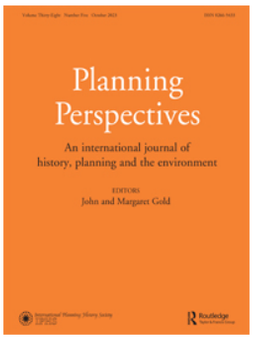

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Taking critical junctures seriously: theory and method for causal analysis of rapid institutional change

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ABSTRACT

Social, political, and economic change sometimes occurs during relatively brief periods in which previously relatively stable institutions are transformed and new approaches established. Historical institutionalists refer to these as critical junctures. Processes of incremental revision and evolution are also important, but if critical junctures sometimes produce enduring legacies, then these processes of rapid institutional change are an important topic for research and theory development. Planning history offers many examples of such relatively short periods of significant change that produced lasting and distinct outcomes in different jurisdictions. The study of critical junctures has been a major theme of comparative historical analysis and historical institutionalism for three decades. This has contributed to the development of robust conceptual frameworks detailing the structure and mechanisms of such change processes and associated research methods that are valuable for planning history and comparative urban research. This paper reviews this research, develops a conceptual framework relevant to planning history and urban governance, and points to processes of rapid institutional change characteristic of cities, suggesting that planning and urban institutions are particularly prone to critical junctures because of multi-level governance contexts, urban complexity, the impacts of urban disasters, and the challenges presented by urbanization and technological and social change.

KEYWORDS

Institutions; critical junctures; temporal analysis; timing; sequence; pacing; reactive sequences; path dependence; comparative-historical analysis

Introduction

If 2020 taught us anything, it is that the world can sometimes change quickly. The COVID pandemic created interlinked health, economic, and political crises, forced governments around the world to rapidly change policies, and revealed and exacerbated major existing issues of inequality, poverty, and systemic racism, among others. One response has been calls for fundamental change, to 'build back better', and create a 'green new deal' to break with the past and create better futures.[1] But although a crisis can quickly change ideas and discourse, and sometimes enables fast policy

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[1] Arundhati Roy published an eloquent essay in the Financial Times in April 2020, in which she argued 'Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our

change, substantive changes to major social institutions are rare and are highly likely to be contested.[2]

Yet social, political, and economic change sometimes does occur during relatively compressed periods of major change in which new institutions are established, or previously relatively stable institutions are reformed or replaced with new approaches. Revolutions obviously fall in this category of change, but so also do some reforms prompted by major economic, political, and environmental crises such as the 2008 financial crisis, or the current COVID pandemic. New challenges sometimes destabilize existing arrangements and generate conjunctures of greater institutional fluidity and innovation. Such turning points are described by institutionalists as critical junctures, and their study has been a major theme of comparative-historical analysis (CHA) and historical institutionalism (HI).[3]

Unfortunately, since Thelen's powerful 1999 critique of HI's focus on 'punctuated equilibrium' models of institutional change processes that saw most change as produced by exogenously triggered critical junctures, her charge that HI was better at explaining continuity than change, and her call for a greater focus on processes of incremental and endogenously driven change,[4] that charge has been uncritically repeated[5] even though incremental change has now been the main focus of HI analysis for over two decades.[6] Worse, Thelen's critique led many to abandon critical juncture analysis entirely, in what seems a clear case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. This paper seeks to correct that error, and to assert the value of critical juncture analysis in planning history research.

Institutions here are defined broadly as 'the formal or informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organizational structure of the polity or political economy'.[7] Cities are governed with extraordinarily dense sets of institutions that regulate everything from sidewalks to water supply, building and housing standards, land-use, public health, schools, taxes, waste disposal and many others. Planning can be understood as a practice of institutional design, application, and adaptation to meet emerging challenges and changing conditions. As Healey put it, 'Urban and regional planning and development is all about institutions. Institutions filter and translate political programs into concrete actions'.[8] Of particular interest here are the formal laws, regulations and administrative practices associated with municipal planning, land development control, and infrastructure investment. These sets of local governance institutions that regulate capital investment in urban property have developed quite differently in different jurisdictions. Planning history requires carefully theorized explanations of why we see such divergent

data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it'.

[2]As made clear by President Biden's 'Build Back Better' initiative. See Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes*; Hall, "Politics as a Process."

[3]Krasner, "Approaches to the State"; Berins Collier and Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena*; Mahoney, "Path Dependence in Historical Sociology"; Pierson, *Politics in Time*; Capoccia and Kelemen, "The Study of Critical Junctures"; Grzymala-Busse, "Time Will Tell?"; Soifer, "The Causal Logic of Critical Junctures"; Capoccia, "Critical Junctures and Institutional Change."

[4]See especially Thelen, "Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics"; Thelen "How Institutions Evolve"; Krasner, "Approaches to the State" provided an early framing of punctuated equilibrium in public policy, but since then a large and growing literature has developed, see Baumgartner et al. "Punctuated Equilibrium in Comparative Perspective"; Givel, "Evolution of the Theoretical Foundations of Punctuated Equilibrium Theory,"

[5]See e.g. Schmidt, "Taking Ideas and Discourse Seriously"; Davoudi, "Discursive Institutionalism and Planning Ideas."

[6]See e.g. Mahoney and Thelen, *Explaining Institutional Change*; Van der Heijden, "A Short History of Incremental Institutional Change"; Sorensen, "Evolving Property Rights in Japan"; Streeck and Thelen, "Introduction: Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies."

[7]Hall and Taylor, "Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms," 938.

[8]Healey foreword in Salet, "Public Norms and Aspirations," xi.

approaches, and research methods that can support causal analysis of institutional change processes. Critical junctures analysis provides both.

