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# The Causal Logic of Critical Junctures

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Hillel David Soifer<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Despite the fact that critical junctures are frequently deployed in historical analyses, we lack an explicit causal logic for them. This article proposes a distinction between permissive and productive conditions in critical junctures. Permissive conditions are necessary conditions that mark the loosening of constraints on agency or contingency and thus provide the temporal bounds on critical junctures. Productive conditions, which can take various logical forms, act within the context of these permissive conditions to produce divergence. I develop these concepts in detail and use classic analyses that apply the concept to show the implications of this new framework for the scope conditions, case selection, and theoretical completeness of historical analysis, as well as for broader issues in historical analysis such as the relationships between crisis and outcome, and between stability and change.

## Keywords

critical juncture, causation, historical analysis, qualitative methods, path dependence

Critical junctures are a central element of social science accounts that center on historical causation. But definitions and applications of the concept have focused more heavily on the *criticality* of certain junctures—on understanding why changes that originate in certain historical moments have long-term and transformative impact—than on what separates a juncture in which dramatic

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<sup>1</sup>Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Hillel David Soifer, Department of Political Science, Temple University, 407 Gladfelter Hall,  
1115 West Berks St., Philadelphia, PA 19122, USA  
Email: [hsoifer@temple.edu](mailto:hsoifer@temple.edu)

change is possible from other historical moments in which continuity is favored. This article constructs a definition of critical junctures based not on their effects, but on exactly what allows and produces change in these moments. The distinct feature of a historical juncture with the potential to be critical is the loosening of the constraints of structure to allow for agency or contingency to shape divergence from the past, or divergence across cases. Many critical juncture accounts implicitly describe this loosening of constraints, but that insight is not incorporated into our conceptual framework, or into strategies of systematic empirical investigation. This article attempts to fill that gap.

To do so, we must distinguish between two types of causal conditions at work during the critical juncture: 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 after the permissive conditions disappear and the juncture comes to a close. The two types of conditions are nearly always framed as separately necessary and jointly sufficient for divergence to occur.<sup>1</sup> Making these conditions separate and explicit increases the precision of critical juncture accounts, setting the stage for increasingly rigorous theoretical statements and more appropriate research designs to test those theories. The result is greater precision in comparative historical research, and thus greater cumulation of knowledge. I begin with some definitions and an empirical example in the first parts of the article, before using some classic accounts of critical juncture scholarship to highlight the ubiquity and utility of the model I develop. These show not only that we can distinguish between permissive and productive conditions in every critical juncture account, but also that doing so improves causal analysis in some important ways.

First, a discussion of Collier and Collier (1991) shows that permissive conditions act as scope conditions on causal claims about productive conditions, and thus should be used as bounds for the testing of causal claims in critical juncture frameworks. Second, Downing (1992) is used to show that a complete statement of any critical juncture account contains equifinality and to explore the implications of that equifinality for theory testing. Third, I use McAdam (1999) to explore the question of when critical junctures end and to show that distinguishing between permissive and productive conditions allows us to specify the sources and timing of the return to political conditions that favor the status quo.

Fourth, the distinction between permissive and productive conditions allows more explicit engagement with the macro-theoretical claims of historical analyses. Yashar's (1997) account of regime trajectories in Central America demonstrates that critical juncture accounts contain implicit broader

claims about the sources of institutional stability and change; distinguishing between permissive and productive conditions can make these claims explicit and precise and lay bare the two levels of the theory she builds. Finally, Weyland (2002) provides an example of scholarship on the relationship between crisis and choice; I show that the analytical distinction between permissive and productive conditions helps to make that too-often tautological link more precise. The final section of the article provides prescriptions for the use of critical juncture accounts in future scholarship.

## Definitions

### *The Permissive Condition*

Critical junctures are marked by heightened contingency, or increased causal possibility.<sup>2</sup> As Capoccia and Kelemen (2007) write, during a critical juncture structural constraints are weakened and “there is a substantially heightened probability that agents’ choices will affect the outcome of interest” (p. 348). It is precisely this reduced importance of structural constraints that opens up space for divergence to emerge. Yet we have little explicit understanding of *why* some moments in time are characterized by weaker constraints than others.

I propose that in any critical juncture, we can identify a set of *permissive conditions* that mark its duration. 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. Thus, we can identify a critical juncture as a potential turning point “at which the interlocked networks of relation that preserve stability come unglued and the (normal) perpetual change of social life takes over” (Abbott, 2001, p. 259).

The duration of a critical juncture is a subject that has seen some conceptual confusion.<sup>3</sup> I propose that it is marked by the emergence and disappearance of a set of permissive conditions. These conditions bound a window of opportunity for divergence that can be quite lengthy, even if the change itself is produced in a more punctuated manner.<sup>4</sup> It should be clear that we can imagine moments of heightened contingency that are not critical junctures. There are at least two logically possible ways to envision this: First, we might see moments where the permissive condition is present (and thus in which change is possible) but where no change occurs. Second, we might see change

that is not reinforced over time; such a phenomenon might happen if one period of loosened constraints is followed by another, such that the outcomes of the first period are wiped away by an immediately subsequent period of contingency that generates the possibility for renewed variation. Permissive conditions are thus not sufficient for divergence. In theory, a particular permissive condition may not be necessary either: We might imagine multiple interchangeable factors that could destabilize the mechanisms sufficient for stability and create a context in which change is possible. Most commonly, however, the permissive condition will take the form of a *necessary but insufficient* component of a critical juncture that acts as the scope condition for the causal relationship between the productive conditions and the outcome. Permissive conditions simply mark a window of opportunity in which divergence *may* occur, and that divergence *may* have long-term consequences.

