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Pitfalls and Opportunities: Lessons from the Study of Critical Junctures in Latin America

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I first taught *Shaping the Political Arena*¹ in a graduate seminar in the Fall of 1994, when I was a relatively new assistant professor. I still remember the class ending with a vigorous debate about whether or not the institutional legacies of the labor-incorporating critical junctures studied by Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier—including populism, corporatism, and state-led development—had run their course in Latin America and been eclipsed by a new era whose defining features were political and economic liberalism.

Convinced that a new political era had in fact dawned in Latin America, I left the class determined to write a sequel to *Shaping the Political Arena*, with a focus on party system transformation during the critical juncture of neoliberal reform. Filled with a mixture of naiveté and hubris, I thought I could tell the story of how the debt crisis and market reforms in the 1980s and 1990s had reversed the process of labor incorporation, undermined the labor-based populist parties studied by Collier and Collier,² and generated a new critical juncture that realigned Latin America's social, economic, and political fields.

Twenty years later, following a series of false starts, missteps, and detours, I finally published that book—*Changing Course in Latin America*³—as a somewhat chastened (and much grayer) senior professor. My central argument was that the crisis-induced transition from state-led development to market liberalism had programmatically aligned and stabilized some party systems—namely, those where market reforms were imposed by conservative political actors and resisted by a major party of the left in opposition—while de-aligning and destabilizing others, where structural adjustment policies were adopted by traditional center-left or labor-based populist parties. Under this latter, de-aligning pattern, party systems converged around variants of market liberalism that left them highly susceptible to destabilizing “reactive sequences”⁴ in the post-adjustment era, when societal resistance to market orthodoxy intensified. Lacking institutional outlets in established party systems, this societal resistance found expression in extra-systemic outlets, from mass social protest to mass electoral protest, culminating in the demise of mainstream party systems and the rise of new left populist or “movement” parties.

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¹ Collier and Collier 1991.

² Collier and Collier 1991.

³ Roberts 2014.

⁴ Mahoney 2000.

Looking back, I am struck by two things. On the one hand, I believe I made an original contribution to our understanding of a complex, region-wide process of political and economic change in a decisive period of institutional transformation. On the other hand, the intellectual journey was indeed circuitous, and I would like to think I learned a few lessons along the way about pitfalls and opportunities in developing critical juncture arguments. This essay addresses the most important of these lessons.

First Lesson: The Importance of Historical Hindsight

Perhaps the most obvious lesson concerns the role of historical hindsight in a critical juncture analysis. Collier and Collier wrote their classic book nearly half a century (or more, depending on the case) following the critical junctures associated with labor incorporation and the rise of mass politics. This historical hindsight made it possible for them to analyze not only the aftermath period immediately following the critical junctures, but also their divergent, long-term institutional legacies.

In my case, I began research when it was clear that the old order had broken down in much of the region, but the new order was still in gestation.⁵ That is, I believe, a common occurrence. It is surely easier to identify why some type of exogenous shock or endogenous strain leads to the breakdown of a given institutional order than it is to explain how divergent patterns of institutional transformation emerge from the strategic responses of specific actors to that breakdown. Indeed, considerable time may pass between the demise of the old order and the consolidation of the new. The further challenge is that the demise of the old order, on its own, may not constitute a critical juncture; neither does the consolidation of new institutions, unless one can demonstrate that other institutional choices or outcomes were possible, and that something *systematic* occurred in the critical juncture that propelled a case along one path as opposed to another. In the recent Latin American experience, some of the most important institutional changes in party systems played out not during the critical juncture of structural adjustment, but rather in its aftermath or post-adjustment period, when societal resistance to market liberalization strengthened—in the classic Polanyian sense⁶—and the region began to “turn left” politically. The divergent institutional trajectories were not fully identifiable, therefore, until the region had gone through a series of “reactive sequences” in the early aftermath period that were driven by this societal resistance. Until I could identify the full range of variation on the outcome of interest—party system transformation—my explanatory leverage was severely truncated.