A major current challenge for planning history and theory is to develop better theories and methods of comparison, particularly between very different cities and countries.[9] CHA conceptual frameworks and research methods are designed to investigate institutional change processes in comparative-historical perspective.[10] Differences in the contexts, timing, pacing, sequencing, and outcomes of critical junctures of institutional development are hypothesized as a major cause of differentiation between jurisdictions. A major claim here is that carefully theorized study of critical junctures is essential for understanding the profoundly different trajectories of planning governance and urbanization in different places.

It seems clear that some (not all) urban institutions are path-dependent, subject to self-reinforcing positive feedback mechanisms that tend to reinforce continuity.[11] Pierson defined path-dependent institutions as 'social processes that exhibit positive feedback and thus generate branching patterns of historical development'.[12] Critical junctures are points where one option is chosen from two or more possibilities and new branches or developmental pathways are initiated. In path-dependent processes, each step down a pathway increases the likelihood of further steps along the same pathway, and increases the cost of reverting to some previously available option.[13] Path dependence means neither stasis nor 'lock-in', as some assume, but differentiated and self-reinforcing pathways of institutional development. In such processes, it makes sense to pay close attention to the decision points, the 'forks in the road' where pathways of institutional development diverge.

Not all institutions are the product of critical junctures, as institutions sometimes evolve incrementally and no particular starting point can be identified. But there is no doubt that some major institutional change does take place during relatively brief periods. As discussed in the next section, the development of modern planning systems at the beginning of the twentieth century provides many examples of critical junctures of institutional innovation prompted by the urban crisis of the nineteenth century.[14]

A critical junctures approach suggests four priorities for research in urban theory and planning history: First is a focus on understanding the conditions under which institutional change becomes possible. Major changes to important social institutions are by definition infrequent events, so we must ask what enables change in each case. Soifer refers to these as 'permissive conditions'.[15] The second focus is on the factors that shape the institutional choices that are made. These include the antecedent conditions before the critical juncture takes place, the actors involved, the context of the critical juncture, and the sequence of institutional development in any particular case. Soifer refers to these as 'productive conditions'.[16] The goal is to develop robust explanations of *why* specific institutions became established and not others. The third focus is to highlight the crucial importance of temporal factors including the sequencing of events during critical junctures, their timing

[9]McFarlane, "The Comparative City"; Robinson, "Cities in a World of Cities"; Stead, de Vries, and Tasan-Kok, *Planning Cultures and Histories*; Sorensen, "New Institutionalism and Planning Theory."
[10]Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences*; Mahoney and Thelen, *Advances in Comparative-Historical Analysis*.
[11]See Sorensen, "Taking Path Dependence Seriously"; "Institutions in Urban Space."
[12]Pierson, *Politics in Time*, 21.
[13]Krasner, "Approaches to the State"; Capoccia and Kelemen, "The Study of Critical Junctures."
[14]Sutcliffe, *Towards the Planned City*; Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow*; Sorensen, "Global Suburbanization in Planning History."
[15]Soifer, "The Causal Logic of Critical Junctures."
[16]Ibid.

in relation to related social processes, and their pacing. As Tilly put it, '*When* things happen in a sequence affects *how* they happen'.[17] Permissive factors combine with productive factors, shaped by timing, sequence, and pace of change to produce distinctive conjunctures of institutional change in each jurisdiction. One contribution of this paper is to suggest a fourth focus on some distinctive characteristics of critical junctures of urban institutions that are different from those of the nation-state institutions studied by most institutionalists, including issues related to multi-level governance, urban disasters, and the challenges generated by urban growth and technological change.

The next section reviews the core components of the critical juncture conceptual framework with reference to Sutcliffe's study of the origins of modern planning.[18] The third section outlines research methods for the study of critical junctures. The fourth section identifies issues of critical junctures specific to urban governance and planning. A brief concluding discussion summarizes the main insights this approach suggests.

Critical junctures in time and place

The critical juncture framework is both a theory of institutional genesis and change, and a well-developed set of research methods for the analysis of institutional change in comparative perspective. The focus is on the role of actors, events, and institutional contexts in processes that create enduring institutions. Critical juncture analysis is designed to construct arguments about historical causality and consequences. As Cappocia puts it 'The overall goal is to build and test midrange theoretical arguments that address the question of the origin or the reform of important political institutions'.[19]

A historical institutionalist perspective frames spatial planning systems as sets of institutions that are dynamic, the product of historical, political, economic, and social forces, and encourages a macro perspective on spatial planning systems that focuses on long-term processes of institutional development.[20] Institutions are understood as politically contested, the product of often intense competition, coalition building, and organizing. This perspective puts history, temporal sequences, and contingent choices during major social, economic, demographic, and technological changes at the centre of analysis.

This is a social ontology that is neither deterministic, as in 'stages of development' models, nor teleological, as in modernist conceptions of 'progress', nor is there a historicist assumption of invariable laws of history.[21] Neither is there any assumption of convergence on 'best practices', as assumed by neoclassical economists. Instead, it is assumed that history matters, and that actors can, in certain situations, have an impact on outcomes, that contests over public policies can lead to contingent choices that have lasting impacts, and that suboptimal approaches can persist even when other options are available.[22]

The suggestion is not that all or even most change takes place during critical junctures, but that there are two main modes of institutional change: incremental and more or less continuous (if bumpy) adjustment and adaptation; and critical junctures of sudden and transformative change.[23]

[17]Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes*, 14 (emphasis in original).
[18]Sutcliffe, *Towards the Planned City*.
[19]Capoccia, "Critical Junctures and Institutional Change," 167.
[20]Sorensen, "Taking Path Dependence Seriously"; Sorensen, "Global Suburbanization in Planning History"; Sorensen and Hess, "Building Suburbs Toronto-Style"; Taylor, "Rethinking Planning Culture."
[21]Streeck, "Epilogue Comparative-Historical Analysis."
[22]David, "Clio and the Economics of QWERTY"; Pierson, *Politics in Time*.

