Reviews

doi:10.1017/S1468109905212021

Thelen’s book focuses on the cross-national comparison of institutions that shape and rule the formation of skills that are a fundamental factor for distinguishing ‘varieties of capitalism’. In addition to this empirical contribution, the book uses a research design that is ideal for the comparative, historical method. Thelen specifies a causal logic that goes far beyond the mere classification of ‘varieties of capitalism’. Both empirical and methodological contributions are closely related.

Vigorous scholarly effort has focused on the illumination of the political economic regimes of advanced industrial democracies. This field of study is at the cross-roads of comparative historical analysis and comparative political economy. It has produced several typologies and concepts to distinguish a regime in one country from another. A precursor to such a distinction is Boyer and Hollingsworth’s concept of ‘production regimes,’ in which different institutional arrangements result in different strategies at firm (micro) levels to cope with institutional competition. The ‘varieties-of-capitalism’ perspective is now more prominent, and many scholars have contributed to the production of several contrasts and distinctions across countries; that is, ‘coordinated’ versus ‘non-coordinated’ market economies, ‘coordinated’ versus ‘liberal’ market economies, or ‘organized’ versus ‘liberal’ market economies. By refining the existing contrasts among advanced capitalist countries, the varieties-of-capitalism perspective defines and classifies institutional arrangements that are functionally supplementary to each other. The perspective persuasively shows a consistency among these arrangements and demonstrates the well-knit unity of the ‘system’ that each regime type embodies. In this regard, varieties of capitalism have been the linchpin of the literature on comparative political economy and now appear to be indispensable for any cross-national analyses in advanced capitalist countries.

However, this strength easily becomes a weakness. Because one institutional aspect is tightly connected with others and thus is a functional complement to others, it is very difficult to identify a causal relationship among them. That is, which institutional arrangement, either political or economic, has contributed to institutionalizing other arrangements and accounting
for the consistency of the ‘system’? For example, did export-oriented industrial organization contribute to developing a highly organized and hierarchical labor organization? Or did such highly organized labor more likely go hand-in-hand with leftist attempts and strategies to mobilize workers’ support and facilitate social coalition across classes? In other words, which factor among a variety of institutional arrangements emerged first and caused other institutional arrangements that are functionally tightly knit? Although the analysis focuses on ‘history’ and a chronological order of events and institutional changes, the varieties-of-capitalism perspective is weak for identifying a causal link to explain the emergence and consolidation of specific system types as final products of such historical developments. Applying a comparative method is not a solution here. Countries belonging to distinct system types have differences in all institutional arrangements and, conversely, all the differences constitute an indispensable part of their systemic differences. The perspective explains as many institutional aspects as possible by coherent systemic dynamics and logics. The irony here is that the complete and self-sufficient explanation of each systemic dynamic makes it difficult to explain why the systemic difference emerged in the first place.

Thelen tackles this problem and tries to answer why ‘varieties’ emerged from one country to another. For this purpose, she combines a cross-national comparison of the evolution of skill formation in Germany, Britain, and the United States, and details subsequent changes in one case, Germany. In explaining the ultimate reason for the institutionalization of German vocational training that is consistent with both labor and employment interests and their social partnership, Thelen traces events back to 1897. At that time, the authoritarian government passed legislation to cultivate the conservative class interests of high-skilled artisans; the legislation was thus never intended to represent labor and employment interests, nor was it aimed at their social partnership. The impact of this legislation, however, has been persistent in the sense that the protection of highly skilled workers was reproduced at each time of institutional interruption and change. Paralleling the German case, Thelen convincingly argues that three other cases – Britain, the United States and Japan – observe the resilient influence on current skill formation regimes of traditional artisanal organization during the early industrial period. In liberal regimes, such as Britain and the United States, the state policies were never directed to protect apprentice training directly nor did they serve to provide conditions to facilitate the organization of a skilled labor force. In a non-liberal regime similar to Germany, the Japanese solution was to encourage skill formation in large enterprises and guarantee skill training with career advancement to cope with unionization and concede labor demand.

A weakness of this book, if one dares to find one, is its heavy reliance on the German case to explain institutional evolution. The cases of the other three countries do not have the same twist between the policy goals in the early industrial period and the present as is true in the German case, where legislation under an authoritarian government became the prime mover for establishing labor-friendly institutional arrangements for the formation of skills. Although the German experience is suitable for explaining the resilient influence of early institutions in adjusting to subsequent changes, its implications may not be applied to other countries. Nevertheless, over all, the book succeeds in illuminating ‘varieties of capitalism’ as well as finding a causal logic to explain a systemic difference.

Junko Kato
University of Tokyo
This book represents the most comprehensive analysis of Japan’s agricultural bureaucracy available in English. It offers insights into the rationale behind the interventionist regime and a detailed picture of how Japan’s Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF) guides every aspect of agricultural production in Japan. With this book, which is a valuable addition to her series on Japanese agricultural policy, Aurelia George Mulgan shows herself once again to be the foremost expert on Japanese agricultural policy.

