

Gerardo L. Munck
**“The Theoretical Foundations of Critical Juncture Research:
Critique and Reconstruction”**

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Research on critical junctures is a well-established tradition that sheds light on the historical origin, endurance, and change of social order. The core ideas used in research on critical junctures has been systematized in the form of a recognizable theoretical framework.¹ This framework, or parts of it, has been used to study various topics, such as state formation, political regimes and democracy, party systems, public policy, government performance, and economic development. And the original arguments developed in this literature constitute important contributions to central areas of inquiry in the social sciences.² Critical juncture research can rightly be characterized as a progressive research program, that offers a distinctive approach to history and historical causation.³

However, recent discussions about critical junctures has generated strife within the critical juncture tradition. Since around 2000, many authors have presented their views about key conceptual and theoretical matters in this research.⁴ And this collective effort has helped to refine

¹ This framework draws on contributions by Kuhn (1970 [1962]), Lipset and Rokkan (1967), Stinchcombe (1968: Ch. 3), Eldredge and Gould (1972; see also Gould 2007), Krasner (1984; 1988), David (1985), Arthur (1989, 1994), North (1990), and Collier and Collier (1991: Ch. 1).

² On the extensive substantive research on critical junctures, see Appendix III.

³ For sweeping overviews of key approaches to historical analysis, see Nisbet (1969) and Sanderson (1990). For approaches within distinct disciplines, see Ingold (1986) on anthropology; Smith (1973), Moore (1974) and Sztompka (1993) on sociology; Burke (1979; 1993: Ch. 5) on history; and Pierson (2004) and Grzymala–Busse (2011) on political science.

⁴ An incomplete list of recent works includes Thelen (1999; 2003; 2004), Mahoney (2000; 2001), Pierson (2000; 2004), Garud and Karnøe (2001), Katznelson (2003), Crouch and Farrell (2004), Orren and Skowronek (2004), Streeck and Thelen (2005b), Hogan (2006), Martin and Sunley (2006), Boas (2007), Capoccia and Kelemen (2007), Djelic and Quack (2007), Greer (2008), Baumgartner and Jones (2009), Ebbinghaus (2009), Howlett (2009), Sydow, Schreyögg, and Koch (2009), Beyer (2010), Djelic (2010), Garud, Kumaraswamy, and Karnøe (2010), Slater and Simmons (2010), Streeck (2010), Soifer (2012), Bernhard (2015), Capoccia (2015; 2016a; 2016b), Rixen and Viola

old ideas and introduce important innovations. At the same time, scholars have frequently defended counterposed views and thus sown doubts about a question as basic as, What are the building blocks of the critical juncture framework? There is even considerable disagreement about the nature of a critical juncture. In short, a problem facing this field of research is that the framework that should provide the common ideas for the research program—there is no research program without at least some agreement on core ideas—has been articulated in different, frequently incompatible ways.

This chapter reviews the theoretical foundations of critical juncture research and, based on a consideration of how foundational issues should be addressed, suggests that some changes to the core ideas used in this research are needed. The aim of the chapter is to show how the critical juncture framework can be reconstructed on stronger foundations.

The first section focuses on social statics, i.e., how and why order is maintained in a society, and discusses the way critical juncture research should account for the historical origins of social orders. It makes the case that all research on historical causation must address two problems: (1) the problem of infinite regress, i.e., the possibility that historically oriented research will constantly push back the analysis to earlier events and hence not find an adequate starting point; and (2) the problem of distal non-recurring causes, i.e., the difficulty of arguing convincingly that a change that occurred in the distant past and has ceased to recur is the cause of a much later outcome. It claims that research on critical junctures should address these problems by studying rapid discontinuous, macro-level, changes—i.e., critical junctures—and by spelling out how such changes generate persistent effects through a distinct causal chain that includes a repeated cause-

(2015), Sarigil (2015), Fioretos, Falleti, and Sheingate (2016), Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen (2018), García-Montoya and Mahoney (2020), and Gerschewski (2021).

effect pair. It also argues that greater attention to stabilizing causal mechanisms, micro-level processes that bridge macro-level variables, is needed.

The second section focuses on social dynamics, i.e., how and why societies change over time and, in particular, the task of explaining why critical junctures occur. It discusses two basic problems all explanations of change must confront: (1) the problem of endogenous and exogenous sources of change, i.e., the challenge of deciding whether to give primacy to endogenous or exogenous factors or, if both are treated as part of an explanation, how to combine them; and (2) the problem of structure and agency, i.e., the task of deciding whether to give primacy to structural factors or to actors and their choices or, if both factors and actors are used in an explanation, how to integrate them. Most basically, it maintains that research should account for the occurrence of critical junctures in a balanced way, avoiding both the pitfall of one-sided explanations that see change as driven by endogenous factors or exogenous shocks and the danger of historical and structural determinism. More specifically, it holds that research needs to recognize the limits of purely endogenous accounts of change more explicitly, move beyond a conception that treats agency as a matter of choosing between externally given alternatives and that equates agency with contingency, and fully appreciate the importance of theorizing change mechanisms.

This chapter engages with an ongoing discussion. Some of its arguments build on, support, and refine some views in the literature. Others imply that some ideas in the literature are erroneous and should be discarded. And yet others involve ideas that are new, at least with regard to the literature on critical junctures. Thus, to clarify how the reconstructed framework that is proposed coincides with and differs from ideas in the literature, the claims made here are compared to current thinking about critical junctures.

The conclusion of the chapter draws together its main arguments.

Social Statics

Critical juncture research seeks to understand the historical origins of social orders and rejects presentism or short-termism, the assumption that patterns of the current world can be explained fully by reference to causes in the recent past (Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992: 7, 23, 35; Rueschemeyer 2009: 147–51). That is, it puts the focus on temporally distal, as opposed to proximate, causes.⁵ More specifically, it spotlights events (X) that lie in a distant past and have ceased to occur and hence do not directly cause a much later outcome (Y) (see Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1 An (Incomplete) Model of a Distal Cause



Given this interest in distal causes, critical juncture research inevitably faces two problems. The first is the problem of infinite regress, which concerns the question: How far back must we go to find the event (X) that is seen as the historical source of a later outcome (Y)? That is, in terms of Figure 5.1, how is the value of “n” determined? The second is the problem of distal non-recurring causes, which raises the question: How can an event in a distant past that has ceased to occur be considered as the cause of a much later effect? That is, in terms of Figure 5.1, how can the gap between initial cause (X) and ultimate outcome (Y) be filled or how can an unbroken causal chain joining cause and outcome be constructed?

⁵ This distinction is similar to Stinchcombe’s (1968: 101–16) one between historical and constant causes. However, Stinchcombe’s definition of a historical cause is rather narrow, so it is preferable to use the more general term distant or distal causes. It is also convenient to contrast this distinction to the distinction between ultimate and proximate causes (Mayr 1961), given that the notion of ultimate cause conveys a sense of causal primacy rather than temporal distance.