### *Productive Conditions*

In the presence of permissive conditions, a set of productive conditions determine the outcome that emerges from the critical juncture. As these factors vary across cases, so too do the outcomes of the critical juncture. We cannot understand the outcome of variation without reference to the productive condition. But it *does not* define the limits of the critical juncture. Instead, productive conditions operate within the possibility space bounded by the permissive conditions described above. Productive conditions alone are insufficient to produce divergence in the absence of the permissive conditions that loosen the constraints of structure and make divergence possible. But once constraints have been loosened, productive conditions shape the outcomes that emerge and are “locked in” when the window of opportunity marked by the permissive conditions comes to a close.<sup>5</sup>

Productive conditions can be defined as *the aspects of a critical juncture that shape the initial outcomes that diverge across cases*. They can never be sufficient causes since they alone cannot produce the divergence caused by a critical juncture. Most commonly, they (like permissive conditions) take the logical form of necessary but insufficient causes—this is the case whether the causal framework includes a single productive condition, or multiple necessary productive conditions. When combined with the permissive conditions, the combination is necessary and sufficient for divergence. But we might imagine a set of multiple necessary productive conditions, or one in which a set of substitutable productive conditions are neither necessary or sufficient. In the former case, each productive condition is an INUS cause; in the latter case, each productive condition is a SUIN cause (Mahoney, Kimball, & Koivu,

2009).<sup>6</sup> Thus, productive conditions may take various logical forms, so long as they are not sufficient conditions.

### *Other Elements of Critical Juncture Arguments*

Although they are not the focus of this article, two other components are part of the critical juncture framework: the critical antecedent and the mechanisms of reproduction. I discuss these two components, explored more thoroughly in the work of other scholars, because they are referenced in the remainder of the article.

*The critical antecedent.* Slater and Simmons (2010) have shown that critical junctures do not begin with a blank slate. Rather than seeing the critical juncture as a “treatment” that represents the only source of variation across cases, they show that scholars must realize that some antecedent conditions play a causal role in the outcomes of the critical juncture. As opposed to other types of antecedent conditions (the background similarities for which case selection often controls, the descriptive context that has no causal relevance, and the rival hypotheses against which a critical juncture argument is arrayed), they identify one kind of antecedent condition that does play a causal role in critical juncture analysis. They define a *critical antecedent* as “factors or conditions preceding a critical juncture that combine in a causal sequence with factors operating during that juncture to produce a divergent outcome” (p. 889). The power of this insight is that it provides a systematic rubric for examining the ways in which cases differed before they diverged, as is clear both in their article and in the examples discussed below.

But critical antecedents are fundamentally different from the permissive and productive conditions developed in this article. To unpack this, it is useful to begin with a quote from Slater and Simmons (2010): They write that the critical antecedent “does not produce its causal effect by causing the independent variable to emerge. It does so by helping to determine the differential causal effect of the independent variable across cases when the critical juncture exogenously comes about” (p. 891). Here we see that the critical antecedent is, in their formulation, unrelated to the permissive condition, which (for them) emerges exogenously. Permissive conditions are also distinct from critical antecedents in that although the former mark the temporal bounds of the critical juncture, the latter are operant *before* the juncture emerges. On the other hand, critical antecedents *are* connected to the productive condition. In their description of the causal role of the critical antecedent above, Slater and Simmons demonstrate that it influences the value taken by the productive condition, and thus the divergence that emerges during the critical juncture.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the distinction between permissive and productive conditions helps to sharpen the conceptualization of the critical antecedent by showing more clearly its causal role in the critical juncture.

*Mechanisms of reproduction.* Although the concept of the critical antecedent was elaborated only fairly recently, much has been written about mechanisms of reproduction (see, e.g., Collier & Collier, 1991). Suffice it to say that what makes a juncture *critical* is that the outcomes generated in one historical moment persist over time. Mechanisms of reproduction are the factors that are sufficient to keep an outcome in place after the factors that produce it have disappeared. They are thus a component of a complete critical juncture framework. But since this article focuses on the causal structure of the juncture itself, and not on the production of its legacies, heritage, or aftermath, I do not delve into the mechanisms of reproduction in the remainder of this article. Yet it should be noted that the emergence of the permissive conditions, described above, reflects the erosion or undoing of the mechanisms of reproduction; a critical juncture emerges when an earlier period of stability comes to an end.<sup>8</sup>

## ISI Example

The example of the experience of import substitution industrialization (ISI), which unfolded in some (but not all) Latin American countries, nicely illustrates the components of the critical juncture framework. After several decades of emphasis on export-led growth, the middle of the 20th century saw a dramatic shift away from export promotion toward the development of industry for domestic markets. This shift began as an ad hoc response to the Great Depression, which brought world trade to a crashing halt as protectionism in the developed world eliminated the markets for Latin America's primary products. In response to these drastic economic changes, a range of policy options was available (Thorp, 1998, p. 124). Although the Depression brought an end to the era of export-led growth, in other words, it did not determine the new economic model that would come to dominate the region. Instead, governments implemented a range of ad hoc policies, which had in common only increased state intervention in the economy (Bulmer-Thomas, 2003, p. 228).

World War II kept world trade from recovering, and thus it exacerbated "nearly a decade of growing disillusionment with the traditional export-led growth model in Latin America" (Bulmer-Thomas, 2003, p. 232). This accelerated the ascendance of economic nationalism that had emerged in the 1930s. As a result, an ad hoc policy response gained more credence, bolstered by a set of ideas that delineated a logic behind inward-looking development and industrialization. The "theoretical and institutional support" for ISI came from Raúl

Prebisch and the other economists of United Nations Economic Commission on Latin America (ECLA), who argued that volatility and long-term declining terms of trade made primary product exports a bad strategy for Latin American countries to follow (Thorp, 1998, p. 132). In addition, the growth of the working class and the middle class through earlier decades of industrialization meant that whatever policy would be developed had to create jobs to be politically palatable (Thorp, 1998, p. 128). As a result, beginning during the 1940s, inward-looking industrialization became the dominant mode of economic development in much of the region.