The claim here is simply that some important institutions do see relatively brief periods of major institutional change followed by periods of greater institutional continuity, and that it is therefore important to understand and be able to analyse and compare these processes.

The logic underlying this pattern can be explained in part as a consequence of path dependence and the challenges of organizing and achieving change.[24] With path-dependent institutions, incremental adaptive change is sometimes suppressed by powerful defenders of the status quo even while the institutional context or setting continues to change, so pressure for change sometimes builds up until it is released by some combination of factors. In such cases, periods of relative stability are likely to be punctuated by periods of significant change. Where conjunctures permitting change are infrequent, critical junctures will likely be a more important mode of change.

Similarly, if we understand institutions as the legacy of prior rounds of conflict and coalition building, and as unequally resource and power-distributive, then institutional change requires both coalitions of actors who engage in processes of institutional reform and a 'window of opportunity' to push their approach forward.[25] Hall emphasizes that coalition building for institutional change is complex, and multiple factors must come together for policy change coalitions to be successful.[26] Such factors, including dissatisfaction with current arrangements, convincing alternative approaches, shared policy objectives, willingness and capacity to press for change, and/or external factors such as economic or social crisis, are unlikely to be normally present and are in practice rare. But sometimes multiple factors converge in time and place to enable conjunctures of major change to important social institutions. Hall describes this as 'multiple conjunctural causation' and suggests that the rarity of such conjunctures tends to reinforce the pattern of periods of greater stability between periods of major reform.[27]

In the study of critical junctures a seminal work is Berins Collier and Collier's '*Shaping the Political Arena*', which focused on the timing, context, and consequences of the incorporation of labour movements into national politics in Latin America.[28] This book was pioneering in its careful definition of critical junctures, and was ground-breaking in linking critical junctures with path dependence and developing a comparative research approach that has been widely adopted. They suggest 'A critical juncture may be defined as a period of significant change, which typically occurs in distinct ways in different countries (or in other units of analysis) and which is hypothesized to produce distinct legacies'.[29] This definition is valuable for its emphasis on institutional change processes that produce long-run *differentiation between jurisdictions*.

In this interpretation a critical juncture must satisfy three conditions: First, there must be significant change in important social institutions, not just a minor adjustment. Second, the critical juncture must produce an enduring legacy, and third there should be different outcomes in different cases, as even if there is a major change and legacy, if the same change and legacy happened in all cases, there may have been no real alternative, and no real choice involved.

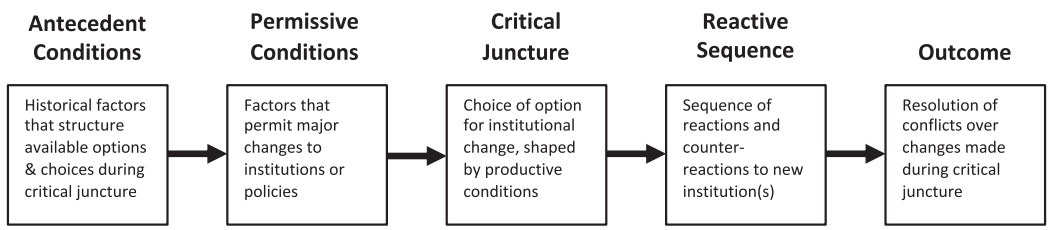
Mahoney suggests a slightly different definition:

[23]Hall, in "Policy Paradigms, Social Learning, and the State" argued convincingly that critical junctures can result from paradigm shifts that change basic interpretive frameworks, as in the shift from Keynesian economic policy to monetarism by the UK government; see Howlett and Mingone, "Charles Lindblom is Alive and Well" and Jones and Baumgartner, "From There to Here" for revews of punctuated equilibrium arguments in policy studies.
[24]Hall, "Politics as a Process."
[25]Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*; Mahoney and Thelen, *Explaining Institutional Change*; Pierson, *Politics in Time*.
[26]Hall, "Politics as a Process."
[27]Ibid.
[28]Berins Collier and Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena*.
[29]Ibid, 29.

> Critical Junctures are choice points when a particular option is adopted from among two or more alternatives. These junctures are 'critical' because once an option is selected, it becomes progressively more difficult to return to the initial point when multiple alternatives were still available.[30]

In Mahoney's framing, the choice point need not produce significant change, because the choice might be to stick with the existing arrangement. Capoccia and Kelemen develop this idea, suggesting that 'If an institution enters a critical juncture, in which several options are possible, the outcome may involve the restoration of the pre critical juncture status quo. Hence, change is not a necessary element of a critical juncture'.[31] Including 'non-change' in the set of possible outcomes of critical junctures invites analysis of 'near misses', and counterfactual analysis, discussed below.

Berins Collier and Collier analysed critical junctures as sequences of steps.[32] First is the pre critical juncture period that they refer to as antecedent conditions. Second is the 'cleavage' or 'crisis' that triggers the critical juncture. Third is the critical juncture itself, in which a new institution or policy (the 'legacy') is selected from among multiple possibilities through 'mechanisms of production' and becomes path dependent because of 'mechanisms of reproduction'. Fourth is a hypothesized 'end of legacy'. Mahoney adopted and diagrammed this sequence with an important modification, adding a 'reactive sequence' of conflicting reactions and counterreactions generated by the institutional change generated during the critical juncture, that eventually are resolved as a new period of relative stability emerges (see Figure 1).[33]



Source: Adapted and modified from Mahoney (2000)

Figure 1. Analytic structure of critical juncture sequence.

