

Analysing Complex Political Dynamic by Applying the Concept of Regime Change

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Abstract

The paper highlights the critical relevance of the concept of regime change in analysing complex, incremental change. Regime as applied in this paper refers to the middle level of cohesion in the political economy of a state, the formal or informal organisation at the centre of political power. The overall focus is on the occurrence and dynamic of complex political change: Why it happens; what are the drivers for incremental political change. It is argued that regime change, with its focus on the change within the political economy of a country is an undervalued concept for addressing and evaluating complex, political change.

Keywords: Complex political change; political economy, regime; crisis, state theory

Introduction

This paper focuses on the challenges in analysing the occurrence and dynamic of complex and incremental political-economic change in the context of a particular constellation of the political economy of a state.

Such a frame of analysis allows the researcher to gain a deeper insight into complex political-economic change as we can observe in China over the past thirty years, which gave rise to controversial discussion about the nature and the extent of that change and, an interwoven theme, to what extent China's development success represents a model in its own right.

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Another controversial case of national political economy transformation can be identified in Japan's economic rise during the 1970-80s period and the subsequent stagnation. In different ways both cases provide a challenge for the established dichotomy between state versus market, government interference and supposed market efficiency. The concept of regime change also offers potential deeper insight into cases like Britain's change from a Keynesianist model to a liberal market one, described as Thatcherist.

This wide application of regime change as a concept for analysing complex political change is based on characterising the regime itself, that is, the middle level of cohesion in the political economy of a nation state. It is stressed that only when we undertake an analysis, which focuses on changes within a specific political-economic setting, defined as regime, will we be able to analyse the extent and dynamic of political-economic change that occurred over a specific period of time. In doing so a common fallacy will be avoided when analysing complex political change, namely to what extent one system is changing towards another one (non-democratic to democratic) instead focusing on the change we can see within a system.

The argument presented in this paper states that the concept of regime change will enable us to identify the nature, dynamic and process of complex political change within a specific system.

Analysing Complex Political Change: Contested Concepts of Regime, and Regime Change

Applying the concept of regime change as the focus of analysis requires a number of clarifications. Though regime is widely used in identifying either a particular political system or a specific style of governmentⁱ, we still can identify the existence of an alternative approach for investigating the process of complex political change.

Easton, for example, distinguishes between political community, regime and authority when referring to a political system as he describes regimes 'as a set of constraints on political interaction' (1965, p.195). Kitchelt's understanding of a regime, also emphasizes that a 'regime may be defined as the rules and basic political resource allocation according to which actors exercise authority by imposing and enforcing collective decisions on a bounded constituency' (1992, p.1028).

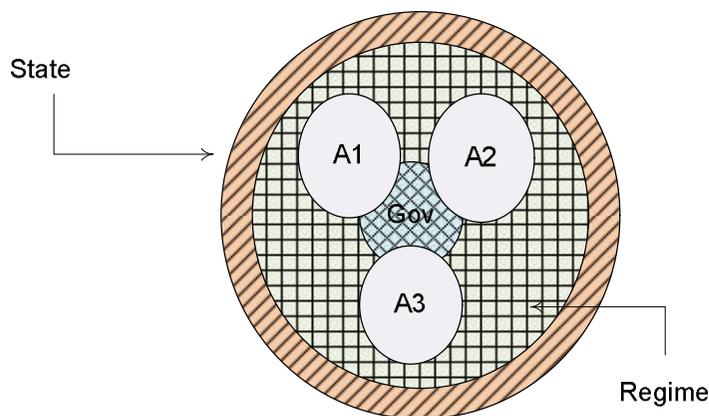
This aspect of constraint and access in addition to the use of political power represents a first indication of how the concept of regime is applied in the analysis of complex political change. Another interpretation of regime is offered by Charlton, who identifies various regime types with a focus on economic systems – by classifying them as capitalist, centrally planned, and as economically underdeveloped – the emphasis is that a regime is based on particular actors in the context of a distinct institutional setting during the process of state formation.ⁱⁱ Interpreting a regime in such a way offers a further valuable indication of an alternate application.

A regime according to Fishman, should be considered as the formal or informal organisation at the centre of political power, determining who has access to political power. Adding that the specific distinctiveness of a 'regime' is illustrated by its characteristics as it is a more permanent form of political organisation than a specific government, but typically less permanent than the state (1990, p.428). Pempel also discerns that a regime neither refers to a government nor the state, instead represents 'a middle level of cohesion in the political economy of a state', adding that it refers 'to the shape, consistency, and predictability of its political economy over time' and describes the key elements of a regime as a socio-economic alliance, political-economic institutions, and a public policy profile (1998, p.20). Hay identifies regime as a particularly level of stateness, where the state represents the most general and abstract level, followed by a particularly state form (like capitalist, feudal etc) and the state regime, which represents a certain and more concrete stage in the evolution of a state form (1999, p.12). This is a theme taken up by Lawson as well, who argues that there are few attempts to examine regime as distinctive from state or government. Further arguing that a conceptual distinction between state and regime can be made by reference to where political power is located as opposed to how that power is exercised. Whereas the state represents the locus of power, a regime indicates the way power is actually used (1993, p.187). Hay also provides a good illustration of different regimes in identifying the Keynesian welfare state and Thatcherism as distinct regimes (1999) and in doing so, we can identify a link to the way Fishman and Pempel identify a regime, as the consistency and predictability of a particular political economic setting.

