical institutionalist analysis, goes beyond critical junctures in his search for possible starting points. Lieberman’s typology identifies four types of starting points: the origination of a new institution of interest, or an important change in such an institution (in either case, the independent variable); an exogenous shock that changes the conditions in which the institution operates; or a change in some “rival independent variable” present in the “background” (1019, Table 1). This typology usefully points to the variety of po-
tential markers of the beginning of a new context, which need not all coincide with the onset of the mechanism presumed to be responsible for the outcome of interest. It also emphasizes that periodization may be based on activity in numerous layers of the context within which a causal process plays out (be they proximate institutions, background conditions, or truly exogenous events), a point to which we will return in a moment.

But while Lieberman introduces the idea that changes in a variety of different aspects of the context surrounding a causal mechanism may be consequential for the outcome of interest, his typology does not leave room for causal processes that might be generated by interaction or friction between the different aspects of the context. Yet, as Orren and Skowroneck (1994: 321) note, the multiple layers or “orders” of institutions that constitute the polity or context at any given time are not “synchronized in their operations.” Rather, these orders “abrade against each other and, in the process, drive further change.” Lieberman’s strategies for periodization focus the attention on “important events, changes or turning points that can be conceptualized as markers of variation in a potentially important explanatory variable” (1017), which have “potentially important impact on the outcomes under investigation.” Lieberman notes that such events are relatively rare: “Within a mass of historical observations, only a few events define a period, whereas most other events and processes are explained as taking place during a period” (1017). This relatively narrow definition is nicely operational, but it also seems simultaneously to raise, and fail to grapple with, the central fact about context, i.e., its multi-layered composition.

Causation in Multi-Layered Contexts

Social processes take place in a context characterized by multiple overlapping layers of institutions and structures that govern the relationships between inputs and outcomes. Pawson (2000) cites as an example of this layered social reality the process of writing a check. Checks are “routinely accepted for payment only because we take for granted [their] place within the wider (institutional) rules of the banking system. The capacities that bring custom and order to the transaction do not reside solely with particular objects (checks) or agents (cashiers) but also belong to the institutional regulations (credit), legal constitutions (charters) and organizational structures (chancelleries)” (294). In historical analysis, we are likely to be concerned with a variety of contextual layers: those that are quite proximate to the input (I)—for example, in a study of the emergence of radical right-wing parties, one such layer might be the electoral system; exogenous shocks quite distant from (I) that might nevertheless affect the functioning of the mechanism and hence the outcome (e.g., a rise in the price of oil that slows the economy and makes voters more sensitive to higher taxes); and also the middle-range context that is neither completely exogenous nor tightly coupled to (I) and that may include other relevant institutions and structures (the tax system, social solidarity) as well as more atmospheric conditions, such as the rate of economic growth, flows of immigrants, trends in partisan identification, and the like. Lieberman (2001) conceives of this “background” context as the locus of “rival causes.” However, we believe that recent research (e.g., Hacker 2002; Streeck and Thelen 2005; Lynch 2006) bears out Orren and Skowroneck’s (1994) contention that the interaction of different layers of context may itself be the site of important causal mechanisms.

Steinmo and Thelen (1992: 16-17) illustrate how changes in background conditions may affect the outcome of an institutionally-structured process, even if the direct institutional inputs do not themselves change. Changes in the social, economic, or political context may make previously marginal institutions more central to political life, bring new actors into play who use the same institutions to achieve different ends, or cause the same actors to pursue new goals through existing institutions. In all of these cases, the institutional inputs do not change, and the mechanism producing outcomes may or may not change, but the institutional outputs do change because the context has changed.

In Age in the Welfare State, Lynch (2006) illustrates how the multiple layers of context within which a causal mechanism operates can play an essential role in generating the outcome of interest—in this case, the extent to which social policies in different countries privilege the elderly over working-aged adults and children. In Lynch’s argument, two critical junctures mark choice points in the development of welfare state institutions, and path-dependent mechanisms tend to reinforce the choices made during these moments. But the age orientation of social policies in different countries cannot be satisfactorily explained within a framework that specifies critical junctures as moments of radical discontinuity. Rather, Lynch argues that processes occurring in three separate layers of context interact to produce the age orientations observed circa 1990. The first contextual layer is the political arena, where the policy preferences of parties and unions take shape; the second is the institutional arena of social policy programs; and the third is a layer composed of slow-moving background processes: population aging, the gradual closure of many Continental European labor markets to younger job-seekers, and the development of public and private markets for old-age insurance. Path-dependent mechanisms of institutional choice following critical junctures, which link the first and second layers, are not enough to explain the outcomes Lynch observes. Rather, much of the important “action” in Lynch’s analysis is caused by “policy drift” (Hacker 2004, 2005), a mechanism that links policy outcomes to the interaction between the first two (political and institutional) layers and the third (demographic and labor market) layer. It is worth noting that policy drift is in fact a mechanism that can only operate in a system characterized by multiple layers of relevant context.