This idea of a sequence of steps forms the core of the comparative research method. Cases are selected in which it is hypothesized that a comparable critical juncture has taken place, and in each case examined, the antecedent conditions are compared, the nature of the cleavage or crisis and the critical juncture producing new policies is detailed, and the reactive sequence, mechanisms of production, mechanisms of reproduction, and the legacies of the critical juncture are compared. In Figure 1, I add Soifer's concept of permissive conditions to Mahoney's adaptation of Berins Collier and Collier's original sequence diagram.

Critical junctures are often understood as triggered by a crisis that undermines the legitimacy of existing institutions and creates openings for policy entrepreneurs to reshape existing institutions and create new arrangements.[34] The claim is that if during a crisis existing institutions

[30]Mahoney, *The Legacies of Liberalism*, 6–7.
[31]Capoccia and Kelemen, "The Study of Critical Junctures," 352.
[32]Berins Collier and Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena*, 30.
[33]Mahoney, "Path Dependence in Historical Sociology."
[34]Berins Collier and Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena*; Katznelson, "Periodization and Preferences"; Capoccia and Kelemen, "The Study of Critical Junctures."

fail to provide an adequate response then pressure will emerge to create institutions that will.[35] Mahoney emphasizes the importance of agency at such times: 'In many cases, critical junctures are moments of relative structural indeterminism when willful actors shape outcomes in a more voluntaristic fashion than normal circumstances permit'.[36] Crises undermine the stability of existing institutions by exposing their inadequacies, weakening their legitimacy. According to Capoccia and Kelemen

> critical junctures are characterized by a situation in which the structural (that is, economic, cultural, ideological, organizational) influences on political action are significantly relaxed for a relatively short period, with two main consequences: the range of plausible choices open to powerful political actors expands substantially and the consequences of their decisions for the outcome of interest are potentially much more momentous.[37]

Here Soifer's distinction between the permissive conditions and productive conditions shaping critical junctures is valuable. Soifer argues that there is an important difference between 'the *permissive conditions* that represent the easing of the constraints of structure and make change possible and the *productive conditions* that, in the presence of the permissive conditions, produce the outcome or range of outcomes that are then reproduced'.[38]

Soifer suggests that

> Permissive conditions can be defined as those factors or conditions that *change the underlying context to increase the causal power of agency or contingency and thus the prospects for divergence*. The mechanisms of reproduction of the previous critical juncture are undermined, and this creates a new context in which divergence from the previous stable pattern can emerge.[39]

This framing of the conditions that make major change possible goes beyond the idea of crisis to include a much wider set of factors allowing change, and is useful for studies of urban governance. For example, substantive and enduring institutions are sometimes produced simply by the need for new policy approaches to emerging issues, or by changes originating at other levels of governance that lack the characteristics of crisis, as discussed in Section 'Distinctive characteristics of urban critical junctures'.

But permissive conditions by themselves are not sufficient for change to emerge. It is also necessary that convincing alternative approaches are available, policy actors are willing to fight for them, and mechanisms exist that allow major institutions to be contested and revised. These are what Soifer refers to as productive conditions, which 'can be defined as *the aspects of a critical juncture that shape the initial outcomes that diverge across cases*'.[40] Productive conditions are the factors that structure the sets of actors, change mechanisms, and choices of institutional change during a critical juncture. These include the antecedent conditions that shape perceptions of what change is appropriate and possible and shape institutional capacity and bias, the relative power and influence of interested actors, and the available mechanisms that permit and structure institutional reform processes.

Both permissive conditions and productive conditions are necessary, and by themselves each are insufficient to produce meaningful change. Soifer therefore argues that there are two distinct ways

[35]Katznelson, "Periodization and Preferences."
[36]Mahoney, *The Legacies of Liberalism*, 6–7.
[37]Capoccia and Kelemen, "The Study of Critical Junctures," 343.
[38]Soifer, "The Causal Logic of Critical Junctures," 1573 (emphasis in original).
[39]Ibid, 1574.
[40]Ibid, 1575.

in which crises or other choice points can fail to produce change.[41] If permissive conditions are absent, e.g. if existing institutions or political coalitions are still strong and perceived to be effective, then it may be impossible for advocates to gain enough support for new approaches. On the other hand, change may fail to materialize even though permissive conditions exist, if productive conditions are not sufficient, e.g. if a policy change coalition lacks a compelling alternative policy, or sufficient power and access to relevant change mechanisms. Soifer's approach identifies the end of the critical juncture as the moment when the period of permissive conditions ends for whatever reason, whether or not institutional change has occurred. This may be because a strong new coalition is formed or an effective new institution is established, or because of exogenous developments, such as an end to a destabilizing economic crisis or war.

Mahoney argues that a focus on critical junctures helps to avoid the problem of infinite regress into the past in search for the origins of institutions, because we begin by identifying a clear starting point for the institution of interest. As he put it: 'Critical junctures provide a basis for cutting into the seamless flow of history'.[42] Major institutional change is shaped by the conditions and setting in which it emerged, but those conditions were produced by a yet earlier set of conditions, and the researcher struggles to find a convincing starting point. Booth encounters this challenge in his excavation of the institutional origins of British discretionary development control, pushing his analysis ever farther back in time, ultimately tracing its origins to twelfth-century feudal understandings of property.[43] With institutions that emerge from critical junctures, however, although it is still necessary to analyse the antecedent conditions from which the critical juncture emerges, a clear starting point can be determined.

