A. Lecours, “Theorizing Cultural Identities: Historical Institutionalism as a Challenge to the Culturalists,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* (September 2000): 499

**Overview**

Culturalists – i.e. Kymlicka and Taylor – have adopted a cultural approach to identity politics which tends to assume that cultural markers translate naturally and spontaneously into identities that are inherently political. Lecours argues that cultural identities and their political manifestations are not “givens” and that theorizing cultural identity politics should begin with questions on the processes of identity formation, transformation, and politicization. Lecours suggests turning to institutions to answer these questions, specifically historical institutionalism, which stresses the role of political institutions in shaping social and political outcomes, and holds that these outcomes are contextual and “path dependent” as they are shaped by varying institutional factors.

**Background**

* Culturalist literature of the 1990s aimed at interpreting the meaning of cultural identities and to suggest strategies for multiethnic and multinational states – did not attempt to explain *how* cultural identities are created, or made relevant
  + Reason for this rests on 2 key assumptions made by culturalists: (1) that identities flow naturally and spontaneously from cultural markers; and (2) that cultural identities are inherently political
* The culturalist approach has some serious theoretical shortcomings:
  + Central flaw lies in its conceptualization of cultural/ethnic groups as natural, coherent, permanent, and inherently subjective entities
  + The theory cannot explain why cultural markers acquire a subjective meaning in some cases and not others, nor can it account for the timing of the emergence of identities
* Historical institutionalism – takes on the idea that political institutions shape social and political outcomes is highly significant for the study of cultural identity politics. The method presents four advantages as a political approach to cultural identity politics:

1. Definition
2. View of interests and preferences which differs substantially from that of rational choice institutionalism
3. The emphasis on power and power-relations
4. Emphasis on the contingencies and irregularities of hx

* Despite its emphasis on political institutions as key determinants of political outcomes, the hx institutionalist framework includes much more than institutions. First, it makes room for agency, stressing the interactions between actors and institutions, and second, it does not ignore macro-level structures
* Finally, hx institutionalism provides a framework for the role of institutions in structuring relations of cooperation and conflict between actors.