

Overcoming path dependency: path generation in open systems

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Abstract

Studies on societal path dependencies tend to focus on mechanisms that Anchor and stabilize national trajectories while paying less attention to transnational interactions and multilevel governance. This paper explores processes of path transformation in societies that are presumed to have the characteristics of open systems. Two pairs of case studies are presented and compared. The first illustrates institutional change through collision, when a national path meets with another. The second describes the emergence of transnational institutional paths and the impact of that process on national institutions and their (potential) transformation. The results indicate that path transformation often stems from a gradual succession and combination of incremental steps and junctures – change is gradual but consequential. They also point to increasing co-evolutionary interaction between national path transformation and transnational path creation. This implies a need for analytical tools that are adapted to the analysis of multi-level, nested processes of institutionalization and de-institutionalization. The paper suggests that the concept of path generation allows for a better specification of the conditions for change in existing societal paths and for the emergence of new paths in the case of open systems than the concept of path dependency. Path dependency is a frequently used concept in the social sciences. In the general sense (soft version), it refers to the idea that events occurring at an earlier point in time will affect events occurring at a later point in time. In a stronger sense, path dependency characterizes historical sequences in which contingent events set institutional patterns with deterministic

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