These are long-standing problems in the study of distal causes. Yet scholars continue to disagree on whether they can be solved and, if so, how. A common view is that contiguity is essential to the relation of causation and hence that the idea of causation at a temporal distance is suspect (Hume 1896 [1739–40]: 73–76). Some methodologists consider that the problem of infinite regress is unsolvable and thus doubt the viability of arguments based on distal causes (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994: 86; Gerring 2007: 181–82). Moreover, even authors who treat these two problems as solvable do not offer consistent recommendations regarding how to solve them. A few authors suggest that critical junctures provide a solution to the problem of infinite regress but conceptualize critical junctures in different ways (Krasner 1984; Collier and Collier 1991: Ch.1; Mahoney 2000; Pierson 2004; Capoccia and Kelemen 2007). Many authors argue that the problem of distal non-recurring causes is solvable, but present different proposals to bridge distal causes and later outcomes (Stinchcombe 1968; Collier and Collier 1991: Ch.1; Mahoney 2000; Martin and Sunley 2010).

Therefore, a detailed discussion about how critical juncture research can and should tackle the problems of infinite regress and distal non-recurring causes is called for.

Infinite Regress

The problem of infinite regress, briefly introduced above, can be formulated more fully as follows. Any research that suggests that an explanation of certain enduring structural features of contemporary societies (e.g., why do some societies have welfare states and other do not?) must address the historical origin of these features, and not only temporally proximate causes, instantly invites the following questions: How far back is it necessary to go? Is it enough to reach back to a prior decade or maybe a prior century? Is it necessary to go back to the beginning of time or at

least the birth of societies, an extremely demanding requirement? Is there any basis for cutting into the long flow of history by positing a meaningful and nonarbitrary starting point to what might be represented as a long causal chain?

A distinctive solution to this problem is provided by conceptualizing *critical junctures* as *rapid discontinuous changes* at the *macro-level* of society or the international system. When understood in these terms, critical junctures introduce a *qualitative novelty* that marks a before and after and provides a basis for identifying a point of entry into the stream of history and solving the problem of infinite regress.⁶ It is imperative, therefore, to elucidate what a critical juncture is and is not.

Critical Junctures as Rapid Discontinuous Changes

The idea that a critical juncture is a rapid discontinuous change can be clarified by distinguishing discontinuous from continuous change. This contrast has been conveyed in different terms. Social theorists contrast change of a system—also called structural change—to change within a system (Parsons 1951: Ch. 11; Radcliffe-Brown 1957: 71–89).⁷ Focusing on the sphere of knowledge, Kuhn (1970 [1962]: 181) distinguishes revolutionary paradigm change from the incremental, cumulative change that occurs within a paradigm. Yet the basic point is that not all change involves differences in degree or movement along some continuum and that discontinuous change differs from continuous change in that it involves the introduction of some new property or qualitative novelty.

To further explain the idea of a critical juncture, it is necessary to distinguish rapid from gradual discontinuous change. This difference corresponds to the contrast between Eldredge and

⁶ See also Dahrendorf (1959: Ch. 1) and Mann (1986: 3).

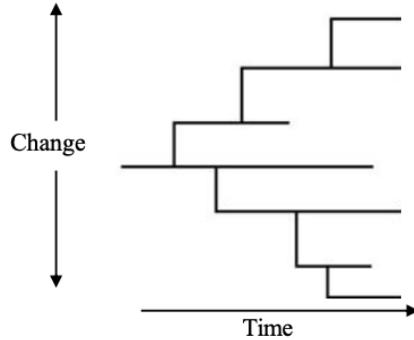
⁷ On discontinuous changes as a solution to the problem of infinite regress, see Bunge (2009: 125–47).

Gould's (1972) saltationist (or punctuated equilibrium) model and Darwin's (1964 [1859]) gradualist model (see Figure 5.2). Both models are branching models of macroevolution and thus recognize the role of discontinuous changes in evolution—these changes are depicted by the nodes at which new branches sprout. However, the distinctiveness of a saltationist model is that it posits that change can involve a rapid discontinuous change—a critical juncture—that introduces a new property in a sudden burst or what social scientists have variously characterized as a “leap-like change” (Schumpeter 2005 [1932]: 115), a “great spurt” (Gerschenkron 1962: 206–07), a “step-like” change (Gellner 1964: 45), or a “power jump” (Mann 1986: 3, 524–25).⁸

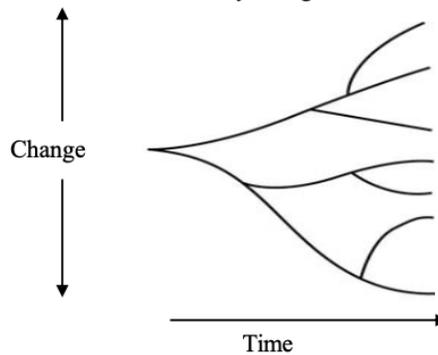
⁸ It is worth noting that such rapid discontinuous changes do not happen instantaneously. For example, punctuations in evolutionary biology typically lasted between 50,000 and 100,000 years or longer (Eldredge and Gould 1972). In turn, the critical junctures studied by Collier and Collier (1991: 32) unfolded over 9 to 23 years.

**Figure 5.2 Two Kinds of Branching
Macroevolution: Saltationism and
Gradualism**

(a) Saltationism: Qualitative novelty and episodic spurts



(b) Gradualism: Qualitative novelty and slow, steady change



Note: New branches indicate discontinuous change or qualitative novelty. Saltationism is the term used to describe the model of change associated with the idea of punctuated equilibrium. Adapted from Eldredge and Gould (1972: 109, 113).

Critical Junctures as Macro-Level Changes

The second attribute of a critical juncture, that it is change at the macro-level, can be clarified in terms of the distinction between properties that are not possessed intrinsically by a unit—which can be identified as macro properties—and properties possessed intrinsically by a unit (e.g.,

individuals, groups, states)—micro properties (Bunge 1996: 17–23).⁹ Understood this way, a critical juncture can be a change in a property units have by virtue of their relationship to other units. For example, it could involve a change in the class structure of a society (e.g., the concentration of wealth in the hands of the 1%) or the structure of the global economy (e.g., the emergence of a semi-periphery between the core and the periphery). A critical juncture can also be a change in properties possessed by wholes. For instance, it could involve the change from a socialist to a capitalist economy or from an authoritarian to a democratic political regime. Briefly, a critical juncture can be a change in either a structural or a systemic property—what is loosely seen as a big change.¹⁰

Because a critical juncture is a big change, it is also useful to distinguish it from a total revolution. A critical juncture can be a change in one aspect of society (e.g., the political system), one part of an aspect of society (e.g., the political regime, which is one part of the political system), or even one part of a part of an aspect of society (e.g., theories of physics, which is one discipline of the sciences, which is part of culture). Moreover, a critical juncture can change some structure partially rather than fully. As Kuhn (1970 [1962]: 49, 92) puts it, revolutions can change systems “in part” or “in whole” and hence “there can be small revolutions as well as large ones.” But a critical juncture can never be a total revolution. Indeed, there are no changes that involve the replacement of an entire system and, if critical junctures are seen as total revolutions, the concept of a critical juncture would have no empirical referents and would cease to provide a solution to the problem of infinite regress.