Notably, the reactive sequences that I studied in Latin America's post-adjustment era were parallel to, but pushed in the opposite direction from, those analyzed by Collier and

⁵ For this reason, I began the book with an epigraph from Antonio Gramsci's (1971, 276) *Prison Notebooks*: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in the interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”

⁶ Polanyi 1944.

Collier in the aftermath to labor incorporation. Where labor-incorporating critical junctures pushed political systems to the left, reactive sequences were triggered by right-wing actors who pulled political systems back in a more conservative direction. In my study, by contrast, critical junctures entailed the political exclusion or marginalization of labor and popular sectors, moving politics in a rightward direction. Reactive sequences, therefore, involved a rearticulation of popular sectors—albeit with organized labor playing a diminished role—and a strengthening of new or established leftist alternatives, depending on the alignment or de-alignment of party systems around the process of market liberalization.

Second Lesson: The Locus of Causal Attribution

Another lesson, building on the first, concerns the locus of causal attribution in a critical juncture argument. The first draft of my book analyzed a watershed moment in different countries, i.e., the transition to market liberalism, when some combination of exogenous shock (the debt crisis) and endogenous strain (the exhaustion of statist development policies) posed severe threats to party systems embedded in the state-centric matrix of development. This draft attributed varied patterns of institutional change to distinct “antecedent conditions” that were in place prior to the onset of the critical juncture—specifically, the differences between “elitist” and “labor-mobilizing” party systems and the broader developmental matrices in which they were embedded during the era of state-led development. As such, institutional change during the critical juncture of neoliberal reform was, in this initial account, largely predetermined by what existed beforehand; no causal nexus during the juncture itself was decisive for explaining party system outcomes. Even the gravity of the exogenous shock was in large part a function of antecedent conditions, since more severe economic crises occurred in countries with labor-mobilizing party systems and ambitious state-led development models.

As the research moved on, however, my assessment of the locus of causal attribution shifted in significant ways once the reactive sequences of the aftermath period began to unfold and differentiate alternative institutional trajectories. Cross-national comparisons suggested that the strength and character of reactive sequences were heavily conditioned by political alignments around the process of structural adjustment *during* the critical juncture itself; they were not, in other words, predetermined by antecedent conditions. “Critical antecedents” may have predisposed cases to experience a shared critical juncture in particular ways,⁷ but an important element of political contingency—the configuration of political actors around the process of reform—was present in national critical junctures and decisive for understanding their impact on institutional change. In short, the “juncture” itself was truly “critical,” though its effects were often delayed, and its institutional outcomes were only identifiable in the aftermath period.

What, then, made the juncture a critical moment of institutional change? Structural adjustment either aligned or de-aligned party systems programmatically, depending on whether

conservative actors directed the process of market reform and whether a major party of the left was available to channel societal resistance to market orthodoxy. As mentioned above, this societal resistance strengthened over time, driving the reactive sequences of the post-adjustment or aftermath period. These reactive sequences were moderated where conservative-led reforms aligned party systems programmatically, stabilized partisan competition, and channeled societal resistance toward institutionalized leftist parties. In countries like Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay, these parties strengthened and won national elections in the post-adjustment era, leading to relatively moderate “left turns” (see Figure 1). In countries like Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Argentina, however, where traditional center-left or populist parties implemented structural adjustment policies, the critical juncture de-aligned party systems programmatically. In so doing, it left them vulnerable to highly disruptive reactive sequences driven by social and electoral protest against market orthodoxy, culminating in the rise of more radical alternatives on the left flank of traditional party systems.