In accordance with this characterisation, a regime therefore represents a particular expression, in the on-going process of state formation and state development, with a comparable impact to that of the state, as a structural framework.

It is essential to recognise that the state forms a more permanent structural entity, and thus provides the structural environment for a regime. Hence, even as state and regime are analytically distinctive concepts, they are intimately related, as the nature of a state will inform the particular dynamic of regime formation and regime change. Figure 1 provides an illustration of a regime's relationship to the state and the government.

Figure 1- Identifying a regime: State, Regime, Government



Crucially, however, we should be aware that a regime does not appear in isolation, as the occurrence and continuation of a 'regime' relates to the use of political power for the benefit of the participants involved. It is worth remembering, as emphasised by Archer, that all socially structured positions reflect vested interests, which are embedded in them (1995, p.203).

By analysing the internal regime structure and a regime's interactions within the state-society relationship, we can discover important insight for the modus operandi of a 'regime' and its linkages with the state and the socio-economic environment. One issue relates to the dynamic of how to define the public policy paradigm, which represents an important feature of a regime. Here we can identify important correlations between the interests of specific actors with the underlining features of a regime, as described above, since a particular regime is based on the interests of its members, and a distinctive public policy profile.

However, a regime will have to manage and respond to economic, political, or social change, and sometimes it may have to induce economic and social change itself in the context of domestic or international developments and challenges, as a regime still need to be seen as legitimate by the parts of the state and society not involved in it. By considering the example of regime change provided by Hay (1999), a change from the Keynesian welfare state to Thatcherism would hardly be possible if there would some kind of acceptance within the wider society existed for such a change, but it does not require unqualified agreement from the whole society.

Yet, in bringing about such a change, the new regime has to offer some alternative, acceptable prospects, compared to the old regime. Consequently, a regime's legitimacy is linked with its ability to deliver on its promises, whatever they are political, economic or a combination of the two. Hence, we should recognise that, as Barker states, political legitimisation constitutes an active political process, as politics itself signifies an energetic and on-going process (2001, p.28) and exists within a specific historical and political context.

Identifying a regime concerns another important aspect, that of actor designation. Actor designation, Frey states, is central to political thought as it underlies our conception of a particular political system and our perception of political structures (1985, p.129). As to conceiving of groups as political actors an important consideration is the extent to which a group is capable of unifying and enhancing its power in negotiations with other social actors and the government. In this regard, we may consider Habermas' argument that a group actor represents a collectivity that can successfully 'be regarded as an individual' (1977, p.3).

Yet, Frey reminds us that 'it is obviously, neither feasible nor necessary that every actor designation be global. Many useful designations will remain specific to particular system-types' (1985, p.139). This is a critical feature of regime formation and the dynamic of regime change since a particular regime develops in the context of a specific state, hence following a generalization of actor designation would not only not be impractical, but indeed would lead to a misperception of the very nature of a regime. That is because a regime, as stated above, comprises a particular constellation within the political economy of a specific state at a certain period of time.

Hence, the particular set of actors who make up a regime will undergo transformation during the process of regime change, and consequently actor designation cannot be global with regard to different case studies.

After having outlined the specific character of a regime, identifying the nature and dynamic of regime change will be the next step in our enquiry.

Crisis and Regime Change

In enhancing our understanding of regime development and regime change we not only have to analyse the underlining causes of these transformations, which will differ from case to case, but equally essential to develop a critical insight into the nature of change itself.

To start with, we should recognise that the term 'change' encompasses a continuum from partial adjustments to a fundamental breakdown. Even as stability seems the norm, change is an inherent, constant, part of political life and state development. However, at times the speed of change accelerates, representing a situation characterised as 'crisis', which distinguishes itself from times where change is a slower and more on-going process. Yet, a 'crisis', as Hay states, does not merely constitute a moment of impending breakdown, but rather a strategic moment of transition, a decisive moment in the transformation of the state (1999, p.320). Ikenberry also describes 'crisis' as a critical turning point, in providing an opportunity for re-thinking the existing structural matrix of a state (1995, p.59).