⁹ It is conventional to think of micro as related to persons and macro to a social system. However, what may be regarded as macro in one context (e.g., the state) may be treated as micro in another (e.g., in a discussion of the global order). What is crucial, then, is whether a property is intrinsic or not to a unit.

¹⁰ The distinction between structural and systemic properties draws on Lazarsfeld and Menzel (1961: 426–29).

In short, a critical juncture is a distinct kind of change. It is not a micro-level change, one that involves intrinsic properties of units. Yet it is also not a total revolution. Indeed, it can be a range of big changes that are structural or systemic in nature.¹¹

Summary

Historically oriented research must address the problem of infinite regress. And a focus on critical junctures provides a solution to this problem. The search for distal causes of social outcomes does not have to reach back to some elusive first cause. Rather, it can cut into the stream of history where some rapid, discontinuous change at the macro level occurred (e.g., the formation of modern states, the transition to industrial capitalism, the introduction of multiparty elections). Prior events can be analyzed inasmuch as considering possible causes of a critical juncture is of substantive interest or of methodological value. Nonetheless, the identification of qualitative novelties introduced by critical junctures provides a well justified and practical criterion to anchor research on the historical origins of outcomes and to respond to the insinuation that the real starting point of a causal chain always lies further back in history.

Distal Non-recurring Causes

Any research suggesting that the cause of an effect lies in the distant past, and that such a cause has ceased to recur and thus does not directly cause an effect, must also confront the problem of distal non-recurring causes. That is, it must address the following questions: How can a distant event have a long-term effect, that is, an effect many decades or even centuries after it occurred? How can the temporal gap between the initial event and the ultimate outcome be bridged? How

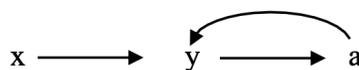
¹¹ For a useful inventory of such changes in world history before 1760, see Mann's (1986: 524–25) list of "power jumps."

can a credible claim be made about the effect of a non-recurring event? This is a key burden that arguments involving distal causes must face.

Bridging Distal Causes and Later Outcomes With a Self-Replicating Loop

The way critical juncture research can confront this key problem in historical research is by treating a critical juncture as a distal cause that triggers what Stinchcombe (1968: 102) calls a self-replicating causal loop, a kind of causal chain that bridges a temporally distant cause and effect (see Figure 5.3). This basic causal model, also called a self-reinforcing positive feedback loop (Krasner 1988: 83; Thelen 1999: 392–96), is readily recognizable. It has been given content with various more specific ideas, that help to explain why certain outcomes are self-reinforcing. For example, scholars have argued that some processes entail “sunk costs” (Stinchcombe 1968: 120–30), have a “lock-in effect” (David 1985: 334; Arthur 1989), or yield “increasing returns” (Arthur 1989, 1994; Pierson 2000).¹² And it offers an elegant solution to the problem of distal non-recurring causes.

Figure 5.3 A Model of a Self-Replicating Causal Loop



Note: The figure draws on Stinchcombe (1968: 103).

¹² See also Mahoney (2000: 515–26), Katznelson (2003: 291–92), Sydow, Schreyögg, and Koch (2009: 698–701), Beyer (2010), Rixen and Viola (2015), and Sarigil (2015).

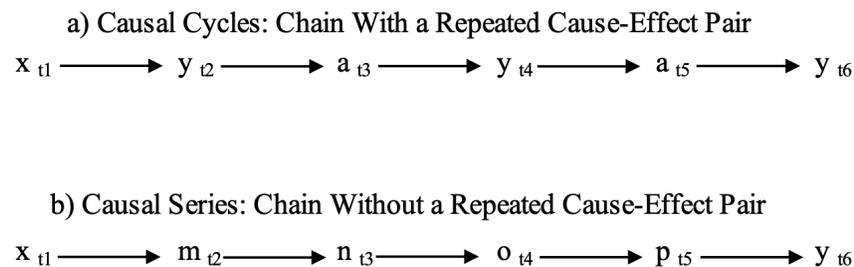
Basically, this problem is overcome by positing that the outcome (Y) of a distal non-recurring cause (X) persists due to reciprocal causation, whereby Y causes A and A causes Y in successive time periods. In other words, the claim that a critical juncture produces an outcome that persists over a considerable time, even after the distal cause has ceased to recur, is sustained by specifying a causal chain that accounts for the reproduction of some outcome—an outcome commonly called the *historical legacy* of a critical juncture.

This building block of critical juncture research is clear and hardly needs any elaboration. However, two points help to complete the discussion.

Distinguishing Causal Cycles from Causal Series

To avoid a possible confusion between this kind of argument and other historical arguments about distal causes and long-term effects, it is useful to distinguish between causal chains that rely on the idea of causal cycles or causal series (see Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.4 Two Kinds of Causal Chains: Causal Cycles and Causal Series



Note: The distinction between causal cycles and causal series is developed in Bunge (2009: 132, 155).

Using these terms, the distinctive feature of critical juncture research is that it always uses a model that includes a *causal cycle*. Indeed, the signature feature of critical junctures, the persistence of the same outcome, is the result of the defining feature of a causal cycle, the repetition of a cause-effect pair (see the A-Y pair in Figure 5.4, panel a). However, this is not the only way in which distal causes may be connected to later outcomes.

For example, a common way of arguing that a distant cause has a long-term effect is to posit what Weber (1978: 331) calls a “concatenation of circumstances,” a kind of causal argument well exemplified by Weber’s own theory of the origins of capitalism (Collins 1980: 929–35).¹³ Such a concatenation of circumstances can be represented as a causal chain that bridges the temporal gap between a distal cause and a later outcome. But this causal chain does not include any repeated cause-effect pair and is better represented as a *causal series* (see Figure 5.4, panel b).

In sum, it is necessary to recognize that not all arguments about distal causes account for the persistence of some effect over a long time—what critical juncture research calls a historical legacy. And it is useful to distinguish historical arguments that rely on different kinds of causal chains.¹⁴

Bridging Macro-Level Relations With Causal Mechanisms

More crucially, to fill out any claim about the historical legacy of a critical juncture, greater attention to the causal mechanisms that account for stability is needed. The literature refers to “mechanisms of reproduction” and “feedback mechanisms” that are key to the stability of the

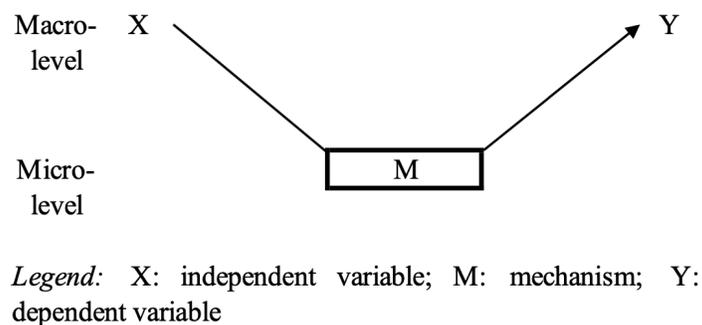
¹³ For another classic example, see Machiavelli (1996 [1531]: Book I, Ch. 39) on the history of Florence.