Sutcliffe's remarkable book 'Toward the Planned City' is an excellent example of a comparative approach that adopts a critical juncture style of analysis, although it was published a decade before Berins Collier and Collier, and does not employ the language of critical junctures.[44] The urban crisis of the nineteenth century saw major urban problems including the spread of epidemic diseases, worsening living conditions for the poor, serious pollution problems, increasing traffic congestion, and chaotic urban expansion at the fringe. The crisis also generated permissive conditions in the form of an increasingly widespread understanding that existing institutions were unable to solve the grave environmental and housing problems that were emerging, and support grew for stronger planning even though property owners resisted attempts to impose greater restrictions on land development. The genius of Sutcliffe's book, however, is its detailed examination of productive conditions in each of the four countries examined, Germany, Britain, the United States, and France.

In Sutcliffe's analysis the productive conditions reviewed include antecedent conditions, the characteristics of planning advocacy coalitions and policy-deliberation processes, economic and social conditions, and the institutional change mechanisms available in each country that shaped the kinds of responses that emerged. Antecedent conditions examined include the existing planning powers, legal frameworks, urban governance capacities, and political system in each country. For example, Germany had inherited a relatively effective pre-industrial framework of municipal intervention that formed the basis of the new planning systems created during the second half of the nineteenth century. Particularly important was the statutory power of municipal governments to lay out new streets to accommodate urban growth and compel landowners to follow the new building lines thus created. This was expanded relatively early into a system to

[41]Ibid, 1584.
[42]Mahoney, *The Legacies of Liberalism*, 8.
[43]Booth, *Planning by Consent*.
[44]Sutcliffe, *Towards the Planned City*.

comprehensively plan new street networks with extension plans well before other powers to regulate private activity such as zoning had been developed.

The urban crisis clearly undermined faith in existing institutions, and helped to solidify support for the idea that regulating private land development was an acceptable and even necessary change to make. But as Sutcliffe shows, differences in permissive conditions were a major variable that influenced the development of planning in each of the four countries. A major theme is that France was a laggard that fell behind in the development of modern planning during the second half of the nineteenth century in part because in France the crisis was not as severe. This he explains primarily with reference to the existence of several effective planning tools such as those employed by Haussmann in rebuilding Paris, plus relatively slower urban growth, more limited industrialization, and better urban conditions, than, for example, in the UK. Similarly, in the U.S. housing conditions for the middle and lower middle classes were relatively good compared to the European countries as a result of abundant cheap land and building materials, and labour shortages that tended to push up wages, producing less urgency of reform, and coalitions of planning advocates led primarily by big business rather than middle-class social movements as in Britain.[45]

Sutcliffe's claim is clearly that a similar critical juncture of planning genesis is happening in the four cases, yet with very different outcomes that produced enduring legacies. Major differences are explained not just by differing antecedent conditions and experience of urban crisis, but also by the differing actors and political processes that produced institutional reform in each country. Each state had different governance arrangements, revenue sources, urban infrastructure systems, legal frameworks for land ownership and land development, and financial systems. For example, while both UK and France were unitary states directly supervising municipalities, Germany and the U.S. had federal systems with Lander and States respectively making municipal law and policy. Industrial expansion also occurred differently in each case in terms of timing relative to other countries, and in terms of industrial mix and location. Sutcliffe does not label later developments as path-dependent, but he does suggest that his analysis is revealing of the origins of enduringly different approaches in each country.[46] Sutcliffe brilliantly deployed the historian's craft in his comparative analysis of the origins of planning, but his research method is more implicit than explicit. A major contribution of recent work in HI and CHA is the development of research methods for such studies.

Sequences, timing, pacing, and causal inference

A fundamental contribution of work on critical junctures has been the development of a robust set of conceptual frameworks and research methods for causal analysis in the study of processes of institutional change, building on the contributions of Berins Collier and Collier and Mahoney,[47] including on sequences and timing,[48] comparative process tracing,[49] pacing,[50] and counterfactual analysis[51] among others.

[45]Ibid.
[46]Ibid, 208.
[47]Berins Collier and Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena*; Mahoney, "Path Dependence in Historical Sociology."
[48]Hacker, "The Historical Logic of National Health Insurance"; Pierson, *Politics in Time*; Howlett, "Process Sequencing Policy Dynamics"; Grzymala-Busse, "Time Will Tell?"; Falleti and Mahoney, "Comparative Sequential Method."
[49]There is no space here for a review of process tracing methods, see Bennett and Elman, "Complex Causal Relations and Case Study Methods"; Collier, "Understanding Process-Tracing"; Mahoney, "The Logic of Process Tracing Tests"; Bennett and Checkel, *Process Tracing from Metaphor to Analytic Tool*; Bengtsson and Ruonavaara, "Comparative Process Tracing".
[50]Sewell, "Three Temporalities"; Roland, "Understanding Institutional Change"; Grzymala-Busse, "Time Will Tell?"; Falleti and Mahoney, "Comparative Sequential Method."
[51]Mahoney, "Path Dependence in Historical Sociology" Capoccia and Kelemen, "The Study of Critical Junctures."

It makes sense to start with sequences. According to Mahoney 'Reactive sequences are chains of temporally ordered and causally connected events. These sequences are "reactive" in the sense that each event within the sequence is in part a reaction to temporally antecedent events'.[52] Faletti and Mahoney distinguish a number of different types of sequences and sequencing arguments including 'reactive sequences' of reactions and counterreactions to major changes; 'self-amplifying sequences' associated with path dependence and 'self-eroding sequences' associated with spirals of decline; causal sequences where events are causally linked; and 'purely temporal' sequences in which there is no suggestion of causal links but the timing and sequence of events impacts outcomes.[53] As suggested in Figure 1 critical junctures are often followed by reactive sequences, so their analysis is necessary for the study of critical junctures.