If political contexts tend to be layered, with processes occurring at different speeds in different layers, and if some mechanisms are characteristic of the interaction of separate layers, then periodization in historical analysis should be attuned to the start and end points as well as to the tempo and duration of multiple processes in multiple layers. Consider a causal process that begins at time $t_1$ (for input) with a change in the main institution of interest, which is found in contextual
A critical junctures analysis would start the clock at time $t_1$, tracing the outcome occurring at time $t_0$ (for output) back to the change in the institution in $L_1$. In this case, the change in this institution follows closely (but not instantaneously) upon exogenous shock $E$ (which itself spans considerably less time than most other elements in this diagram, but does have some measurable duration). Preceding the exogenous shock and lasting well past the critical juncture $[CJ]$ at time $t_1$, background condition $B$ exerts a continuous influence on the unfolding of the causal process and can also be causally connected to the outcome of interest, $t_0$. A second causal process linked to a change in contextual layer $L_2$ also predates and persists through the critical juncture, although its start and end points do not coincide neatly with $B$, either. Another process of potential relevance to $O$ occurs in $L_3$, but continues beyond the occurrence of $t_0$. Our view of portable causal mechanisms implies that, under the same initial conditions, identical contexts will produce identical outcomes. But which context is the relevant one in this diagram? Only the temporal context starting at $C_5$ captures all of the major contextual layers, but it excludes the exogenous shock and resulting critical juncture.

It is clear from this schematic representation of unfolding causal processes in a layered context that a perfect periodization scheme may prove elusive, and that care must be taken, when making decisions about periodization, to specify which layers of context are relevant and in what ways. The use of critical junctures as starting points may pose particular problems in multi-layered contexts when important processes are not synchronized with the starting point of the $I \rightarrow M \rightarrow O$ pathway to which the critical juncture pertains.

Because the multiple layers of context that affect the outcomes of causal processes cannot all be expected to change at the same moment, dividing a historical narrative into periods based on the starting or ending point of a single causal process risks hiding from view precisely those interactions between layers moving at different speeds that can generate change over time. There are two crucial implications: first, critical junctures and other starting points that hone in on the initiation of a single $I \rightarrow M \rightarrow O$ pathway miss the causal impact of things that don’t change at all, or don’t change at the same time or pace as the critical juncture; and second, interactions between layers may be as important in producing outcomes of interest as any single causal mechanism.

**Conclusion**

If the context within which a social mechanism operates has many different institutional (or cognitive, or ideational, etc.) layers that may be relevant to the functioning of the mechanism, then periodizing as a method for generating contextually (and hence causally) homogeneous sub-units of a narrative, as Büthe (2002) recommends, becomes fraught with difficulties. If, as we argue, causal mechanisms are relatively abstract portable concepts whose causal force is given by the contours of the environment in which they operate, and if the contours of this environment change over time, then we must divide time into pieces within which the relevant context is constant in order to observe the causal mechanisms at work.

But when there are many layers of context that may affect the outcomes in which we are interested, whose properties
may change at different rates, that may be affected or not by different types of exogenous shocks, and that may or may not change at the same moment that the causal process we are observing begins, then how do we know where one context leaves off and another begins? We propose that as researchers we allow our theories about the social world to guide more strongly the selection of a relevant temporal context, rather than relying on “natural” starting points like major critical junctures or other historical breaking points.

We advocate periodizing based on important moments in those layers of the contextual environment that are likely to be most relevant to the outcome of interest from an explanatory point of view. Within the mass of all possible aspects of the environment that could be interconnected with the outcome, we must use theory to identify those that are most salient to the research question and hypotheses to be tested. Our research question, hypotheses, and the nature of the outcome of interest will determine which institutions, events, or background conditions are likely to be the most crucial. In Figure 1, for example, which of all the possible eight contexts (or their combinations) we choose to focus on will depend on which one our theories tell us is most likely to yield an “efficient” explanation for the outcome of interest.

An important corollary of this proposal is that no one type of starting point is ontologically superior to any other. Critical junctures or exogenous shocks are not inherently more interesting, or more causally important, than endogenously determined moments of institutional creation, or than the slow-moving changes that sometimes occur in the “background.” The context we choose may start with any one of these elements, it may contain some or all of them, or it may cut across the linear temporalities initiated with events, institutions, and background conditions.

Notes

1 Büthe also does not address the issue of how one might periodize within the grand historical narrative in order to achieve more causal leverage.

2 In some analyses (Collier and Collier 1991; Capoccia and Keleman 2007), critical junctures are labeled as “causes” of the outcomes of interest, but we interpret this designation to be inconsistent with the notions of causality employed by these same authors.

References


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