¹⁴ To clarify, the point is not that an argument about critical junctures only involves a causal cycle but rather that it always contains a causal cycle. That is, a critical juncture might produce a legacy through a causal cycle combined with a causal series. For example, what is called the aftermath period (Collier and Collier 1991: 37) or the formation phase (Sydow, Schreyögg, and Koch 2009: 692–94) could be modeled in terms of a causal series prior to the operation of a causal cycle.

legacy (Collier and Collier 1991: 35–37; Thelen 1999: 387–96). However, if arguments about these mechanisms are to add something significant to claims about causal cycles, they must meet three basic requirements.

They must model mechanisms as processes that happen within the objects being studied, that is, at a lower level of organization than the variables in an $X \rightarrow Y$ hypothesis or, more precisely, at the level of actors and their actions (see Figure 5.5).¹⁵ In other words, they must be arguments that do more than treat causal mechanisms as mere intervening variables.

Figure 5.5 A Model of a Causal Mechanism



Arguments about mechanisms should also be treated as central to explanations and not reducible to some minimal point (e.g., positing that some single generic mechanism, coordination among actors, establishes a connection between a macro-condition and a macro-outcome). Specifically, they should strive to meet various standards that have been elaborated for theories of

¹⁵ This concept of causal mechanism is due to philosophers of science and sociologists (Boudon 1986: 30; Coleman 1986: 1322; 1990: 8; Bunge 1996: 123–24, 137–50; 1997; Elster 2015: Ch. 2) and contrasts with the understanding of mechanisms as any intervening variable.

mechanisms, such as spelling out a complete set of essential, system-specific mechanisms and addressing how they interact among each other.¹⁶

Lastly, any theory about the mechanisms used to explain why a social order endures needs to adequately consider agency. The mechanisms connecting two variables specify actors and their actions. And all actors cannot be assumed to act so as to stabilize the current order. Some actors will always be better off with a new order and hence favor change. Moreover, all actors have agency and need not reproduce a social order. In other words, actors that are part of a system can always try to change the system. And, inasmuch as these actors prevail, the mechanisms that reproduce a legacy would cease to operate. Thus, a complete theory of mechanisms must address the possibility of disequilibrium behavior.

Accounting for the persistence of an effect in terms of *stabilizing causal mechanisms* increases the value of arguments about persistent effects made in terms of macro-level variables.¹⁷ Indeed, explanations involving only macro-level variables beg another question about bridging, in this case about how macro-level causes could produce macro-level effects (Coleman 1990: Ch. 1). Going beyond arguments about how the persistent effect of a critical juncture is produced through a causal cycle, the legacy of a critical juncture needs to be explained through a systematic account of causal mechanisms.

Summary

Critical junctures are distal causes, that cease to recur. Thus, they do not directly generate outcomes that occur at a great temporal distance. Yet, research on critical junctures gets around the problem

¹⁶ On various ways in which mechanisms can be represented and assessed, see Bunge (1997: 454–58; 2006: 131), Craver and Darden (2013: Chs. 3 and 6), Elster (2015: Ch. 2), and Waldner (2015).

¹⁷ On the epistemic value of knowledge about causal mechanisms, see Thagard (1999: Ch. 7), Bunge (2006: Chs. 4 and 5), Darden (2006), Elster (2015: Part 1), and Craver and Darden (2013).

of distal non-recurring causes by specifying how a critical juncture has a long-term, persistent effect—i.e., generates a historical legacy—through a causal chain involving a self-replicating causal loop or what has been called here, for sake of precision, a causal cycle. Moreover, inasmuch as the stabilizing causal mechanisms that bridge macro-level variables are spelled out, the claim to have connected a distal cause to a later, enduring outcome is even more credible.

The Claims, Compared

The arguments presented here support some positions in the literature. They run counter to other positions. And they introduce some novel ideas.

Critical Junctures as Rapid Discontinuous, Macro-level, Changes

The case made for conceptualizing critical junctures as rapid discontinuous, macro-level, changes provides a justification for what might be characterized as the consensus view in the literature. Some authors who draw on the idea of path dependence argue for a view not supported here: that small changes can be critical junctures (Mahoney 2000: 526; Pierson 2004: 44, 50–52; Greer 2008: 220–21).¹⁸ However, a majority of authors define critical junctures as discontinuous and/or rapid changes (see Appendix I). Moreover, most scholars characterize critical junctures as “*macro* transformations” (Collier and Collier 1991: 11) or large-scale events (Ekiert 1996: xi; Hacker 2002: 58–59; Katznelson 2003: 282; Ikenberry 2016: 540–41), while specifying that such macro-level events encompass a range of big changes short of total revolutions.¹⁹

In contrast, the argument that rapid discontinuous, macro-level, changes solve the problem of infinite regress provides a basis for rejecting some common views in the literature. A few

¹⁸ See also David (1985: 332) and Arthur (1989: 117).

¹⁹ See the suggestions to treat changes in “partial regimes” (Collier and Chambers-Ju 2012: 565) and “policy subsystems” (Baumgartner and Jones 2009) as critical junctures.

scholars explicitly acknowledge that major discontinuities can be used to tackle the problem of infinite regress (Hogan 2006: 663; Slater and Simmons 2010: 888). Nonetheless, some authors do not acknowledge the seriousness of the problem of infinite regress in the study of distal causes. For example, Diamond (1997: 9) simply urges scholars to “search for ultimate explanations” by “pushing back the chain of historical causation as far as possible.” Others do not always confront the problem of infinite regress squarely, suggesting that an objective criterion is not needed and that the starting point of an analysis of historical causation “might merely be a point in the causal chain beyond which it is empirically difficult or theoretically less interesting to pursue causality” (Simpser, Slater, and Wittenberg 2018: 420; see also Pierson 2004: 89).

And yet others address the problem of infinite regress but provide dubious solutions. Some authors propose to address this problem by focusing on moments when “contingent historical events ... that cannot be explained on the basis of prior historical conditions [or] prior events” occur (Mahoney 2000: 507–09, 511; 2001: 7–8). However, critical junctures are not and could not be fully contingent events, i.e., uncaused causes. Other scholars suggest that this problem could be solved by identifying points “at which ... cases begin to diverge in significant ways” (Pierson 2004: 89). However, critical junctures can send units (e.g., countries) on divergent, convergent or parallel paths. Thus, neither contingency nor differentiation are defining features of a critical juncture (see Chapter 19) and hence do not provide a basis for identifying critical junctures.²⁰ Various arguments in the literature are best discarded.

²⁰ Capoccia (2015: 169–70) discusses the problem of infinite regress but suggests a different criterion, one based on the size and duration of the impact of a critical juncture, for identifying critical junctures (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007: 360–63). However, it is not clear how this solution gets around the problem of infinite regress, in that it essentially calls for an assessment of the causal impact of all hypotheses about critical junctures before making any call regarding where to start the analysis. Furthermore, it is not clear how this solution could be consistent with Capoccia and Kelemen’s (2007: 348, 352) claim that “change is not a necessary element of a critical juncture” (see also Capoccia 2015: 165).