Reactive sequences, therefore, produced electoral shifts to the left across much of Latin America in the post-adjustment era, but they spawned very different types of left turns in aligned and de-aligned party systems. Although it might have been more consistent with Collier and Collier’s analysis to treat the left turn of the 2000s and its reincorporation of popular sectors as the new critical juncture, the conditioning of the left turn by political alignments during the process of market reform led me to identify this earlier period as the decisive juncture. And indeed, I suggested above a quite different way in which the left turn could be seen as analogous to Collier and Collier’s argument—i.e., as a reactive sequence that restructured party systems along a left-right axis of programmatic competition following the neoliberal convergence of the late 20th century. That axis—the most important institutional legacy of neoliberal critical junctures—is likely to endure even as the “left turn” fades and conservative actors return to the forefront across much of the region.

These differences in the temporal location of causal attribution have important implications for the conceptualization and theorization of critical junctures. In *Shaping the Political Arena*, Collier and Collier viewed antecedent conditions related to the strength of the oligarchy and patterns of labor mobilization as major sources of variation in critical junctures and their outcomes. In my work, antecedent conditions predisposed cases to experience a critical juncture in particular ways, but they did not determine institutional outcomes; instead, outcomes were shaped by more contingent alignments or configurations of actors during the critical juncture and the strategic choices they made to support or oppose market reforms. The different timing of causal attribution—i.e., whether variation is determined early or late in a complex causal chain—is thus closely tied to the degree of contingency that exists in a given critical juncture.

⁷ Slater and Simmons 2010.

Figure 1: Neoliberal Critical Junctures in Latin American Party Systems

	Cases	
	Brazil, Chile, Uruguay	Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Argentina
Critical Juncture	<i>Aligning</i> Conservative-led neoliberal reforms	<i>De-aligning</i> Neoliberal reforms adopted by populist or center-left parties
	Major party of the left in opposition	No major party of the left in opposition
	↓	↓
Reactive Sequences	Electoral strengthening of established left party Stabilize partisan competition along left-right axis	Mass social and electoral protest Weakening of traditional parties
	↓	↓
Institutional Legacies	<i>Moderate left turn</i> Institutionalized partisan competition, alternation in office	<i>Radical left turn</i> Partial or complete party system breakdown; restructure programmatic competition among new actors

Third Lesson: Alternative Models of Institutional Change

A final lesson concerns the model (or models) of institutional change associated with a critical juncture approach. The conventional wisdom associates critical junctures with abrupt, discontinuous, and path dependent institutional change, whereby specific institutional outcomes or trajectories, once established, are reproduced over time. According to Pierson, such path dependency is secured through social processes of increasing returns that are self-reinforcing and generate positive feedback effects.⁸ In some formulations, this model of institutional change approximates a punctuated equilibrium, whereby a given institutional equilibrium is disrupted and actors coordinate around a new equilibrium that achieves stasis by means of self-reproducing mechanisms.⁹

It should be recognized, however, that critical junctures may occur across a range of cases subjected to similar kinds of exogenous shocks or endogenous strains, and they can produce highly divergent institutional legacies. Some of these institutional legacies may approximate the path dependent logic of discontinuous, self-reproducing change, but others may look more like the alternative models of incremental or cumulative change analyzed by Kathleen Thelen,¹⁰ or the fluid forms of “serial replacement” analyzed by Steven Levitsky and María Victoria Murillo.¹¹ In this latter pattern, institutional arrangements are continuously reconfigured and no stable new equi-

librium is reached. All three of these patterns are readily apparent in Latin American party systems as distinct institutional legacies of the turbulent transition from state-led development to market liberalism. The comparative historical perspective offered by a critical juncture approach can shed light on the political alignments and reactive sequences that produced all three of those legacies, not just those that culminate in a new, self-reinforcing institutional equilibrium. Critical juncture approaches, then, may be applicable to the study of a wider range of institutional transformations than is conventionally understood.