After the Korean War, the recovery of world trade made primary product export a viable economic model once again. Yet some Latin American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Uruguay) continued to focus on industrialization and the domestic market. ISI policies were sustained by politicians who drew support from the burgeoning labor sectors that these policies created, even as world market conditions made possible a return to an export-led economic model. In other countries in the region, where a significant industrial base was not built during the depression and war years, there was a turn back to export-led growth (Bulmer-Thomas, 2003, p. 268).

In this brief and stylized account, we have all the pieces of a critical juncture framework (see Table 1). The collapse of export markets and world trade destroyed the export-led growth model. Thus, the Great Depression and World War II created a context in which ISI *could* emerge—they acted as permissive conditions, opening a critical juncture in which new macroeconomic institutions could be created. As Latin American policy makers sought a response to the crisis in primary product exports, they experimented with a range of economic models. Political and economic conditions that predated the critical juncture—the existence of mobilized labor sectors and small business—acted as a critical antecedent in making ISI a politically viable model to varying degrees in different countries. Influential economic thought from ECLA acted as a productive condition which, within the critical juncture, shaped the varied extent to which the ISI model was implemented. When world trade recovered, bringing export-led growth back as a viable option, we see variation being “locked in”: Where industrialization had developed to a certain extent, it was politically prohibitive for governments to back away from commitments to this model. But where a large industrial base had not been built, world economic recovery led to a return to an emphasis on export-led growth, which bore fewer start-up costs and was more politically palatable.

**Table 1.** Inward-Looking Industrialization as a Critical Juncture

Critical antecedent	Strength of middle class and labor as of 1929
Permissive condition	Collapse of world trade and economic challenges of Great Depression and World War II
Productive condition	Economic ideas of ECLA and more general rise of economic nationalism
Outcome	Inward-looking industrialization implemented to varying degrees in Latin America
End of critical juncture	Recovery of world trade by 1950, and especially after the Korean War
Mechanisms of reproduction	New political coalitions among bureaucrats, domestic elites, and organized labor
Consequences	Crises of populist rule and bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes (O'Donnell, 1973)

## The Causal Importance of Permissive and Productive Conditions

Thus far, I have shown that critical junctures consist of two temporally nested but logically distinct causes: the permissive condition and the productive condition.<sup>9</sup> Because they are analytically distinct, we can divide all historical moments into four types, based on whether neither, one, or both of these conditions are present (see Table 2). In each cell, we can make predictions about stability and change. The upper-left-hand cell labeled “status quo” describes those times when neither the permissive conditions that mark the bounds of a critical juncture, nor the productive conditions that set off divergence, are present. In this cell, dramatic change—or indeed any change whatsoever—is precluded. The lower-right-hand cell, in which both permissive and productive conditions are present, is the critical juncture. The upper-right-hand cell, where permissive conditions are present but productive conditions are absent, can be seen as crisis without change, or a case of “missed opportunity.” Finally, the lower-left-hand cell, in which productive conditions are present, but permissive conditions are not, will also not produce dramatic change. Instead, this type of historical moment may be marked by incremental change, as the conditions that produce divergence may still have effects even when the constraints on major change are in place.<sup>10</sup>

The relative frequency of each cell—and thus the balance of stability and change—is determined by how rare or common each of the conditions is. We



**Table 2.** Permissive and Productive Conditions and Outcomes

		Permissive conditions	
		Absent	Present
Productive conditions	Absent	Status quo	Crisis without change or missed opportunity
	Present	Incremental change	Critical juncture

can also use this table, along with definitions of causal importance elaborated in Goertz (2006), to explore the causal importance of critical junctures, assuming for the purposes of this discussion that the permissive and productive conditions each take the form of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. Three issues can be addressed here: the first two—the absolute trivialness and relevance of each of the two conditions—relate to the absolute importance of each condition in producing the postjuncture divergence, and the third relates to the relative causal importance of each.

Trivialness is one way to think about the causal relevance of necessary conditions. It can be assessed by the number of cases of ( $\sim X$ ,  $\sim Y$ ). The rarer the ( $\sim X$ ,  $\sim Y$ ) outcome is, the more trivial the necessary condition (Goertz, 2006). For permissive conditions, the ( $\sim X$ ,  $\sim Y$ ) outcome is found in two cells in Table 2: the status quo and the incremental change cells. As these become more common relative to all historical moments, according to Goertz, the permissive condition should be less trivial. For productive conditions, the ( $\sim X$ ,  $\sim Y$ ) cells in Table 2 are the status quo and missed opportunity cells. As these become more common in comparison to all historical moments, the productive condition is less trivial. If both permissive and productive conditions are nontrivial, more historical moments will be found in the status quo cell than in any other, and the critical juncture will be reserved for truly exceptional historical moments. This is an intuitively satisfying conclusion since it suggests, as Mahoney and Thelen (2010) have argued, that most historical moments are characterized by stability or incremental change rather than punctuated change, and that incremental change is more common than punctuated change.

A second approach to causal importance derives from the relevance of a cause rather than its trivialness (Goertz, 2006). A maximally relevant necessary condition is also sufficient; as relevance increases,  $X$  is more close to being sufficient for  $Y$ . Relevance is measured by comparing cases in the cell ( $X$ ,  $\sim Y$ ) to cases in the cell ( $X$ ,  $Y$ ). As the former cell has fewer cases, the causal factor  $X$  is more causally relevant. Drawing on Table 2 we can conclude that as missed

opportunities become rare, the permissive condition becomes more relevant, and that as incremental change becomes rare, the productive condition becomes more relevant. An implication of the former is that as the temporal duration of the permissive condition narrows—as the window for change is shorter—it becomes more causally relevant for divergence; this too is intuitively satisfying since it suggests that critical junctures become more important as they narrow temporally (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007, pp. 350-351). Second, as each condition becomes more causally relevant, most historical moments are either in the top-left corner of status quo or in the critical juncture cell. As critical junctures become more relevant, incremental change thus becomes rarer.