Finally, the argument about critical junctures presented here goes beyond the current literature in various ways. It explicitly treats the problem of infinite regress as a foundational issue in critical juncture research. And it clarifies key concepts commonly used somewhat loosely in much of the literature. To give but one example, authors who use the concept of punctuated equilibrium commonly rely on the metaphor of a branching tree to specify what is distinctive about a punctuated equilibrium, but fail to differentiate between the Darwinian and Gouldian branching models of evolution (Krasner 1984: 242; Capoccia and Kelemen 2007: 342). Thus, this discussion moves the literature forward by offering a precise conceptualization of critical junctures as rapid discontinuous, macro-level, changes and by proposing such qualitative novelties as a criterion for solving the problem of infinite regress.

Critical Junctures as Causes of Persistent Effects

The idea that critical junctures are causes that have persistent effects hardly requires discussion. All definitions of a critical juncture note that it produces a historical legacy (see Appendix I). Furthermore, many scholars clarify that arguments about a historical legacy must meet the burden of bridging an initial non-recurring cause and an ultimate outcome by specifying what has been called “mechanisms of reproduction” (Collier and Collier 1991: 35–37; Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen 2018: Ch. 7), “feedback mechanisms” (Thelen 1999: 387–96), “transmission mechanisms” (Peisakhin 2015: 22; Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen 2016: 637; Simpser, Slater, and Wittenberg 2018: 422), “channels” of “transmission” (Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen 2016: 633), or “conveyor belts for legacies” (Simpser, Slater, and Wittenberg 2018: 427). The idea that critical juncture research rests on a causal claim about persistent effects is widely recognized.

This core idea is not accepted by all, however. One view presented in the literature that draws on the notion of path dependence is that the legacy of a critical juncture can be explained by a causal chain that involves “reactive sequences” that “are marked by backlash processes that *transform* and perhaps *reverse* early events” rather than by “processes of reproduction that *reinforce* early events” (Mahoney 2000: 509, 526–35; see also Arestis and Sawyer 2009: 11; Beyer 2010: 4–5; and Martin and Sunley 2010: 84–85). Yet, reactive sequences involve a causal sequence that resembles a causal series as opposed to a causal cycle (Mahoney 2000: 526–29; Falletti and Mahoney 2015: 220–23), and thus can account for a long-term effect but not for a persistent effect, the distinguishing feature of critical junctures. Therefore, the distinction between causal cycles and causal series introduced above provides a basis for both clarifying the distinctiveness of causal claims about historical legacies and for disposing of the view that reactive sequences are a kind of path dependence and can explain the persistence of some legacy.²¹

As a final point, the proposal made here adds something new to the literature. Discussions about mechanisms have not been based on an explicit definition of a causal mechanism and have not recognized that a theory that incorporates mechanisms is a cross-level theory. The distinct epistemic value of a theory that specifies causal mechanisms is also rarely recognized. Indeed, the literature has largely failed to recognize the need to bridge macro-level variables by spelling out causal mechanisms. Thus, adding the idea of stabilizing mechanisms to the repertoire of ideas used in critical juncture research is a significant innovation.

²¹ A similar conclusion is reached by Howlett (2009: 252–53), Sydow, Schreyögg, and Koch (2009: 697–98), Rixen and Viola (2015: 317), and Sarigil (2015: 222–23).

Social Dynamics

The study of social statics is central to critical juncture research. And the argument that critical junctures produce historical legacies is the most distinctive claim of this research. But the study of social statics is only half of the research agenda on critical junctures. This research also addresses the sources of social change and provides explanations of social dynamics, that is, of how and why societies change over time.²² Moreover, it uses the classic distinction between the crisis of an old order and the creation of a new order (Kuhn 1970 [1962]: Chs. 7 and 8; Collier and Collier 1991: 773; Roberts 2014: xiii), and frequently analyzes two distinct questions about dynamics:

- (1) The causes of the end of the legacy: Why does the legacy of a critical juncture erode and end?
- (2) The causes of the critical juncture: Why does a critical juncture occur? Why does change occur through big, discontinuous leaps rather than small, incremental steps?²³

Given this interest in social dynamics, critical juncture research again inevitably faces some problems. One is the problem of endogenous and exogenous sources of change or, more specifically, the challenge of deciding whether change should be explained mainly in terms of endogenous or exogenous factors or, if not, how these two sources should be combined. Another

²² Some key texts on the critical juncture framework suggest that an analysis of dynamics is not central to research in this tradition. For example, Stinchcombe (1968: 105) states that “the *interesting* part” of explanations that rely on what he calls “historical causes” is “the process creating the self-regenerating loop, not the original cause,” i.e., the critical juncture. However, scholars have dedicated a lot of attention to the causes rather than the consequences of critical junctures. Actually, early works in this tradition focused more on explaining critical juncture than on accounting for the legacies of critical junctures; see, for example, Kuhn (1970 [1962]), Moore (1966), Lipset and Rokkan (1967), Skocpol (1979), and Mann (1986). And the interest in understanding why critical junctures occur continues (e.g., Ikenberry 2001; Kurtz 2013; Mazzuca 2021).

²³ The importance of these questions is stressed, among others, by Collier and Collier (1991: 33–34), Lee (2012: 94), Chibber (2003: Ch. 8), Roberts (2014: 44–46, 229), and Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen (2018: Part III). In addressing these questions, scholars commonly focus on one critical juncture and, looking backwards, seek to account for its origin (Collier and Collier 1991; Roberts 2014), and looking forward, consider why the legacy of the critical juncture erodes and/or comes to an end (Collier and Collier 1991: Ch. 8; Chibber 2003: Epilogue; Collier and Chambers-Ju 2012). Other scholars start their analysis at one critical juncture and, looking forward, analyze why the legacy of a critical juncture erodes and/or comes to an end and why a new critical juncture occurs (Rokkan 1970; Scully 1992; Ikenberry 2001; Kurtz 2013). This choice is largely dictated by research interests and is not consequential.

is the problem of structure and agency, which creates a similar challenge of deciding whether change should be explained mainly in terms of structural factors or actors and their choices or, if not, how factors and actors should be integrated in an explanation.

Compared to the problems of infinite regress and distal nonrecurring causes, these two problems are more general ones. In effect, although critical juncture research faces the specific challenge of explaining major discontinuous changes, the issues relevant to critical juncture studies of social dynamics are less distinctive than those it must confront in the study of social statics. What is more, unlike the problems of infinite regress and distal nonrecurring causes, these problems have been discussed extensively for a long time. They have been the focus of considerable attention in classical social theory (Nisbet 1969; Smith 1973; Sztompka 1993) and they continue to be the focus of reflection (Koning 2016; Emmenegger 2021; Gerschewski 2021).