The book presents an argument about self-interested bureaucrats who seek to maximize their interventionist role. While many MAFF officials aspire to serve national interest and support farmers, Mulgan shows that MAFF consistently favored the most interventionist policy options. She contends that, while seeking to preserve the Japanese farming sector, MAFF policies have created a viable but dependent farm sector that would continue to rely upon MAFF for its survival. In particular, despite its stated goal to encourage larger-scale independent farms, the ministry has reinforced the pattern of inefficient, small-scale farms through its land-use and subsidy policies. The circle of intervention and dependence justifies the personnel, budget, and lucrative retirement positions for top officials after they leave the ministry. Close cooperation from local governments, interest groups, and quasi-public affiliated agencies (gaikaku dantai) further enhance bureaucratic authority. Although this book leaves out the role of political interests that also support the agricultural welfare state, Mulgan addresses these questions in her larger study, *The Politics of Agriculture in Japan* (2000).

The reform of food safety policy following the outbreak of mad cow disease in 2001 presents an interesting example of the broader theme of the book. The discovery of cows afflicted with this disease sent consumers into a panic and dealt a severe blow to domestic producers. MAFF received much of the blame because it had not taken sufficient action in response to warnings after the European outbreak of the disease. The ministry issued administrative guidance rather than a legal ban on the practice of feeding meat and bone meal to cows, and told Japanese consumers that there was no risk of mad cow disease in Japan. Despite the criticism of MAFF at the time, Mulgan shows that MAFF used the crisis to increase its authority in food safety regulation. The new Food Safety Commission operates under the control of the Cabinet Office, but is largely staffed by MAFF personnel. Within MAFF, the powerful Food Agency was abolished in punishment for the scandal, but a new bureau to address food safety issues replaced it. Many of the staff and functions from the old Food Agency continue under the new department. This is a vivid example of how efforts at reform are stymied by the persistent ministry efforts to maximize its interventionist role.

The evidence of a dominant state role in Japan’s agricultural sector is overwhelming. Nevertheless, considerable changes have taken place. Even the most controlled commodity, rice, has seen greater freedom with the relaxing of the import ban and state-controlled distribution system. Now Japanese rice farmers can directly market their production and foreign producers supply 8 per cent of domestic consumption. Across all commodities, the share of imports in domestic consumption has steadily grown such that Japan now imports over half of its food. The Uruguay Round Agriculture Agreement led to a shift in policy tools from price supports to direct income subsidies and from import quotas to tariff protection. In 1999 the Diet passed a
new Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas Basic Law to replace the Agricultural Basic Law that had governed the sector since 1961. Mulgan documents how MAFF has gone from being a ‘Ministry of Food Production’ to a ‘Ministry of Consumers and Food.’ The external pressures on the ministry have necessitated such chameleon-like transformation as old policies became unsustainable and some of its power was eroded. The number of MAFF personnel was reduced by one-third from 1986 to 1996, while the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Transportation retained almost the same levels of their personnel over this period (p. 106). The share of agricultural budget in the total budget has steadily declined from a high of 10.8 per cent in 1970 to 3.3 per cent in 1999 (pp. 180–183). Other studies explain how international trade negotiations and the structural decline of the agricultural sector have brought about change in Japanese agricultural policy (e.g., Davis, 2003, Hayami, 1988). The fascinating story of ‘Japan’s Interventionist State’ is to tell how skillfully MAFF has avoided even further reduction of its role in the face of such inexorable pressures.

The goal of this book is to examine Japan’s agricultural political economy. The focus on Japan allows for incredibly exhaustive analysis within a modest sized book. For those interested in a more comparative context, the classic studies by Hayami and Anderson (1986) and Lindert (1991) have shown that across advanced industrial democracies, agricultural protection has grown as the sector declines. In a comparative study of the politics of state intervention in agriculture, Sheingate (2001) explains how the pluralist interest group politics in the United States allowed it to reduce state intervention in agricultural policy while France and Japan remained locked in corporatist politics.

Although the focus of ‘Japan’s Interventionist State’ is agricultural policy, it has broader implications of interest to any student of Japanese political economy. Mulgan contends that her model of an interventionist state applies to other policy sectors and in chapters 2 and 3 develops a general theory of how bureaucratic self-interest guides policy intervention. Her work stands alongside Chalmers Johnson’s (1982) description of the bureaucracy MITI as the key actor in a Japanese developmental state. She joins other scholars such as Steven Vogel (1996) who have argued that much of the deregulation in the 1990s has been reregulation that continues to allow bureaucrats to manage the Japanese economy.

Christina Davis

References

Recent years have seen numerous books, both academic and popular, lament the sorry state of the US news media. Most have focused on a perceived liberal or conservative reporting bias and have sought to prove the negative effects of skewed information on public knowledge and opinion. Almost all such studies have focused on traditional, hard news sources – like the *The Washington Post* or CNN. Largely ignored is the fact that a growing number of Americans are getting most, if not all, of their political information from soft news – the Lenos and Lettermans of the media industry rather than the Woodwards and Bernstein. In an important new book, *Soft News Goes to War: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy in the New Media Age*, Matthew A. Baum directs the discourse on American media and public knowledge toward a question arguably more important than the ideological direction of news coverage: what happens to an electorate that is made highly aware of international affairs through media that provide little or none of the context, facts or analysis necessary to understanding?