The third way to think about causal relevance is to ask about the *relative causal importance* of the permissive and productive conditions. Goertz (2006) investigates the relative importance of multiple necessary conditions with reference to their ubiquity; those that are rarer are more causally relevant. No general statement applying across all critical junctures can be made here; the relative importance of permissive and productive conditions will vary. It should be noted, however, that as gradual change becomes more important and we move closer to the model of institutional change described in Mahoney and Thelen (2010), the permissive condition will become more causally important relative to the productive.

## **Permissive and Productive Conditions in Classic Accounts**

Having specified the causal logic of the critical juncture, and traced some implications of this framework for thinking about historical causation and institutional change, I now turn to considering classic accounts to show the gains from explicitly detailing the causal claims of critical juncture arguments.

### *Critical Junctures and the Scope of Theoretical Claims*

In their sweeping theory of Latin American political development, Collier and Collier (1991) traced the long-term consequences of labor incorporation. In their theory, the mode of labor incorporation acts as the productive condition, and the permissive condition is the crisis of labor mobilization that placed the “social question” in the center of political contention. Because their interest is in the *effects* of labor incorporation, they consider only the effects of variation in the productive condition: all eight of their cases saw labor incorporated into politics after a major social crisis in the early 20th century. Their interest is in the ways in which different “values” of the productive condition shape divergent regime

outcomes over subsequent decades. But we might imagine cases in which the permissive condition was absent—where the oligarchic control of politics was not threatened by the rise of labor—and indeed this was the case in some Latin American countries not explored by Collier and Collier. Here, the old order was never disrupted by the emergence of the social question, and old political patterns persisted.

Collier and Collier (1991), because of the way their causal question is framed, cannot speak to these cases. Since the permissive condition of the rise of labor bounds the theory of regime dynamics that they develop, it acts as a scope condition on the proposed relationship between the mode of labor incorporation and regime outcomes. The failure to specify this bound becomes problematic when causal claims about the productive condition are made without attention to the conditional nature of causation in the critical juncture framework. Collier and Collier do *not* imply that the mode of labor incorporation will affect political outcomes in the long term where politics has not realigned around the social question in advance of this “moment.” It is not appropriate to criticize their argument because it does not apply to such cases. The explicit specification of permissive conditions is valuable precisely because it provides an explicit bound on the domain of cases to which the link between productive condition and outcome can be expected to apply.<sup>11</sup>

### *Equifinality and Theoretical Completeness*

The causal structure of the critical juncture dictates that there are two distinct logical paths to the absence of change. First, the absence of the permissive condition is itself sufficient to determine the absence of change. Second, even when the permissive condition is present, the absence of the productive condition is also sufficient to determine the absence of change. Negative outcomes of critical junctures are, in other words, marked by equifinality. This means that to be fully specified, a critical juncture explanation of the outcome of interest must explore both pathways.<sup>12</sup> Yet most accounts ignore cases where the permissive condition is absent. As a result, they fail to investigate one of the causal pathways to negative outcomes.

Downing (1992) is an exception. His study demonstrates the importance of a fully specified critical juncture account as he explores the historical origins of democracy and autocracy in Europe, focusing on the long-term legacies of medieval constitutionalism. This focus on medieval political institutions clearly delimits the scope conditions of his argument since in their absence, outside Europe, distinct processes shape regime outcomes (chap. 2). Where

the medieval era saw certain arrangements—a balance among crown and nobility, decentralized military organization, and peasant property rights—they provided “a decentralized institutional basis for what could later become checks and balances on central authority” (p. 36). They could lay the foundation for democracy, however, only if they survived the escalation of military competition after 1500.

The onset of military competition marked the opening of a critical juncture for regime development in Europe. After about 1500, shifts in the technology of warfare (the rise of firearms, increased functional specialization in armed forces, and new forms of fortification) radically increased the length and cost of warfare. This posed for states the choice between finding ways to compete in this newly pressurized international context or defeat and the loss of sovereignty, as happened in the case of Poland.

But although the onset of military competition marked the emergence of a permissive condition for regime change, the variation in regime type resulted not from warfare itself but from how warfare was financed. Where domestic finance was used, and extracted through intensified taxation, the result was a dismantling of constitutional institutions in favor of absolutism. Thus, the combination of military competition and domestic finance was necessary and sufficient for the end of constitutionalism, as in both France and Prussia. But where leaders were able to use one of several alternative ways to finance war, constitutionalism could survive. States could rely on foreign resource mobilization as one alternative; Sweden in the Thirty Years’ War, for example, financed its armies largely through the capture of rents from Danzig, which it seized early in the conflict. A second alternative was reliance on allies for defense. Third, advanced economies facilitated the mobilization of domestic resources without resort to absolutism since capital markets could be used as a substitute for taxation. Fourth, geography served as a substitute for military modernization in defensive wars. These last three alternatives were crucial to the survival of constitutionalism in the Dutch Republic despite the fact that it faced “perhaps the most arduous period of protracted warfare any European country has ever experienced” (Downing, 1992, p. 218). Thus, the way military mobilization was financed was the productive condition that produced regime variation, explaining why absolutism emerged in Prussia and France but not Sweden or the Dutch Republic.

