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APPLICABILITY OF NEW INSTITUTIONAL ECONOMICS IN THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF IDEOLOGIES AND RELIGIONS

Summary: The paper tries to demonstrate the great explanatory potential of economic theory in general and new institutional economics in the domain of ideologies and religions. This is done by presenting Douglass C. North's concepts about ideological conviction and its role in contracting, collective action, and institutional change. It is shown how choices within the constraints of ideological beliefs as well as choices about the ideological beliefs can be explained by applying the utility-maximizing model within the new institutional economics perspective. It is also argued that this institutional-economic approach interpretation of ideologies and religions being accepted and changed by people has neither reductionist nor denouncing inherent aims or implications.

Key words: new institutional economics, Douglass C. North, ideology, religion, economic approach.

1. Introduction

Ideologies and religions have long been absent from economic analyses. This was so even though the very origin of the modern capitalist economy was famously attributed by Max Weber to religious developments, and even though ideologies such as liberalism and socialism influenced the creation of institutional structures of many states around the world. *Homo oeconomicus* – fully rational, concerned only in his or her own preferences and relative market prices – seemed uninterested in and unable to comprehend any metaphysical or normative beliefs. This did not change much even with the advent of new institutional economics (NIE). Although its proponents recognized the deficiencies of the perfect rationality model, they have not so far produced a convincing new-paradigm proposition. In effect, to date, differently understood and operationalized notions of “bounded rationality” are being used.

For the sake of this paper, the notions of ideology and religion will be defined in such a way so as to underline their institutional dimension. “Ideology” is thus a particular system of beliefs about particular institutions – from individual contractual obligations to the level of socio-economic systems. Ideologies necessarily include a descriptive component – the beliefs about the factual state of the world

and the mechanisms and consequences of social interactions. But the core of every ideology are the normative beliefs – value judgments about actions and institutions being right or wrong, and logically resulting postulates of their retention or change. In a similar fashion, “religion” is defined as a particular system of beliefs, institutions, and organizations premised upon relations of humans with supernatural beings of defined identity and characteristics. Religions can yield ideologies concerning different areas of social and economic life.

Many examples can be found that ideologies and religions still exert a substantial influence on the institutional frameworks of economies and politics. Feminists in 2010 succeeded in Poland in establishing gender quotas in voting lists and environmentalist groups are strongly encouraging European Union energy markets regulations or product requirements, such as the costly and world-wide exceptional carbon emission reduction plans and “phasing out” light-bulbs from 2009. The growing population of Muslims in Europe poses new policy problems about assimilation and cultural diversity, with the French complete ban on *burqas* in public places in 2010 as an example of a widely debated issue, while the 2011 uprisings in Arab countries provoke additional fears of more immigration and possibly Islamic extremist governments in the neighborhood of the EU. The European Union is continuously facing ideological and legal struggles over such issues as the marital-law status of homosexuals, which could further reshape the household as well as the role of religion in legal systems or even the very presence of religious symbols in the public sphere (the case of crucifixes in Italian schools started in 2002), which could in turn further reshape the informal-institutional fabric of European societies.

There are still additional reasons for economists in Poland to be interested in ideologies and religions. As far as religion is concerned, Poland is virtually a homogenous country, with not less than 94% of the population self-declared Roman Catholic [Boguszewski (ed.) 2009, p. 4]. What are the socio-economic effects of Polish religiosity and the impact of the Catholic Church on the functioning of market economy in Poland? Is Catholicism any kind of positive “spiritual capital” in the transformation and modernization processes? The departure point for the political and economic transition period that started in 1989 was a state which claimed ideological legitimization, one of the main actors of the transition process has been the Catholic Church and the cultural context of post-transition Polish public and economic life is frequently identified as a specific blend of the *homo sovieticus* [Chumiński 2005, p. 64] and Catholic [Klimczak, Klimczak 2009, p. 105] mental and cultural heritages. In spite of all these unresolved questions and circumstances, social sciences still seem to know relatively little about the role of ideology in institutional change.

The issue of ideologies and religions as defined above seems also to be the core of any theory of informal institutions. Oliver E. Williamson, who identifies informal institutions with “social embeddedness” level of institutional analysis, writes: “This is where the norms, customs, mores, traditions, etc. are located. Religion plays a large role at this level” [Williamson 2000, pp. 596-597]. And as Williamson immediately

notes, although there already exists some sociological theory of knowledge and religion, this level “is taken as given by most institutional economists”. This might be considered a bit of a “methodological discomfort” for these economists, taking into account the very apt remark by a sociologist, Mark Granovetter, who points out that “we have the irony that economics, despite its devotion to methodological individualism, finds itself with no ready way to explain institutions as the outgrowth of individual actions, and so falls back to accounts based on gross features of the environment. There are two such main accounts: culturalism and functionalism” [Granovetter 1992, pp. 4-5]. The central questions confronting economists in the science of human beliefs and ideologies can therefore be repeated after D.C. North, who wanted to know “not only how human beings learn and meld beliefs and preferences to reach decisions and hence the choices that underlie economic theory but also how and why do they develop theories in the face of pure uncertainty, what makes those theories spread amongst a population or die out, and why do humans believe in them and act upon them?” [North 1996].