Baum, an Associate Professor of Political Science and Communications at the University of California Los Angeles, limits his investigation to television news media. He begins by tackling the thorny problem of defining what soft news is. For example, can a daytime talk show such as *Oprah*, or a TV tabloid like *Entertainment Tonight* co-exist peacefully in the same category with an industry standard like NBC's *Today Show*? Baum convincingly argues that they can by categorizing ‘soft news’ as all those media that consistently dramatize the news through easily recognizable and acceptable frames such as ‘us vs. them’, ‘human drama’, ‘danger from abroad’ ‘injustice’ or ‘moral values.’ Stories that fit best into these ‘cheap frames’ – such as the widely argued question of whether Bill Clinton used the bombing of Kosovo to draw attention away from his Monica Lewinsky sex scandal – will become ‘water-cooler events’ that can sustain the public interest for extended periods. Stories that don’t fit easily into cheap frames – such as the Clinton administration’s intervention into Haiti – will get little or no attention from soft news shows. In a later chapter, Baum uses rigorous content analysis to demonstrate that this definition works and that there truly is a definable difference between hard and soft news.

Baum hypothesizes that in the ‘new media age’ suggested by the book’s title, more people are becoming aware of events through soft news. Here he is not referring to the age of computers and the Internet, although they make up part of the picture. Instead, he means today’s highly competitive and fragmented media marketplace, which is ruled by the need to develop high-rated shows at low cost. Inexpensive and popular soft news TV programs perfectly fit this new business reality. Baum contends that because of media saturation, people are forced to make rational choices about the costs and benefits of spending time with one or another form of mass media. People who normally see no personal gain in spending time on hard news will accept soft news purely for its entertainment value. Increased political awareness is a by-product of their desire to be amused.

This ‘by-product theory of news consumption’ is then tested with analysis of decades of opinion poll data. The results show that people living in the age of soft news were indeed more aware of, and opinionated about, issues surrounding important recent stories, such as the Gulf War, than people of a generation or two ago were of similar issues related to the Vietnam War or
Korean War. Baum’s data effectively demonstrate that the increase in awareness ‘can be traced to the least politically informed and educated segments of the population, the very individuals who are most likely to consume large amounts of soft news.’ What is more, the kinds of events and issues that have grown in public awareness are those that fit well into the simplified frames of soft news. While this is not direct evidence that soft news has increased awareness, when coupled with the fact that the changes have taken place at the same time that hard news sources have lost viewers and have decreased the amount time and money they spent on foreign affairs topics, the connection seems hard to deny.

The result is that a much wider segment of society may think it understands foreign policies when, in fact, it has a narrow and sensationalized picture of the world. Baum links awareness from soft news to a tendency toward isolationism and a ‘distrust of proactive, multilateral, or interventionist US foreign policy.’ This can even take the form of suspicion about traditional allies. Baum shows that during the mid-1990s, when the US and Japan were involved in a series of trade disputes, the probability of having warm feelings about Japan decreased dramatically in direct proportion to talk show consumption.

The soft news phenomenon also has strong implications for the future of electoral politics. While soft news consumers tend to be less educated, less politically engaged and, therefore, less likely to vote, they also tend to be less ideologically fixed and more persuadable than more highly-educated hard news consumers. Baum notes this could mean increased pressure on politicians to tailor their campaign messages toward the simplified frames favored by the soft news consumer in order to capture the essential swing vote. While most of the effects of soft news are decidedly negative, the picture is not entirely bleak. Baum show that there is a tendency among at least some soft news viewers to use soft news as a ‘gateway’ to obtaining more information on a topic of interest through hard news.

One of the shortcomings of Baum’s study is that, while it was written after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, nearly all of the research data pre-dates those events. It would be interesting to know if the assumed connection between soft news and isolationist attitudes has changed as a result of new public fears and increased nationalism. An examination of the influence of soft news on the 2004 presidential election – which George W. Bush has claimed gave him a mandate to continue his militant international policies – would also be interesting. Baum’s focus on television news is understandable given the need to narrow an otherwise overwhelming data pool. However, it leaves open the question of how much influence tabloid newspapers and news weeklies have had on changes in awareness and opinion Baum that describes. A future study might employ Baum’s excellent research model to the print media.

Baum’s research is entirely focused on news consumption in the United States. However, it is not without importance for people who live outside that country. Certainly it is useful for non-Americans to understand how discourse on foreign policies that may affect them are being shaped in the United States. What is more, the soft news phenomenon is not confined to the USA. Baum’s study also provides a framework for examining the role of the mass media in many other democratic societies.

Mark C. Hollstein
Kansai Gaidai University