Critical Junctures and Comparative Historical Analysis

In light of these lessons, what is the value-added of using a critical juncture approach and macro-level comparative historical analysis to explain change and continuity across national party systems? Party system change in contemporary Latin America can be effectively studied with other kinds of tools and methods, as seen in the important work of scholars like Jana Morgan, Jason Seawright, and Noam Lupu.¹² Using more micro-analytic approaches, these authors reached many of the same conclusions that I did about the uniquely destabilizing effects of market liberalization policies adopted by traditional labor-based populist or leftist parties. They illuminate pieces of the puzzle, particularly micro-level preferences and mechanisms, that my book glosses over.

But I believe the critical juncture approach offers unique insights as well. It sheds light on the longer-term historical and

⁸ Pierson 2000.

⁹ Krasner 1988.

¹⁰ Thelen 2004.

¹¹ Levitsky and Murillo 2014.

¹² Morgan 2011; Seawright 2012; Lupu 2016.

deep socio-structural contexts in which micro-level political processes are embedded. It helps to explain why party systems throughout the region encountered similar political and economic challenges at a particular historical stage of capitalist development; how the demise of state-led development and the transition to neoliberalism disrupted representative institutions that were embedded in the old order; and why this disruption was more thorough in some countries than others, depending on an identifiable set of antecedent conditions. Most important, perhaps, it explains why the *structural imperative* of market liberalization—every country in the region adopted structural adjustment policies by the late 1980s or early 1990s—produced *politically contingent* effects that could *not* be accounted for by preexisting institutional conditions (such as the strength of traditional party systems) or structural variables alone (such as the depth of the economic crisis or market reforms). This political contingency—the alignment of actors around the process of neoliberal reform—was what made the juncture critical, as it generated divergent, path dependent institutional trajectories. These trajectories only unfolded and crystallized over time, however, and they were not fully identifiable until the reactive sequences of the aftermath period had exerted their effects.

Such divergent effects can only be fully understood when viewed comparatively, across a significant number of cases, and when studied historically, such that temporal sequences and dialectical processes are identifiable. The macro-level comparative historical approach makes it possible to theoretically integrate processes of change across multiple social fields; we can see, for example, how economic crisis and reform alter the array of actors and interests on the social landscape, which then transforms the social bases of political representation and policy choice. Such integration may also spawn unexpected new theoretical insights. Although my book began as a study about party system change and continuity, its critical juncture approach ultimately generated theoretical propositions regarding variation in the severity of economic crises in Latin America, the levels and effects of social protest, the determinants of different types of “left turns” in the post-adjustment era, and the stability of “third wave” democracies in the region (propositions that I have explored elsewhere).

A macro-analytic approach is also sensitive to the positioning and relationships of actors within a larger strategic environment. Lupu’s concept of party “brand dilution,” for example, is closely related to my notion of “programmatically de-alignment,” but whereas brand dilution is a unit-level effect (i.e., operating at the level of an individual party organization), programmatic de-alignment is a systemic effect (i.e., it captures the systemic consequences of a major party diluting its brand). A specific party brand not only provides a basis for appealing to core constituencies; it may also provide a rationale for opponents to support a rival party organization, as captured in the notion of “negative partisanship.”¹³ For this reason, perhaps, “bait-and-switch” market reforms in Latin America not only undermined the party that diluted its brand, but also tended

to weaken their rivals as well. Programmatic de-alignment, therefore, contributed to larger patterns of party system decomposition beyond the demise of individual parties that diluted their brands.

Conclusion

The insights outlined above have been hallmarks of critical juncture approaches since the pioneering work of Collier and Collier. As this essay suggests, their classic study has inspired a wide range of scholarly efforts over the past quarter of a century to apply, refine, and amplify critical juncture arguments in a number of different institutional domains. These arguments are intrinsically complex, and their development encounters innumerable challenges and stumbling blocks. Their payoff, however, is well worth it at the end of the day, as critical juncture approaches are vital to our understanding of the sources and dynamics of institutional change.

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¹³ Abramowitz and Webster 2016.