However, it is not clear how these two problems should be tackled. Some scholars consider that critical juncture research has not solved (and possibly could not solve) these problems (Thelen 2003, 2004: 29–31; Streeck and Thelen 2005a, 2005b: 6–9; March and Olsen 2006: 11–13). Given that critical juncture research focuses to a great extent on how order is maintained in a society, it is seen as assuming that stability is the natural state of the world, that change is an anomaly, and that only exogenous shocks can account for major discontinuous changes. Given that this research traces the origins of social order back to distant macro-level or structural factor, it is portrayed as disregarding the role of agents as possible causal forces and exemplifying the pitfalls of historical and structural determinism. In short, critical juncture research is seen as having a static bias and providing an impoverished externalist and deterministic account of change.

Moreover, even authors who treat these problems as solvable offer different, not clearly reconcilable positions. Most of the discussion centers on the role of structure and agency in

accounting for change—scholars have been largely silent about the analysis of endogenous and exogenous sources of change. And, while some authors focus on the various ways in which critical junctures are determined by antecedent conditions (Slater and Simmons 2010; Soifer 2012), others argue that critical junctures are determined by contingent choices, choices made by actors that are unconstrained by antecedent conditions (Mahoney 2000; Bernhard 2015).

Thus, this section discusses how critical juncture research can and should confront these two problems relevant to the study of social dynamics.

Endogenous and Exogenous Sources of Change

Social theory provides some useful guidance regarding how critical juncture research should approach the role of endogenous and exogenous sources of change. The discussion about endogenous and exogenous factors—also called internal and external factors—has gone through two phases. Initially, a debate was framed in terms of the extent to which social change should be explained by factors internal to a society or by intersocietal or international factors. Classic evolutionary theory focused on internal factors, and diffusionist theory on external factors. However, these two options were scrutinized and discussed. And, over time, both options were seen as limited and the need to integrate the two kinds of sources of change was recognized (Sanderson 1990; Smelser 1992).

A more recent iteration of this debate was framed in terms of the relationship among spheres or systems within a society—the economy, politics, and culture. In this context, the Marxist view that change originates in the economy offered a clear example of an externalist account, in that the economy was portrayed as the prime mover of society and hence as the cause of political and cultural change. Yet, again, over time the view that change is driven by

developments in one sphere has been replaced by a pluralist view of social change, which recognizes that change can be driven by different sphere in different periods, that many times they operate jointly, and that at times they affect each other (Bunge 1985: 193–99; Mann 1986: Ch. 1). In short, a basic lesson of social theory that should be incorporated into research on critical junctures is that one-sided accounts of change should be avoided.

However, adding to this general point, the distinctive role of exogenous factors in explanations of discontinuous change should be recognized. It is key to stress that no system can be endogenously transformed into a new system, and that discontinuous change is always driven—at least in part—by exogenous factors.²⁴ Put different, one of the distinguishing features of critical juncture research is that it rejects the view that all change can be immanent, that is, driven purely by endogenous factors (e.g., a change in political regime change cannot be explained only in terms of tensions within the antecedent political regime). This is a common view, which is associated with the idea that change is always continuous. But it is erroneous.²⁵

Thus, it is important to stress that critical juncture research should avoid explanations based largely or entirely on exogenous shocks. And it is equally essential to acknowledge that explanations of discontinuous change necessarily must address exogenous drivers of change and cannot focus only on endogenous factors.

²⁴ This fundamental point has been made, in different ways, by various social theorists (Gellner 1964: 27–32; Nisbet 1969: 275–84; Smith 1973: Chs. 6–7; Touraine 1977: Ch. 7; and Giddens 1984: 163–64, 228–51; see also Schumpeter 2005 [1932]: 116–18). Yet this insight has largely been lost.

²⁵ The view that all change is endogenous change does allow for external factors, but only inasmuch as they serve as a stimuli that works itself through a system (Smith 1973: 150). On immanent change and its connection to the idea that change is always continuous, see Nisbet (1969: 170–78). For a classic argument in favor of “immanent self-determination,” a purely endogenous theory of change, see Sorokin (1941: Chs. 12–16). For a recent defense of a theory of change that eschews exogenous factors, see Crouch and Farrell (2004).

Structure and Agency

Social theory also provides some useful guidance regarding the analysis of structure and agency. Indeed, the structure/agency problem has been the subject of a great amount of discussion in social theory (Giddens 1984; Ingold 1986: Ch. 5; Bunge 1996: Chs. 9 and 10). And this literature points to some obvious potential hazards for critical juncture research. This research places emphasis on macro-level or historical factors. Yet outcomes are never predetermined by macro-level or historical factors. Thus, it needs to take steps to avoid historical and structural determinism.

Critical juncture research also relies heavily on arguments about path dependence to explain the legacy of critical junctures. However, it is important to recognize that agency is possible “*all* the time and not just in the very rare moments when structures break down entirely” (Conran and Thelen 2016: 66; see also Thelen 2004: 28–31), and that “processes of path destruction and new path creation are always latent in the process of path dependence” (Martin and Sunley 2006: 408; see also Garud and Karnøe 2001 and Garud, Kumaraswamy, and Karnøe 2010). Accordingly, critical juncture research must avoid what has been appropriately called “path dependence determinism” (Crouch and Farrell 2004) and recognize the possibility of “path generation” (Djelic and Quack 2007: 161–62, 167–68) and “path switching” (Crouch and Farrell 2004: 12).

Yet, again, it is important to go beyond this sound but basic advice to avoid determinisms. Critical juncture research should provide a full and nuanced analysis of actors and agency. Actors are always agents within a social system and agents are always conditioned. Yet actors always have the capacity for agency. Thus, actors do not have agency only when constraints on action are lifted. As Bunge (1998: 279) stresses, “history is made by individuals acting in and upon social

systems that pre-exist and shape them” (see also Bunge 1996: Chs. 9 and 10). Moreover, the equation of agency and contingency is mistaken. Indeed, it is worth recalling Weber’s (1946 [1919]: 120–27) moving depiction of the responsible politician who is called upon to make a choice, and says “here I stand, I can do no other.”

In other words, researchers should not provide an account of agents as causes by equating agency with moments of contingency allowed by structural factors. This view reduces agency to a choice regarding the unconditioned remainder left after the impact of structural factors has been accounted for. Rather, they should explore the many ways in which actors shape history, even when the circumstances are not favorable, sometimes by choosing between externally given alternatives, other times by creating new conditions, and yet other times by controlling conditions.²⁶

More to the point, as in the analysis of statics, the study of dynamics should specify *change causal mechanisms*, i.e., the mechanisms that produce change. In this regard, it is important to recognize that the mechanisms that generate system change are not the same ones as those that underpin the stability of a system. Further, as noted above, theorizing mechanisms involves several things. It requires the specification of the actors and the actions of actors that produce change. It calls for spelling out all essential, system-specific mechanisms and their interaction. And, key to the question of agency, it entails considering whether, rather than assuming that, all actors support change.

²⁶ The impact of actors on social processes is sometimes analyzed as an example of self-determination, which is contrasted to causal determination by factors or conditions external to actors. But self-determination does not imply causal indeterminacy nor is it an escape from external conditions. On self-determination, see Bunge (2009: 17–21, Ch. 7) and Wehmeyer et al. (2017: Part I).