The account as developed so far, however, cannot explain the regime trajectory of England before 1688. Downing carefully shows that before 1688 England did *not* have the commercial economy and credit markets that the Dutch Republic had already evolved, nor the other factors that retained constitutionalism in that case. Instead, England’s constitutionalism survived

(despite domestic crises that are a separate issue) because it was not embroiled in major conflict before that date. Its participation in the Thirty Years' War was fairly limited, and England mobilized fairly few troops for other wars during the same period.<sup>13</sup>

A traditional critical juncture account would focus only on the path in which the permissive condition was present, but the productive absent. In Downing (1992), one would focus on the cases of Sweden and the Dutch Republic, and show that various intervening factors prevented a link between war and absolutism. But this ignores countries that were not embroiled in major war; Downing's inclusion of England allows him to develop a complete theory of the survival of medieval constitutionalism in Europe. As fully stated, it claims that these institutions survived under *two distinct sets of circumstances*: the absence of major conflict, or major conflict without the mobilization of "drastic proportions of domestic resources" (p. 239). The presence of this second path to state weakness highlights the fact that neither the intervening factors Downing identifies nor the absence of conflict is sufficient to explain the survival of medieval constitutionalism across Europe. To focus on one at the expense of the other is to fail to construct a complete theory of the collapse and survival of constitutionalism. Downing shows that in constructing a complete theory of a particular outcome, a critical juncture account logically must contain two paths to negative outcomes, and thus two sets of counterfactuals that must be investigated. One counterfactual analysis would explore the absence of the permissive condition, and the other the absence of the productive condition. Stating each clearly and tracing each through historical analysis is a necessary component of a full account of the critical juncture process that produced the outcome of interest.

### *The End of a Critical Juncture*

By definition, the causal frameworks of critical junctures contain multiple components. Too often, however, these are simply lumped together in the category of "independent variables." Yet distinguishing between permissive and productive conditions allows the researcher to identify the end of a critical juncture and thus the period in which change is possible. I demonstrate this in a review of McAdam's (1999) classic work on the civil rights movement.

McAdam (1999) provides an explicit critical juncture account. By labeling a political opportunity space in which the movement could emerge, he identifies a set of permissive conditions for it. Although the emergence and decay of the productive conditions mark the actual rise and fall of the civil rights movement, the permissive conditions mark an opportunity space for possible

mobilization. Thus, they identify a period in which mobilization *could* have taken place. According to McAdam's framework, the civil rights movement could have emerged any time after 1954. The possibility space for the civil rights movement opened with the *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court decision of 1954, which represented a "watershed moment" (p. 3) in the loosening of the structural constraints on Black mobilization by committing governments to dismantle segregated education. This decision, which was the culmination of a series of factors that represented a "realignment of political forces favorable to blacks" (p. 112), made the civil rights movement possible.

Once the permissive conditions were present, the productive conditions marked the length of the movement itself; in this case, the movement did not last as long as it possibly could have. That it lasted from the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955–1956 to about 1966 was the result of the rise and decay of the productive conditions. McAdam (1999) identifies two sets of productive conditions, each necessary for movement emergence. First, he argues that an "organizational base" was necessary. This grew during the years 1930–1954, as churches, colleges, and the NAACP bloomed in the context of the declining cotton economy.<sup>14</sup> Second, he explores the growth of hope and a sense of emergent efficacy about the prospects of collective action for producing change. These two conditions interacted in a mutually reinforcing fashion and allowed Blacks to seize on the political opportunities afforded by the changing political context to set off the civil rights movement. These productive conditions varied over time (and over space and social group) within the window of opportunity, underlying variation in the extent of mobilization during the civil rights movement.

The civil rights movement began with the 1955–1956 Montgomery Bus Boycott and survived so long as its base organizations remained strong, its rank and file believed in the prospect of change, and its actions were able to mobilize at least acceptance from other groups and the federal government. As McAdam (1999) shows, all of these factors were present in the early 1960s. But by the late 1960s, fraying organizations, the loss of hope in non-violent change, and a shift in movement tactics and demands combined to weaken the civil rights movement. Conflict both within and between its organizations emerged after 1965 (p. 182). At the same time, the declining sense of political efficacy reduced participation in movement actions. A third source of movement decline was the substantive and tactical shifts of some of its proponents, which further escalated divisiveness and led other actors to see mobilization as a threat. Thus even as the permissive conditions were largely still present, the productive conditions had eroded by the mid-1960s, and the movement fragmented.

The permissive conditions disappeared with the rise of a conservative “backlash” that shifted the political opportunity structure once again in the late 1960s, bringing the window of opportunity for mobilization to a close—as McAdam (1999) puts it, “The late 1960s are properly viewed as the end of the Second Reconstruction” (p. 192). The conservative reaction polarized politics around race and split the traditional urban coalition of the Democratic Party, resulting in a devaluation of the Black vote as politicians weighed appealing to African Americans against “the costs of antagonizing a large and ever expanding segment of the white population” (p. 194). The 1968 election and its aftermath led both Republicans and Democrats to focus their political appeals on Wallace supporters, rather than on the Black vote. Simultaneously, because of both the race riots of 1967–1968 and the rise of other salient issues, White support for civil rights fell sharply over the late 1960s. As a result of these and other shifts, McAdam argues, the mobilization for civil rights could not have continued after about 1968. Yet by the time these political shifts took place, internal factors had already eroded the movement to a significant extent; only after the 1968 election were both the permissive and productive conditions for civil rights mobilization eliminated.

As this discussion shows, distinguishing between permissive and productive conditions allows the explicit identification of a “possibility space” within which the civil rights movement could have happened, independent of the factors that caused it to emerge when and last as long as it did. Only by making this distinction can we understand why the civil rights movement ended *before* the rise of the southern strategy with the 1968 electoral campaign. McAdam (1999) shows that civil rights mobilization was cut off by the decay of the productive conditions even as the window of opportunity for mobilization remained open. An alternative logical possibility in a critical juncture is that the causal process is truncated by the end of the permissive conditions; had this happened in the civil rights case, we would have seen a truncated mobilization rather than the decay that was actually observed.<sup>15</sup>

### *Critical Junctures, Two-Level Theories, and the Sources of Stability and Change*

The analytical distinction between permissive and productive conditions also allows us to fully appreciate the implications of critical juncture arguments for broader understandings of the sources of stability and change. This can be seen in Yashar (1997), which examines the divergent regime outcomes in Costa Rica and Guatemala. Doing so helps shed light on the full power of the

argument she develops, which simultaneously explains both regime type and the stability and fluidity of regimes in general.