Hay provides further arguments for distinguishing a crisis from a rather on-going and continuous political process of adjustment, by differentiating between 'failure', as a non-reproductive property of a system and the dysfunctional symptoms they generate, and 'crisis', as a situation in which failure is identified and widely perceived (1999, p.320). A similar approach can be identified in what Gao describes as an 'intrinsic dilemma', which indicates the development of built-in contradictions in the prevalent institutional logic of a particular state, as existing institutions resist transformation in their environment, consequently reducing an institution's capabilities to respond to new challenges (2001, p.10). Hence, 'crises' as a decisive moment in time signals a critical juncture for de-legitimizing political, economic and social institutions.

It is also important to note that change is not always absolute and it can take various forms. Sztompa, highlights the various forms change can take: 'change in composition, change in structure, change of function, change of boundaries, and change in the relations of the subsystems and change in the environment' (1993, p.5). Offe's distinction between structural and conjunctural modes of political rationalities provides additional insight into the range of responses towards systemic failure. A *conjunctural mode of political rationality* is characterised as a response in which a solution is sought to be found within the pre-existing and largely unmodified structures of the existing institutional compromise, whereas a *structural mode of political rationality* inherits the very transformation – a restructuring, of the existing institutional compromise (Offe 1985, cited in Hay, 1999, pp.328-9).

When considering these illustrations of the nature of change and its application to regime change, we should therefore distinguish between a partial alteration of an existing regime, and a more comprehensive aspect of change, the actual breakdown of an existing regime. In distinguishing between these two characteristics of change the term regime shift refers to a change within a regime whereas regime change refers to a change of the regime. An abstract illustration of both processes is provided by Figure 2-4. Figure 2 illustrates a stable regime, with well-established internal regime relations between the dominant actors. Figure 3 reveals changes within a regime by indicating changes within one of the actors or in the internal relationships between one or more actors. The reduced internal coherence of one actor, based on various developments like the magnification of diverse interests, which can no longer be amalgamated to a single position may provide a good illustration. Alike, if one of the actors loses some of its significance, one may think of a political actor in losing its dominant political position. However, in the case that more than one actor is losing either its internal coherence or its relevance is undermined the related implications for a regime can lead to its unravelling, consequently leading to a change of the regime. This process is illustrated in Figure 4.

It is also vital to recognise that both underperformance and success can undermine an established regime. As with underperformance, being unable to fulfil certain tasks or failing to implement strategic objectives could undermine the political legitimacy a regime rests on.

Equally, the accomplishment of strategic targets, like the modernisation of the economy, may lead to a situation where a regime risks not only undermining its internal coherence but of becoming obsolete; once a regime reaches its strategic objective the rationale for its existence may no longer exist.

Figure 2 Stable Regime

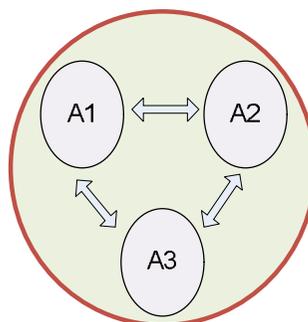


Figure 3 Change within the Regime

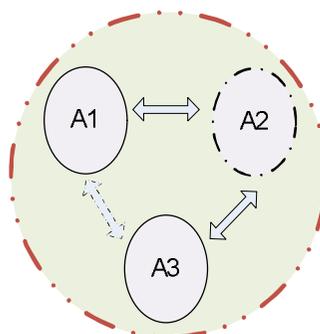
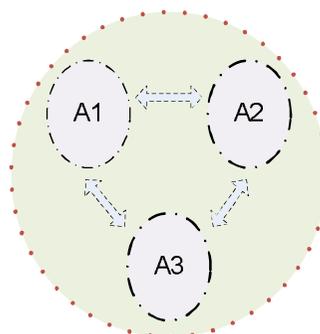


Figure 4 The unravelling of the regime



Another potential source for undermining regime stability are alterations in the expectations within society in which over time the regime's aims and goals may no longer correspond with the expectations held within the society. Consider the following example.

A regime may still only focus on generating economic growth, whereas within the society raising living standards, including non-economic topics such as reducing pollution or improving working hours become more prominent issues.

It should not be taken for granted that a regime will be able to formulate a new strategic consensus, rather it will be a measurement of a regime's strength and of its internal coherency if it will be capable of addressing such challenges successfully. After all, such a consensus must not only transcend the particular interests of the involved actors but also impart a character of solidarity between the various participants of a regime, in order to be accepted by all participating actors of a specific regime.