Summary

To address social dynamics, that is, why orders come to an end and critical junctures occur, critical juncture research needs to rely on an integrative approach that avoids some common extremes in theories of social change. It should also go further and incorporate some less obvious ideas. It should avoid both excessively internalist and externalist accounts. Yet it should also recognize that one of the distinctive features of critical juncture research is its rejection of the view that all change can be driven by endogenous factors. It should escape macro-reductionism, the view that actors play no role in determining social outcomes. But it should also avoid micro-reductionism, the view that actors are not part of a system. Indeed, critical juncture research requires an understanding of agency that does not treat it as a matter of contingent, unconditioned choice that opens up when structural factors do not fully determine outcomes. And it needs to theorize causal mechanisms of change.

The Claims, Compared

These arguments are consistent with and provide a justification for much thinking about critical juncture research. Scholars regularly explain critical junctures in terms of both endogenous and exogenous sources of change. They recognize that a “crisis may be generated internally or externally” (Krasner 1984: 234; see also Bulmer and Burch 1998: 605; and Ikenberry 2001: 44–48). And they go to some length to draw attention to the role of “endogenous social strains or pressures” and to show how exogenous shocks are actually associated with endogenous processes (Roberts 2014: 47–48; see also Collier and Collier 1991: 768–72; and Kurtz 2013: 42–43).²⁷ The

²⁷ Relatedly, in debates between internalists and externalists in studies of knowledge—a debate that maps on to the one about endogenous and exogenous factors addressed here—Kuhn is frequently depicted as a radical externalist (Barnes 1982). However, Kuhn’s analysis of the crisis of paradigms puts great weight on an internal factor, the anomalies that emerge within a reigning paradigm, as a driver of paradigm change (Kuhn 1970 [1962]: Chs. 6–8).

need to avoid one-sided accounts of change is largely reflected in substantive research on critical junctures.²⁸

The literature on critical junctures offers an even more elaborate discussion about the role of structure and agency and stresses the importance of averting determinisms. The idea that critical junctures must be explained in terms of structural factors and agents is explicitly endorsed by most scholars (Sabel and Zeitlin 1985: 162–63; Collier and Collier 1991: 27; Katznelson 2003: 282–83).²⁹ Moreover, a rich discussion focuses on how structure and agency might be integrated. In particular, many authors consider how antecedent conditions (i.e., the exogenous and endogenous factors that precede a critical juncture) affect the discretion of actors during critical junctures (Collier and Collier 1991: 27, 771; Roberts 2014: 48–49), and they have proposed distinctions to think about the relationship between antecedent conditions and actor choices.³⁰ To a large extent, the proposed approach coincides with and provides support for current practices.

Nonetheless, the positions articulated here are not shared by all. It does not coincide with the critical view that most research on critical junctures relies on a deterministic account of path dependence and hence is forced to explain change by invoking exogenous shocks (Thelen 2004: xii–xiii, 8, 25–31; Streeck and Thelen 2005a; 2005b: 6–9). This is not an accurate depiction of the tradition of critical juncture research as a whole. Even though research could be more explicit about which factors are endogenous and which are exogenous, they routinely explains change in terms of both endogenous and exogenous factors. Even though research could provide a more

²⁸ For examples of substantive research that address the interplay between endogenous and exogenous factors, and avoid treating exogenous (international) shocks as the main or only driver of change, see Collier and Collier (1991: Chs. 3 and 4), Collier (1993), Roberts (2014: 47–48, Ch. 4), and Mazzuca (2021).

²⁹ See also Pierson (2004: 51–52), Weingast (2005: 165–66), Martin and Sunley (2006: 402–03), Soifer (2012: 1574, 1593), Slater (2010: 55), and Slater and Simmons (2010: 887–90).

³⁰ Soifer (2012: 1573, 1575–76) distinguishes permissive conditions, which ease “the constraints of structure and make change possible,” from productive conditions, which “determine the outcome that emerges from the critical juncture” and which are influenced in turn by critical antecedents. Finally, Riedl and Roberts (see Chapter 6) distinguish between activating and generative critical junctures.

nuanced analysis of actors, it has avoided the pitfall of various determinisms. This critique rightly pushes researchers to be more attentive to agency. Nonetheless, critical juncture research does not provide a static account of dynamics.

The views presented here also does not coincide with some common practices in critical juncture research. Many explanations of critical junctures are couched in terms of antecedent conditions, cleavages, and shock. However, the discussion here suggests that a focus on the distinction between endogenous and exogenous drivers of change would lead to clearer theorizing about possible sources of change. Some antecedent conditions are endogenous, and others are exogenous. Some cleavages are internal to a system (e.g., the cleavage between hardliners and soft-liners in a study of regimes), and others are external to a system (e.g., the owner-worker cleavage in a study of political regimes). Thus, a focus on the theoretically fundamental distinction between endogenous and exogenous factors is seen as preferable to the somewhat cumbersome terminology of antecedent conditions, cleavages, and shocks used in many explanations of critical junctures.