Yashar (1997) uses the language of a “window of opportunity” (p. 70) to refer to the elite divisions that marked the possibility for reformers to push into the political arena in the 1940s. She argues that simultaneous elite splits and popular mobilization represent a permissive condition for realignment by making multiclass reform coalitions possible and destabilizing existing political institutions.<sup>16</sup> Within this permissive context, the specific natures of the coalitions that emerge (including the strategies they chose, alliances they made, and balance of power within them) act as productive conditions because they set off causal sequences that produced the regime outcomes. The scope of reforms introduced in this period set off countermobilization on the part of elites, but elite unity in Guatemala and split in Costa Rica shaped the different decision-making institutions that emerged within these coalitions, establishing authoritarian rule in Guatemala and democracy in Costa Rica.

Further change was precluded, Yashar (1997) argues, when the counter-reformist regimes were able to establish control of the countryside in both cases, bringing the permissive context for new coalitions to emerge to a close. Rural control kept the “country’s most disruptive social sectors: agrarian elites and the rural poor” (p. 214) from disrupting politics, by co-opting the former and establishing the ability to control the latter. The establishment of rural control, then, marks the end of the window of opportunity for regime change by “locking in” regime outcomes.

It is thus a misnomer to refer to elite divisions, mass mobilization, and reformist coalitions as analytically equivalent independent variables within Yashar’s (1997) critical juncture—or to refer to regime type as her only dependent variable. Instead, we should see the first two as permissive conditions because they shape a political arena within which political outcomes are redefined through coalitional politics. Within those permissive conditions, a “reformist” or “counterreformist” context, marked by contingency, coalitional fluidity, and rapid change, produced a series of short-lived political regimes, each of which was shaped by its predecessor and by the critical antecedents of the Liberal era. Only the reassertion of rural control eliminated the conditions that permitted continued regime fluidity. The reestablishment of state control over the countryside brings an end to these elite divisions (by committing agrarian elites to the regime in power) and to mass mobilization (by co-opting or repressing it), and thus brings the window of opportunity for regime reorganization to a close.

Distinguishing between permissive and productive conditions highlights Yashar’s (1997) broader claims about the roots of regime stability and fluidity:



regimes are stable so long as they avoid a conjuncture of concurrent elite divisions and mass mobilization. In the Liberal era, they faced the former but not the latter, and thus remained stable. During the 1940s, they faced both, creating a window of opportunity for regime fluidity, within which regimes in her two country cases diverged. Thereafter, the establishment of rural control resolidified the new regimes in both Costa Rica and Guatemala, locking in outcomes that persisted for subsequent decades. Beyond the sources of democracy and authoritarianism in these cases, then, Yashar also explains the stability and fluidity of political regimes. The presence and absence of the permissive conditions shape regime stability and fluidity, whereas the productive conditions shape the nature of the regime itself.

More broadly, this examination of Yashar's (1997) book shows that critical juncture analyses take the form of what Goertz and Mahoney (2005) called two-level theories. Although what they call the "basic level" is used to explore a factor that is common across cases, the "secondary level permits differentiation among cases in the ways in which this can occur" (p. 506). Yashar presents explanations both for regime stability and fluidity (the basic level) and for regime type (the secondary level), and the causes of each of these levels of regime outcome are separate elements of the critical juncture. The distinction between permissive and productive conditions helps to elaborate the distinct levels of analysis in accounts of historical analysis and to separate the causal chains operating at each level.<sup>17</sup>

### *Distinguishing Context and Choice in Crisis-Based Theories*

The distinction between context and choice in causation has been the subject of much research (Falleti & Lynch, 2009). This is especially true in crisis-based accounts, which too commonly link crises to outcomes without taking the sources of divergent responses seriously. A more careful application of the critical juncture framework, as seen in the work of Weyland (2002), shows that choices of response mediate between crisis and outcomes and that the concept of crisis itself can be disaggregated into distinct components that may separately act as permissive and productive conditions. This allows for more nuanced theoretical predictions about when and how crises produce the drastic changes with which they are commonly associated.

Weyland (2002) investigates the causes of differential response to crisis across countries, focusing on the divergent economic policies that emerged out of the economic crisis of the 1980s in Latin America. Here the relationship between crisis and choice is truly complex since elements of crisis act as *both* permissive and productive conditions in his explanation of policy shifts. It is

useful to identify the components of the critical juncture in Weyland's argument since he does not simply limit the place of crisis to the permissive condition.

The permissive condition that marks the opening of Weyland's (2002) critical juncture is the onset of hyperinflation. This economic shift opens a critical juncture because it places both the leadership and the population into the domain of losses, which Weyland identifies as a necessary but insufficient condition for the adoption of neoliberal policies because it is characterized by increased risk acceptance. It also, however, undermined the established political class and "allowed" (p. 91) for the rise of outsider politicians who were more likely to choose radical policy shifts to neoliberalism. Thus, drastic reforms found acceptance in Peru, Brazil, and Argentina. In Venezuela, by contrast, the lack of hyperinflation and the perception among the population that oil revenues would recover led to a rejection of a neoliberal reform effort.

Weyland (2002) argues that when the fruits of economic recovery reach the masses, they are induced to give the model in place a chance rather than opting for yet another set of reforms. The result is support for the continuing, though not necessarily the deepening, of neoliberal reforms in cases where they had been instituted. The return of the masses to the psychological domain of gains makes them more risk averse and more likely to favor a status quo approach to economic policy rather than continued drastic shifts. This, for Weyland, marks the end of the critical juncture since a crucial necessary condition for economic reforms is eliminated.