Failure of redefining new strategic aims will carry consequences for regime stability and regime change. Still, a regime may be re-formulating its original aims, consequently deflecting some pressure for change it faces, or to integrate new objective in its strategy, thereby preserving or regaining its support within the wider society. Even so, since a regime embodies specific interests we will see attempts made to conserve the status quo in an effort to preserve the existing regime. This resistance to change can in turn give rise to what was described earlier as an intrinsic dilemma. After all, we should interpret the established pattern of interaction within a regime not as permanent, but as embryonic and dependent on a particular structural environment at a specific moment in time.

After having outlined the specific character of a regime, identifiable as a particular structural entity within the structural framework of the state, which provides the context for a particular regime to develop and exist, the very nature of the state and its continuous relevance as a crucial structural entity is a critical issue. This will be the topic of the following section.

The State as a Basic Structural Variable for Regime Formation

By emphasizing that the state provides the more permanent structural entity and thus forms the framework for a regime, it is therefore essential to develop a firm understanding of the nature of the state.

The empirical variety and structural differences of existing states, identifiable at a more abstract level, by reference to a particular political system - republican, monarchist, authoritarian - or based on a state's involvement with the economy - capitalist, plan-rational, or socialist - raises questions of how we interpret the nature of the state, as either a static unit or as a social construction.

Poulantzas argues that the state represents the material condensation of relationships, based on the outcome of power struggles within the state (1978, p.144). Jessop speaks of 'state projects' and by stressing the relational character of the state, he emphasises that the state as a variable institution can never be considered to be neutral, indeed, the state is a manifestation of the power of social forces, acting in and through it (1990, p.9-10). Such an interpretation of the state echoes Cerny's assessment, that the state provides the contextual framework, on which other agents strategically and tactically orient themselves (1990, p.29). Similarly, Hay and Lister emphasise the structural and/or institutional contextualization the state provides for political, economic and social actors (2005, p.12). North too, highlights the relevance of the existing state structure, as political, economic, and social actors strategically and tactically orientate themselves in the context and logic of the existing state structure, consequently identifying state structures as an institutional matrix (1999, p.12).

Considering these positions and the observable variety of states we should no longer consider the state as a neutral institution; indeed it becomes apparent that the specific character of a state favours a particular state form. Jessop describes this impact as a state's selectivity, arguing, that a given type of state will be more accessible and suited to the pursuit of some type of economic and political strategy than others, accordingly to its modes of intervention (1996, p.110). For example, within a socialist state, a free-market approach in organising its economic activities would hardly be a viable option.

This in turn highlights that the state comprises a major structural entity with fundamental implications for other actors, consequently limiting the options available for organising and steering economic activities as well as determining the state-society relationship. As such, existing state structures have determining consequences for future national trajectories of developments with implications for regime formation and regime development.

Yet, even when acknowledging the impact existing state structure has for future developments, Cerny (1990) reminds us that the state structure should not be interpreted in a static way. Indeed, one can identify on-going processes of transformation within the existing state structure - processes of interrelated dynamics between the political and the socio-economic environment - what Cerny refers to as structuration. This in turn allows us to recognise the occurrence and dynamic of change and the implication this has for regime formation and regime change, since the state forms the structural environment for regime formation and regime change.

Hence, by considering the state as both, the manifestation of the power of social forces and its relevance of a structural entity in contextualising the strategic action of political, economic and social actors it becomes apparent that we can identify particular national processes of developments. Again, even though we can identify a distinction between the state and a regime by providing the framework within which a regime can exist, a specific state and regime are intimately related to each other, as a state is suited to the pursuit of a specific economic or political strategy.

The implications are critical, since it will not only have a significant impact on how we perceive the dynamic of political change and to what extent the state constitutes a neutral entity or not, but equally important for our understanding of regime formation and development.

Conclusion

Applying the concept of regime change will provide us with a critical insight into the occurrence and dynamic of complex political change. With its focus on the constellation of the political economy of a particular national setting it also offers an approach, which transcends the nature of particular case studies and consequently it can be employed to a wide variety of cases studies. However, applying the concept of regime change requires sensitivity to the dynamic and extent of change, as this can take various forms. This represents a continuum between partial and fundamental change or between regime shift, change within the regime, regime change, and the change of an existing regime.

However, applying regime change as a tool for analysing complex political change, it is important to note, that politics is shaped in the context of constraints and a particular structural environment within the national space. As such we have to the impact of a particular national setting for regime formation and regime change and with it the nature of the state.

ⁱLevitksy and Way apply this particular meaning of regime and regime change in their work on the international dimension of democratization in the post-Cold War era (2006). Epstein et al too apply this particular understanding of regime and regime change in their work on democratic transition from authoritarian to non-authoritarian rule (2006), as does Huntington in his work on democratization ((1991). Gasirowsky relates his work on regime change to the transformation of political rule, yet in both directions, from authoritarian to non-authoritarian rule and vice versa (1995).

ⁱⁱ See Chapter 1, *Comparative Governments* (1986), Roger Charlton

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