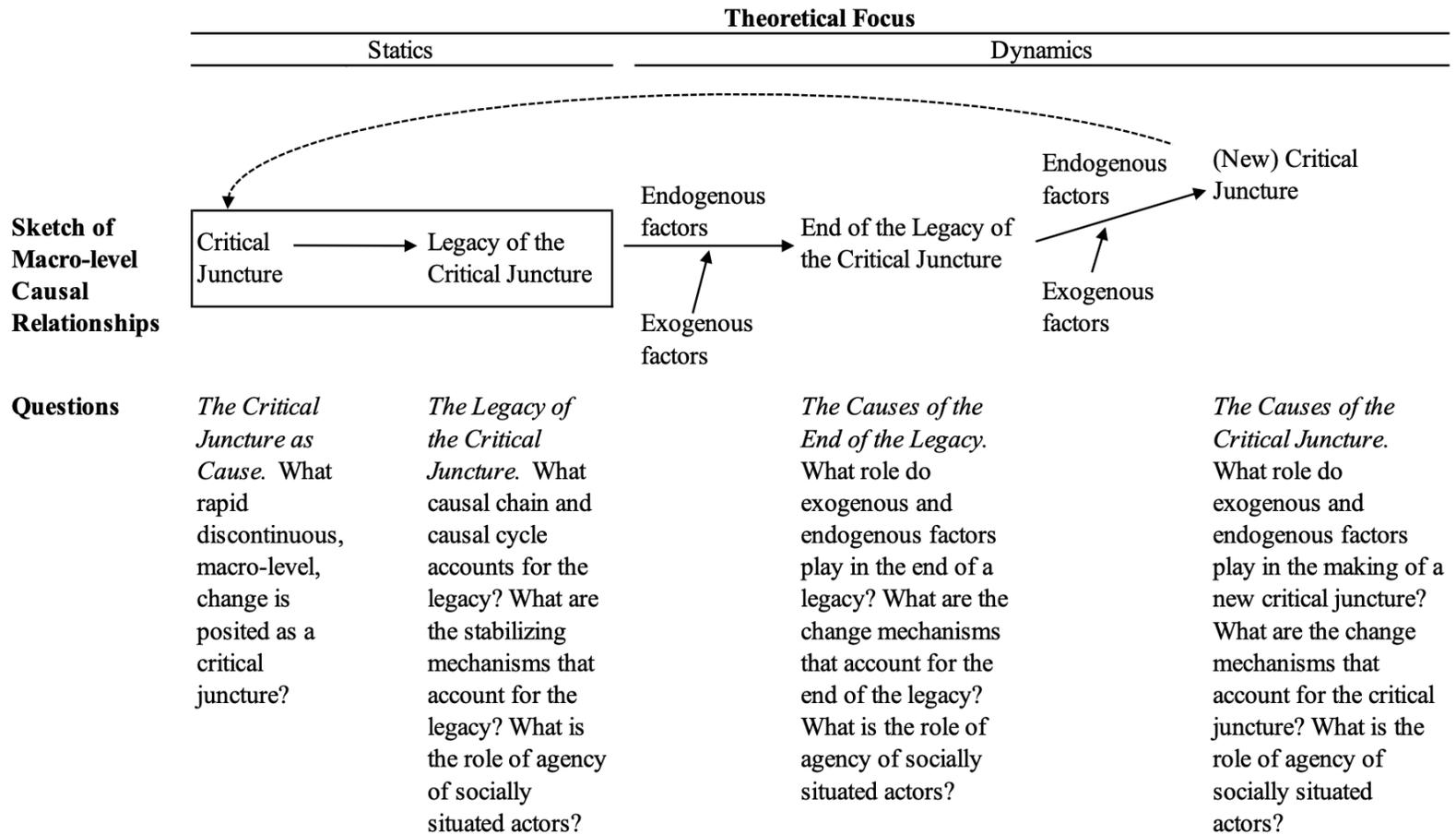
In turn, even though the literature on critical junctures has sought to combine the analysis of structure and agency, most scholars conceive of agency as a choice between externally given alternatives. Indeed, a commonly voiced idea is that “at critical junctures ... many constraints on agency are broken or relaxed and opportunities expand so that purposive action may be especially consequential” (Katznelson 2003: 282–83; see also Sabel and Zeitlin 1985: 162; Capoccia and Keleman 2007: 342; Greer 2008: 219; and Roberts 2014: 43). Additionally, scholars regularly equate agency and contingency, seeing agency as manifested through the contingent choices of actors—choices seen as unaffected by or independent from prior conditions (Mahoney 2000: 511; Bernhard 2015: 978), and even make a case for treating contingency as a hallmark of critical

junctions (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007: 343, 348; Greer 2008: 219; Calder and Ye 2010: 42; Capoccia 2015: 148, 150–51, 156–60, 165). Thus, the analysis of actors and agency supported above differs from the way in which agency is analyzed in the literature on critical junctions.

Finally, the discussion in this section goes beyond the existing literature in several ways. Beyond suggesting that critical junction research should explicitly build on basic insights in social theory, it has introduced three key points. It has clarified what is distinctive about explanations of big, discontinuous changes—their rejection of the view that all change can be immanent, i.e., endogenously driven. It has pointed to the need to broaden the scope for agency beyond the choice between externally given alternatives and to break the equation between agency and contingency. And it has called for specifying change mechanisms, an important gap in current theorizing.

Additionally, the most sweeping innovation in this discussion has been its treatment of the matters of the endogenous and exogenous sources of change, and the relationship between structure and agency, as foundational issues in critical junction research. Such a focus on fundamentals is needed to justify decisions about the critical junction framework. And, as the critical review of the basic building blocks of critical junction research in this section (and the first section) shows, it provides a basis for the introduction of several new ideas to the critical junction framework (for a graphic representation of the proposed reconstruction of this framework, that combines the ideas on statics and dynamics presented in this chapter, see Figure 5.6).

Figure 5.6 The Critical Juncture Framework: An Approach to the Study of Statics and Dynamics



Note: To indicate that the *critical juncture-legacy* nexus anchors the study of critical junctures—from a methodological perspective, the study of dynamics takes a certain order as its point of reference—it is highlighted in a box. *Endogenous factors* are internal to the system under consideration; *exogenous factors* are external to the system under consideration. Thus, the meaning of the term "exogenous" varies according to the subject matter. Economic factors may be considered as exogenous in research on politics, and vice versa. Exogenous can also be taken to mean, more strictly, factors that are not themselves traceable back to a critical juncture. The dotted line connecting the (new) critical juncture to the prior critical juncture is not a causal arrow; rather, it indicates that, with a new critical juncture, the analysis moves next to the effect of the critical juncture. *Causal mechanisms* are actions of entities at a lower level of organization than the ultimate outcome that is being explained.

Conclusions

Discussions about critical junctures during the past two decades have revealed considerable disagreement about the building blocks of critical juncture research. This situation is not necessarily problematic. Debates and controversies are a common feature in successful research programs. However, when serious doubts are raised about the core ideas of a research program, its momentum is weakened. Thus, this chapter has sought to reconstruct the critical juncture framework on stronger foundations. And, to this end, it has offered a review of the theoretical foundations of critical juncture research and, following a discussion about how various foundational issues should be handled, proposed various changes to the critical juncture framework. It suggested that some ideas should be clarified and refined, that other ideas should be discarded, and that yet other ideas should be introduced.

The foundational issues addressed in this chapter are complex, and some questions are best treated as open. Nonetheless, the discussion has yielded several conclusions.

One set of conclusions concern the study of social statics:

- A critical juncture is (1) a rapid discontinuous, macro-level, change, and (2) a distal cause that generates a historical legacy or, more precisely, has a persistent effect via a causal cycle—a causal chain that includes a repeated cause-effect pair.
- Critical juncture research rejects the universal validity of a continuist conception of change.
- Claims about long-term effects that do not involve a persistent effect (e.g., arguments in the form of causal series) should be distinguished from arguments about the historical legacy of critical junctures.
- Explanations of social order are more credible when they specify stabilizing causal mechanisms, the micro-level processes that bridge macro-level variables.

Another set of conclusions concern the study of social dynamics:

- The critical juncture framework offers an integrated explanation of statics and dynamics. However, it treats the question of what explains social order and what explains social change as distinct questions, that require different answers.
- Critical juncture research should avoid the shortcomings of extreme internalism and externalism, and not privilege either endogenous or exogenous sources of

change. Nonetheless, it does reject the view that all change can be endogenously driven.

- Critical juncture research should avoid the shortcomings of macro-reductionism and micro-reductionism, and address the impact of structural factors and agency. Yet, it requires a better understanding of agency, that does not equate agency with moments of contingency allowed by structural factors.
- Explanations of social change are more credible when they specify change causal mechanisms that bridge macro-level variables.

The critical juncture framework systematizes one approach to historically oriented research. Indeed, it certainly is not the only approach that makes use of temporal concepts and addresses how history matters. It is not even the only approach that links the study of social statics to that of social dynamics. Nonetheless, this framework is a rather unique synthesis of well-vetted ideas, that avoid a number of possible pitfalls. It provides a useful guide to researchers seeking to encompass and combine the study of statics and dynamics, of social order and social change.

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