Within the critical juncture, neoliberal reforms took hold only after a period of experimentation with heterodox policies in Argentina and Peru, but to a lesser extent in Brazil. The divergence in economic model across and within countries resulted from variation in two productive conditions. First, leader type shapes divergence in economic policy: radical shifts to new economic policies will be chosen only if leaders are not committed to another development model. Hyperinflation began under leaders associated with heterodox economic policies in Peru, Brazil, and Argentina. These leaders did not shift policies because this would entail admitting "that their heterodox experiments had been a mistake" (pp. 87-88). Only leaders whose decision making was not constrained by their commitment to the status quo (what Weyland, 2002, calls the "prior-option bias") were able to undertake such drastic policy shifts—thus only outsiders without a history of association with other economic policies were able to undertake drastic adjustment. Thus, one productive condition is the ascension of an outsider politician—a phenomenon caused by crisis, but also by a range of unrelated factors such as changes in electoral technology and political institutions (p. 62). This explains

why neoliberal reforms did not begin until new elections brought Fujimori, Menem, or Collor to power years after hyperinflation began in each country.

A second productive condition is the severity of the economic crisis beyond hyperinflation: Neoliberal reforms were rejected by the political class in Brazil because there was a consensus that the established development model had not been exhausted. This aspect of the economic crisis separates Brazil from Argentina and Peru and explains why reforms were fully implemented only in the latter cases. Thus, although one element of the economic crisis (hyperinflation) operated as a permissive condition, another (exhaustion of development model) operated as a productive condition.<sup>18</sup>

Weyland's (2002) account thus highlights the need to disaggregate components of crisis in models that link it to major shifts. He shows that crisis is a multifaceted phenomenon that emerges in distinct configurations in different cases. Moving beyond a generic attempt to link "crisis" to reform requires theoretical precision about the aspects of crisis that permit experimentation and those that produce enduring policy shifts. Thus, the framework of permissive and productive conditions facilitates precision about links between crisis and policy change.

### *Methodological Prescriptions*

The examples discussed above highlight several implications of the critical juncture framework proposed in this article. In closing the article, I develop some methodological prescriptions for critical juncture analysis.

*Case selection and testing critical juncture theories.* Case selection to test a critical juncture argument should proceed in two stages. First, scholars should test for the permissive condition. Since this always takes the form of a necessary but insufficient condition, it should be tested by selecting cases where the outcome of interest is present and ensuring that the permissive conditions were present in each. Second, scholars should test the productive condition. The form of this test depends on the logical form of the productive condition. In all cases, however, the test of the productive condition should *be conducted only in cases where the permissive condition is present*. Since the relationship between the productive condition and the outcome is bound by the scope conditions of the permissive condition, cases where the permissive condition is absent are not relevant for testing. For example, the account of ISI developed above claims that ECLA's economic ideas led to ISI only where world trade collapsed. To show in a context of stable world trade that despite the salience of economic nationalism ISI did not emerge does not falsify this claim. Thus, although the burden is on the researcher to

carefully specify the permissive conditions of the critical juncture framework, the burden on subsequent scholarship is to ensure that theory testing accurately accounts for those conditions.

*When do critical junctures end?* . A component often missing even in the most careful critical juncture accounts is the specification of the end of a critical juncture. Even those works that identify the permissive conditions that set off a critical juncture often fail to specify what brings that juncture to a close and forecloses the production of subsequent divergence. It may be that the reverse of its opening has that effect—for example, the end of a war may bring to an end the possibility that states can radically transform their relationship with societal actors. Alternatively, it may be that the productive conditions themselves bring an end to an era of heightened contingency by producing a newly stable institutional outcome. Third, a completely exogenous set of conditions, independent from both the initial permissive conditions and the productive conditions, may have this effect. McAdam (1999), for example, shows that the window of opportunity for civil rights mobilization came to an end because of the rise of “law and order” politics and a conservative backlash that shifted the political opportunity structure in ways inimical to Black mobilization.

Specifying the end of a critical juncture is particularly important because of its relationship to the productive conditions. It may be most intuitive that the juncture comes to an end after the productive conditions have had their effect. But in fact the permissive context might end during the operation of the productive conditions, or before they have begun to operate. Thus, separate specification of permissive and productive conditions allows us to identify not only the onset of the critical juncture but also how it came to an end.

*Theoretical completeness and critical junctures.* A logical implication of the critical juncture framework developed in this article is that negative outcomes are marked by equifinality since they are caused both by the absence of permissive conditions and by the absence of productive conditions. A complete account of variation in the outcome of interest must trace both of these pathways and confirm them. Most critical juncture accounts limit themselves to comparing cases in which critical junctures occurred, tracing the relationship between distinct values of the productive conditions and divergent outcomes. But divergent outcomes must also result from the absence of the permissive conditions that mark the onset of the critical juncture. Scholars interested in the causes of long-term divergence must examine this type of case as well.

This, of course, is a different question from the one asked in many standard critical juncture accounts. Collier and Collier (1991), for example, investigate

the effects of labor incorporation; they are not seeking to develop a theory of long-term regime outcomes. Thus, their research design, which examines only cases where labor was incorporated, is appropriate for their question of interest. But many scholars *do* use critical juncture frameworks to explain the origins of a particular outcome. Under those conditions, the failure to consider cases where the juncture did not emerge is a failure of research design. Had Downing, for example, not considered the case of pre-1688 England, he would have failed to realize that some European countries could avoid major war for long periods of time and thus retain medieval constitutionalism even without the distinct features of the Dutch case. This would result in faulty inferences about European political development.

Thus, the onus is on the researcher to be explicit about how the theoretical question underlying a critical juncture account is framed: Is the interest in the effects of a particular cause or in the causes of an effect? If the former, the scholar may limit analysis to cases where the critical juncture opens and examine how distinct productive conditions shape divergent outcomes. If the latter is the focus, however, equifinality comes into play, and the scholar must also theorize and investigate cases in which the permissive conditions are absent.