As Mahoney argues 'Whereas self-reinforcing sequences are characterized by processes of reproduction that reinforce early events, reactive sequences are marked by backlash processes that transform and perhaps reverse early events'.[54] For example, Sykora's analysis of the transition from communism to neoliberal capitalism in Eastern European countries is explained as a revolution that led to a sequence of reactions in urban space and property law in which new path dependencies become established through a series of steps that in several countries took the form of reactions and counterreactions to the initial revolutionary change of economic system.[55] This reactive sequence seems still ongoing and it is too soon to suggest that a new, stable situation has been achieved in all the jurisdictions affected.

An example of a self-amplifying urban sequence is gentrification, where new investment in a low-income neighbourhood makes it more attractive and drives up property values, encouraging more inward investment. A self-reinforcing urban institutional sequence can occur where existing institutions allow profitable capital investment in property development that reinforces the economic and political power or the development industry in particular jurisdictions.[56] Self-eroding sequences are also common in cities, as for example when the closure of a major department store in a retail area results in less customers shopping there, other stores lose revenue, and are forced to close, reinforcing the cycle of decline. Similar self-eroding sequences can be triggered by loss of population, that leads to lower property values, lower tax revenues, and higher property tax rates to pay for existing services, which push more residents out or discourage potential incomers, as has happened in some declining towns in Japan.[57]

The focus here is on the causal, temporal, ordered, and paced sequences diagrammed in Figure 2. Here X represents a starting condition, ~X a different starting condition, Y the outcome at the end of a sequence and ~Y as a different outcome. Causal relationships are represented with arrows (->), while non-causal relationships are represented with a dash (–). Examples from the literature are noted in brackets.

Figure 2 shows the different types of sequences. A major distinction is between causal sequences where a causal relationship is seen between each step and the next step (A causes B, which causes C), and strictly temporal sequences where no causality is implied but a different order of events is expected to produce a different outcome (if B happens before A a different outcome is produced).

[52]Mahoney, "Path Dependence in Historical Sociology," 509.
[53]Falleti and Mahoney, "Comparative Sequential Method," 221.
[54]Mahoney, "Path Dependence in Historical Sociology," 526.
[55]Sykora, "Revolutionary Change."
[56]This is the basic concept of 'growth machine' analysis, Molotch, "The City as a Growth Machine."
[57]Sorensen, "Liveable Cities in Japan"; see also Pallagst, "The Planning Research Agenda."

	Ordered	Paced
Causal sequences X -> A -> B -> C -> Y ~X -> ~A -> ~B -> ~C -> ~Y (e.g. Sutcliffe 1981, Dąbrowski and Piskorek 2018)	**Causally ordered sequences** A -> B -> C -> D -> E -> Y A -> B -> E -> D -> C -> ~ Y (e.g. Rodgers 1998)	**Causally paced sequences** Slow A -> B -> Y Fast A -> B -> ~ Y (e.g. Marcotullio 2007)
Strictly Temporal sequence A – B -> Y B – A -> ~Y (e.g. Grzymala-Busse 2011)	**Temporally ordered sequences** A – B – C -> Y C – B – A -> ~ Y (e.g. Abu Lughod 1999)	**Temporally paced sequences** Slow A – B -> Y Fast A – B -> ~ Y (e.g. Abu Lughod 1999)

Adapted from Faletti and Mahoney (2015: 217)

Figure 2. Causal, temporal, ordered, and paced sequences.

Each of these can be further divided into ordered and paced sequences, depending on whether the pacing or speed of events is significant.

An excellent example of a causal sequence is analysed by Dąbrowski and Piskorek in their 2018 paper examining differing pathways to the development of regional planning capacity in the process of accession to the EU by Poland, Czech Republic, and Hungary.[58] The critical junctures are identical in all three cases, so timing, sequencing, and pacing are not distinguishing factors. First was the 1989 collapse of the Eastern Bloc and transition towards liberal democracy and capitalism including the re-establishment of local self-government and planning capacity after decades of highly centralized government. Second was the opening of negotiations on accession to the EU and demands from the EU for major institutional change to meet the conditions for membership, including the development of regional planning authorities capable of managing Structural Funds. Third was actual accession to the EU and the implementation of cohesion policies, including access to EU funding. The choices made at each point had important impacts on the set of possibilities available at the next point, and different choices by each country led to divergent pathways of institutional development. A clear causal relationship is established between choices made early in the sequence and differing outcomes later in the sequence.

Grzymala-Busse usefully points to the very different implications of timing and sequencing for causal arguments, even though these are often grouped as a single set of issues.[59] The sequence of events matters greatly to analysis, especially when trying to make effective causal arguments with process tracing. Sequence is primarily a question of the order of events internal to a process. Questions of timing, on the other hand, concern the relationship of a process to external events and conditions, particularly in comparative studies of similar critical junctures that occurred at different

[58]Dąbrowski and Piskorek, "Development of Strategic Spatial Planning in Central and Eastern Europe."
[59]Grzymala-Busse, "Time Will Tell?"

times for each case. In this way, 'Fundamental "early events" in path-dependent analyses refer to their order in a *sequence*, not their *timing*, and they matter because they condition future events, not because they unfold differently'.[60] The timing of a critical juncture relative to broader conditions and to other jurisdictions shapes its productive conditions including the set of choices available to actors and their relative costs, and also shapes the experience of different jurisdictions if some of them reap benefits from first-mover or late-comer advantages.[61]

Rodgers demonstrates the importance of the sequencing of critical junctures of institutional development in his study of urban politics in the 'progressive age' of early twentieth-century United States.[62] He shows that the sequence of events was a key factor in the development of municipal ownership of public utilities such as water, gas, electrical, and transit systems, and that a major factor allowing successful municipalization of transit systems in the UK and Germany compared to the U.S. was that local governments that had earlier established municipal gas distribution companies generated valuable institutional capacity and large profits, and were much more likely to be successful in managing complex transit systems. He argues that in the U.S. the timing of the municipal enterprise movement was later, leading to a different sequence of development because gas and electrical systems were already established and were virtually all privately owned, and this contributed to the failure of most U.S. attempts to establish municipally owned streetcar systems.

