

COMMONS FORUM RESPONSE

Communities, Institutions and Institutional Trajectories

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The crucial element in David Bray's arguments is many academic ventures lack an advocacy perspective which refuels supportive initiatives within the communities 'innovation.' Armed with cultural, legal, and economic resources, communities in Mexico described by Bray they study. As a researcher I myself have received have 'evolved' to exploit market opportunities without hospitality, security and acceptance from the communities I worked in. I wish I could be sure whether losing internal cohesion. However, the language we use to understand, or even describe, this process has lagged my work always had reciprocal benefits for the behind. David Bray takes an important step towards communities. One of the more interesting books I read correcting that gap by moving beyond 'conditional recently was Water conflicts in India: a million revolts in cooperators' and 'dominant strategies' in the essay. My the making which has a number of cases where response seeks to push it a little bit further. Institutions collective action was undertaken by Indian communities are most commonly understood as equilibria. This where not all cases had a satisfactory ending- happily, if conceptualization, borrowed from game theory, has not "ever after" for the community.

In the global crisis the threats stress and tensions and common property, with good effect. It has helped us embattled communities face in maintaining their understand the internal dynamics of groups, and to traditional right and access to common property predict success and failure (variously defined along many resources should not only be a source of research dimensions) within a broad range of initial conditions. But studies for conferences but have a practical value of institutions-as-equilibria alone does not help us in defusing tensions, upholding community rights and investigating change.

An evolutionary game-theoretic perspective, such as the one pioneered by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, for example, also only takes us so far in understanding the nature and direction of institutional change. We know institutions change in response to specific stimuli but we are still at a loss for words to theorize the relationship of this change to outcomes we are interested in, such as equity and/or sustainability. The language of institutions, which constrains us to think of institutions as either the cause of sustainability or the effect of inequality, gets in the way.

There may be cause-and-effect relationships; I do not wish to deny their importance. But there may be more to institutions than just causing this or being the effect of that. A crucial dimension is missing. I want to suggest that institutions not only evolve, but they co-evolve with the outcomes we are interested in. In a simple, but hopefully not simplistic, portrayal, institutions mediate the influence of macro-processes such as demography, markets, and technology on outcomes on multiple dimensions. Following the call for simplicity, let us assume there are two dimensions of interest – equity and sustainability.

These could be environment and development, or within-group and over-time distribution; the point is the same. After mediating the influence of macro-processes, institutions themselves change in response to the new outcomes. This is the pathway of institutional change, working through the reconfiguration of the preferences of the agents. We could just as well call them identities or subjectivities instead of

preferences; they relate to how agents interact with each other under constraints defined by the rules of the game (or institutions!). Over a long period of time, institutions co-evolve with the outcomes, a movement which can be described as a trajectory.

Some of these institutional trajectories will be characterized by improvements in both equity and sustainability, while others would describe improvements in one or neither. The communities described by David Bray, if I interpret correctly, would fall into the first category, which could be labeled as sustainable development under certain circumstances. Our task is to compare institutional trajectories that correspond to such positive and not-so-positive outcomes on multiple dimensions of interest, and identify the conditions that facilitate positive outcomes. The missing part in David Bray's essay, perhaps of future interest, is a comparison with the failures.

Clearly, the institutional trajectories described by Bray are not the same, and neither would be the outcomes. Therein lays a fruitful source of comparison. David Bray's essay begins the process of describing the trajectories of institutional change in Mexico.

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