## **Conclusion**

The critical juncture is a commonly deployed analytical device that has contributed much to our understanding of political and institutional change. Yet to date scholars have been satisfied to label a critical juncture as a time period or a “turning point” without inquiring into what makes that period distinct from those that precede and follow it. This article has tried to correct that omission by proposing that all critical junctures are bounded by the presence of permissive conditions, within which logically distinct productive conditions operate to set off long-term divergence. In tracing through a variety of examples of critical juncture scholarship, I have shown that many classic accounts use this conceptual distinction between permissive and productive conditions but that none to date have done so explicitly. Making this distinction explicit, and designing research accordingly, guides us to focus on the separate questions of why critical junctures open and close, and how causation during these moments of loosened stricture sets off processes of long-term continuity. By considering these questions separately, and integrating both into our analyses of historical causation, we can gain greater analytical precision and better cumulate knowledge about institutional change and political development.

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## Notes

1. Thus, critical junctures can be seen as a subtype of what Goertz and Mahoney (2005) call “conjunctures of necessary causes” (p. 501). One can logically envision an account in which a critical juncture marked one of multiple paths leading to divergence over time or across cases—in that situation, the juncture would be sufficient but not necessary to explain divergence, and each of these components would be an INUS cause. One could also envision an account in which the juncture was necessary but not sufficient for divergence—one in which it had to occur in conjunction with some other set of factors but I cannot find an account in which additional necessary conditions are non-trivial. In practice, scholars using the critical juncture framework (as the examples below show) overwhelmingly tend to conceptualize it as consisting of two sets of jointly sufficient conditions, each of which is necessary to set cases on divergent paths. One exception is Downing (1992), which is discussed below.
2. Although I use the term *contingency* here, I am agnostic about the relative importance of agency and contingency in the critical juncture, an issue explored in Capoccia and Kelemen (2007). Instead, I share with Slater and Simmons (2010) and Pierson (2004) the view that accounts of critical junctures should emphasize divergence rather than contingency. I borrow the term *causal possibility* from Bennett and Elman (2006).

3. Capoccia and Kelemen (2007, pp. 350-351) claim that the duration of a critical juncture must be considered relative to the outcome observed. This view, although persuasive in addressing the extent to which a juncture has criticality, ignores the fact that junctures are characteristics of the historical context and not just of our theoretical frameworks. The criticality of a juncture, as Capoccia and Kelemen note, is an artifact of our theoretical framework, but I want to suggest that the *presence or absence* of a temporally delimited juncture itself is not.
4. The term *window of opportunity* is defined by Goertz and Levy (2007) as a condition that “sets the stage for the event to happen” (p. 36). For a recent use of this metaphor, see Saylor (2008).
5. This framing is analogous to the distinction between context and causal mechanism drawn by Falleti and Lynch (2009): The permissive conditions shape the context, whereas the productive conditions cause the outcome.
6. Examples of the former discussed in this article are Yashar (1997) and Weyland (2002); an example of the latter discussed below is Downing (1992), if we take his outcome to be the survival of constitutionalism.
7. This can be seen in a reading of the cases both in Slater and Simmons (2010) and in Slater (2010), where the critical antecedent of prewar nation building shapes the *form* of contentious politics after independence in Southeast Asia, which acts as the productive condition in his critical juncture argument to explain state strength and regime stability.
8. On types of mechanisms of reproduction, and how the erosion of each shapes different kinds of institutional change, see Mahoney (2000). Whether the permissive condition itself erodes the mechanisms of reproduction or whether the permissive condition is the *consequence* of such erosion will depend on the particular case.
9. This formulation explains why my definition of critical juncture does not encompass arguments like Skocpol (1979): Although she does identify two separate necessary but insufficient conditions for revolution that are jointly sufficient when they concur, they are not explicitly defined as temporally nested, and thus we cannot distinguish between permissive and productive conditions. Critical junctures, in other words, are logically distinct from conjunctural causation because of the relative timing of the occurrence of the two causes.
10. Thus, the counterfactual analysis that is a natural corollary of the study of critical junctures must ask about the absence of each type of condition. The one that seems most natural is the “missed opportunity” cell, which is defined as a counterfactual in the wording of its label. But the “incremental change” cell, too, raises the possibility of counterfactual analysis about the permissive condition. For example, the import substitution industrialization (ISI) example above suggests that one could ask both whether ISI would have taken hold, even in the presence of proindustrialization economic thought, without the Great Depression,

and whether it would have taken hold without a change in economic ideas. The critical juncture framework thus raises two distinct counterfactuals.

11. Thus, this provides an answer to the concern raised by Geddes (2003, pp. 139-142) about the difficulties of identifying a strategy for testing critical juncture arguments.
12. As discussed above, a theory of the *effects of the critical juncture* need not consider cases in which the juncture is absent. But a critical juncture explanation for *variation in a particular outcome* must consider the effects of the absence of the critical juncture.
13. The critical juncture of major conflict did not open for England until the very end of the 17th century, when it entered into the first of a series of wars with France. In this second phase of English political development, factors similar to those described above for the Dutch case explain the survival of English constitutionalism.
14. As Slater and Simmons (2010) show, the changes in the cotton economy operated as a critical antecedent.
15. For an example of an argument in which the decay of permissive conditions leads to aborted institutional change, see Soifer (n.d.).
16. Yashar (1997), then, identifies two necessary factors that together compose the permissive condition.
17. To be precise, not all two-level theories are critical junctures. But all critical juncture analyses, since they separately explain both stability and change and the particular “value” a case takes at moments of change, are two-level theories.
18. Here, then, we have multiple productive conditions, each of which is a necessary but insufficient cause.

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**Bio**

**Hillel David Soifer** is assistant professor of political science at Temple University. His current research focuses on the origins and persistence of variation in the strength of Latin American states and has been published in *Studies in Comparative International Development* and *Latin American Research Review*. He has a PhD from the Department of Government at Harvard University.