In addition to distinguishing between causal sequences and purely temporal sequences, Falleti and Mahoney also suggest that there is an important difference between purely temporal arguments where 'timing matters in the sense that the temporal relationship among events is consequential' and paced sequential arguments in which 'the speed or duration of events – not their timing relative to one another – is causally consequential'.[63]

In many social processes, the speed or pace of the process makes a difference to outcomes, and this can be true for both causal sequences and purely temporal sequences. For example, it has often been remarked that a distinguishing feature of contemporary urbanization is its great speed. Whereas most European countries took about 500 years to move from 10% to 50% urban, many Asian and African countries are now making the same transition in 20–50 years.[64] As Marcotullio showed, in such compressed environmental transitions speed of urbanization is a decisive variable where developing countries are dealing with sanitation issues, industrial pollution issues, and green environmental issues at the same time, instead of sequentially and more slowly as in the developed countries.[65] Pacing has implications not only for urban forms, infrastructure, and environmental quality, but also for the development of governance and civic engagement, as Grzymala-Busse argues: 'rapid institutional building is unlikely to involve popular deliberation or consultation and is much more likely the product of elite bargaining and imposition'.[66]

Abu-Lughod makes both timing and pacing major parts of her comparison of the development of New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles.[67] New York was already the dominant American metropolis when Chicago was a frontier camp with a few houses and Los Angeles was still a cattle ranching region of Mexico. New York's status as the main U.S. financial and trading centre played a decisive role in Chicago's growth, providing capital, markets, and logistics for industries like

[60]Ibid, 1290 (emphasis in original).
[61]Ibid, 1289.
[62]Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*.
[63]Falleti and Mahoney, "Comparative Sequential Method," 218–219.
[64]Wan and Zhang, "Accelerating Urbanization."
[65]Marcotullio, "Variations of Urban Environmental Transitions."
[66]Grzymala-Busse, "Time Will Tell?" 1272.
[67]Abu-Lughod, *New York, Chicago, Los Angeles*.

food processing but limiting the room for finance and marketing industries to develop. The timing of New York's fast population growth before the advent of mass public transit or cars meant that New York developed extremely high-density slums and industries in its core area during the period when most working people walked to work. Chicago's growth, on the other hand, exploded in tandem with the spread of its public transit system, allowing a much lower density and more dispersed pattern of development, and Los Angeles attained its peak of growth after mass automobile use, producing an even more radically decentralized pattern. Abu-Lughod also argues that the timing and pacing of growth (especially periods of rapid expansion) in relation to economic cycles, wars, changing technologies, and political developments were key factors differentiating the developmental pathways of the three cities.

Distinctive characteristics of urban critical junctures

Cities have institutional settings that are quite different from those of the nation-state institutions studied by most historical institutionalists. Firstly, local governments exist in multi-level governance systems and are subordinate to upper-level governments. Second, local governments always operate in complex, multi-actor, and multi-level network governance systems in which there are major limits to autonomous action and routine dependence on or subordination to other actors. Third, disasters play a greater role driving institutional change of local governments than for national governments because of their spatially concentrated impacts and their sudden demands for new institutions, the timing of which can be significant. Fourth is that processes of urbanization and technological change trigger demands for new institutions, some of which prove enduring.

Cities and local governments occupy a different structural position in relation to policy and institutional change processes than national governments, or provincial/state governments that have constitutional status. In most unitary states like Britain, France, and Japan, the national government makes laws to enable and regulate local government, planning, and land development processes, and delegates implementation responsibility to local governments. In federal systems such as Germany, the US, and Canada, planning laws are made by Lander, States, and Provinces respectively, and again, implementation is delegated to local governments. In all cases legislative authority and implementation responsibility are located at different levels of government, generating distinct challenges of multi-level governance.[68] Legislative changes initiated by upper levels of multi-level governance systems often prompt major institutional change by local governments, and can lead to the establishment of institutions and capacities that sometimes prove durable. Planning systems imposed on colonies by the metropolis were often similarly unilateral and consequential, and in many cases led to developmental pathways that have been hard to reform.[69] Planning practice at the municipal scale is repeatedly punctuated by bursts of exogenously driven institutional change to which local practice must adapt.

There is a great variety of such exogenously driven institutional change at the local government level, including changes to enabling legislation defining local government powers and responsibilities, changes to permitted taxes, environmental responsibilities and standards, and to mandates for delivery of public health, housing, and education. Senior governments can re-organize the territory of local governments through amalgamations, the creation of new levels of governance or the

[68]See, e.g. the special issue on European Spatial planning edited by Dabrowski and Lingua, *Planning Perspectives*, 2018, Vol. 33, No. 4; and Sorensen, "Multiscalar Governance and Institutional Change" in that issue.
[69]See, e.g. Blanc, "Unpacking the Ecuadorean Spatial Planning Law."

abolition of others, as happened in the 1980s UK during Thatcher's abolition of the metropolitan governments, and in Toronto in 1998 when Metro Toronto was abolished and the six lower-tier governments were forcibly amalgamated into a new City of Toronto. Longstanding programmes and funding such as for social housing or refugee settlement can be suddenly terminated at the national level but the issues that they were meant to address do not similarly disappear, so in most cases, new arrangements must quickly be developed. Two jurisdictions confronted by a similar legislative change may make different choices for contingent and passing reasons.

The imposition of such change by senior levels of government almost always requires a series of choices for local governments, and these choices are often consequential, establishing new developmental pathways, capacities, and/or deficits, changing the relative power of policy actors, and establishing facts on the ground that have long-term consequences. As Rast argues, a key factor reinforcing path-dependent trajectories is the self-reinforcing impact of the capacity built by city agencies.[70]

Critical junctures in local governance therefore have a different logic than those of national-level institutions. A weakening of the legitimacy or effectiveness of existing institutions during a crisis is not required when change is driven by a national government, or if entirely new institutions are established where there were none.

A second and related characteristic of critical junctures of institutional change at the local government scale is generated by the multi-centred and networked quality of local governance. Magnusson describes local governance as operating within complex environments with a 'multiplicity of political authorities in different registers, ones that are there for different purposes and heed the call of different drummers' and are seldom simple hierarchies.[71] Whereas critical junctures at national scales can be decisively resolved by limited sets of national-level actors, for local governments power is usually more diffused and networked, resulting in much more complex patterns and processes of institutional change. Hall's concept of 'multiple conjunctural causation' and claim about the rarity of such conjunctures is relevant here, suggesting that exogenously generated critical junctures such as the top-down changes just described will be particularly important.[72] Thinking about urban critical junctures must take urban governance complexity explicitly into account.

Disasters are a third characteristic driver of rapid institutional change in cities. Events like major fires, earthquakes, floods, epidemics, and wars have likely always triggered critical junctures for cities. Major fires prompted the development of building codes, but also fire departments, piped water systems, and rebuilding plans. Natural disasters generate the permissive conditions for major institutional change by revealing the shortcomings of existing approaches and the high cost of inaction. Urban fires, such as the Great London Fire of 1666, or the Chicago fire of 1871 prompted reforms of building codes to mandate fire-resistant building forms, that also had an enduring impact not only on subsequent built forms, but also on pathways of institutional development in each jurisdiction.[73] Disasters also impact national and regional governments, but for cities the spatially concentrated impacts and demands to rebuild differently have often prompted political and institutional changes. And the timing of disaster in relation to other contextual factors

[70]Rast, "Annexation Policy in Milwaukee."
[71]Magnusson, *Politics of Urbanism*, 4.
[72]Hall, "Politics as a Process."
[73]See e.g. Hebbert, "The Long After-Life of Christopher Wren's Short-Lived London." Fischler, "Development Controls in Toronto in the Nineteenth Century."

such as economy, planning ideals, and legal frameworks creates an important factor that differentiates between cities.

A fourth distinctive feature of urban critical junctures is that processes of urbanization themselves can generate critical junctures of institutional change. Urbanization demands continuous choices, some of which are trivial, but others have enduring impacts. Urbanization is transformative not just of economies and society, but also of space, place, and governance systems, and often prompts the re-structuring of municipal territorial geographies, through annexation and the incorporation of new municipal units, and the scaling up of existing administrative units from town to city, and the re-scaling of governance through the creation of regional planning approaches and infrastructures. And new challenges often demand new institutions where there were none, as for example with the creation of municipal water and transit systems or the development of modern planning itself – with 'modern planning' defined as systems that include municipal government powers to differentially regulate private property development.

Contingent processes of institutional development, and the timing and sequencing of urbanization and institutional change relative to other factors such as transportation technology, financial markets, and industrialization differentiate the choices made by different jurisdictions (whether cities, regions, or countries). Urbanization processes are in this way generative not only of differing urban forms and collections of urban infrastructures and investments, but are also always generative of differentiated sets of institutions and capacities in each jurisdiction.

Conclusions

A major task of planning history is to develop robust explanations of *why* there is such great variation in planning systems between jurisdictions. The case has been made here that the widespread dismissal of critical juncture analysis over the last two decades has been a serious mistake. There is no doubt that many planning institutions were created in critical junctures of relatively rapid institutional change, and that differences of permissive and productive conditions and of timing, sequence, and pacing were major factors that led to varying outcomes in different cases. Sutcliffe's seminal analysis of the creation of the first modern planning laws in four countries was a study of critical junctures.

This paper suggests that carefully theorized study of critical junctures is essential for understanding the profoundly different trajectories of planning governance and urbanization in different places. Critical junctures analysis provides a robust conceptual framework for the comparative-historical analysis of major social institutions. This conception of institutional change suggests specific kinds of research questions: what were the antecedent conditions before the critical juncture; what were the permissive conditions that opened potential for change to major social institutions; what were the productive conditions that shaped the particular outcomes in each case; what were the characteristics of the reactive sequence following major change during which greater institutional stability emerged; what can we learn from each critical juncture about the nature of institutional change mechanisms regulating and permitting change to specific sets of institutions?

Planning and local governance processes see distinctive types of critical juncture compared to national governance processes, particularly because of multi-level governance systems where institutional change is often imposed unilaterally from above, triggering critical junctures of institutional change at the local level. And urban planning and governance institutions also seem prone to critical junctures because urban complexity often makes major institutional change difficult, while processes of urban growth, technological advances, and urban disasters create

demands for change that sometimes result in critical junctures of rapid institutional change. Sometimes upper-level governments change the rules in unexpected or unwanted ways that require institutional changes in response. Understanding the conditions and consequences of such critical junctures and the ways that relevant actors engage in contestation over urban planning institutions in reactive sequences is important if we hope to understand and compare planning histories.

Planning history and planning theory seem certain to benefit from a much closer attention to such processes of institutional genesis. It is past time to take critical juncture analysis in planning history seriously.

Disclosure statement

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