The domain of ideologies and religions is to some extent a matter of individual choice. And if Gary S. Becker is right that the economic approach of rational utility-maximizers “is applicable to all human behavior” [Becker 1976, p. 8], it also must be able to deal with decisions about accepting and discarding belief systems, and acting, or not acting, upon them. The aim of this paper is to reinforce just this kind of self-confidence and ambition of institutional economists. This is achieved by giving an outline of some applications of NIE in the scientific study of ideology and religion already present in institutional economics literature, especially in the works of D.C. North. Concluding remarks follow.

2. Douglass C. North and the concept of ideological conviction

North’s inquiry into the domain of ideology began with two theoretical problems he faced while developing his theory of institutional change.

a) Neoclassical economics assumes that wealth-maximizing individuals would maximize “at every margin” [North 1984, p. 258]. For such individuals, whenever it is possible to cheat, steal, or shirk, with certainty of impunity, disobeying rules and institutions is the “rational” choice. If this, however, was an accurate description of human behavior “the costliness of measuring performance, of fulfilling contracts and enforcing agreements would foreclose a world of specialization and division of labor” [North 1984, p. 479]. Therefore, the first problem could simply be formulated as follows: Why do individuals obey rules and institutions and fulfill agreements “when an individualistic calculus should have them act otherwise” [North 1981, pp. 45-46]?

b) Mancur Olson claimed that all collective action is haunted by the “free-rider” problem, which is the more serious, the bigger the group. Having found “enormous amount of [institutional] change [occurring] because of large group action which

should not occur in the face of the logic of the free rider problem” [North 1981, p. 46], North recalls Olson’s own acknowledgment “that his theory does not account for a wide variety of groups”. Olson stresses the instability of groups without side benefits, “but he neglects the point that they should not have existed at all under his model” although they in fact “significantly affect political and legal policy” [North 1981, pp. 57-58]. The second problem then is: Taking into account the free rider problem of large groups lacking the Olsonian selective incentives, how is it possible that such groups have existed and succeeded in pushing institutional change?

The answer that North gives to these problems is the notions of ideological conviction and ideological attitude, however nowhere formally introduced and defined. People do not litter the countryside or shirk at work because of values inculcated in them, their “perceptions about the justice and fairness of the rules of the game” [North 1992, p. 479] and the strength of the ideological conviction that they hold [North 1981, pp. 46-47]. Ideologies held by the individual thus contribute to the overall complex of constraints and incentives that shape his or her choices. Very importantly, there is potential substitution between concern for material interest and concern for doing what is perceived as fair or good. Given different utility functions, utility maximizing individuals would differ their willingness to pay “to express an act on their convictions” and the demand function for “acting upon beliefs” is very likely to be negatively sloped, i.e., “the lower the cost of expressing one’s convictions, the more important will these convictions be in determining a choice” [North 1990, pp. 43-44].

One could easily extend these North’s provisional insights to the question of the binding force of contracts and institutions in general. The problem would now be not “why” but “when” – under what circumstances will a utility-maximizing individual comply with a rule and fulfill a contract? Answering such a question, one could take the an indirect route through considering Gary S. Becker’s “Crime and Punishment...” [Becker 1968], which considers among other issues the factors of not obeying rules. From Becker’s inferences it follows that an offence (in the context of a legal rule or contract) will be committed if the expected utility of offence (taking into account probability and disutility of punishment and long-term prospects) is greater than the expected utility of compliance (taking into account long-term prospects) [Becker 1968, Footnote 16]. By reversing the issue and applying North’s observations on the role of ideology, one obtains the following.

Proposition 1:¹ As long as an individual ideologically holds a given institution to be fair and legitimate,² he or she will comply with this institution if he or she perceives that *ceteris paribus*:

$$U_{BC} + U_{IdC} > (1 - p)U_{BN} + pU_p + U_{IdN} \quad (1)$$

¹ For the sake of simplicity, intertemporal issues are neglected.

² See further discussion.

where: U_{BC} – utility of benefits from compliance; U_{IdC} – utility of moral self-satisfaction due to acting consistently with one's ideological beliefs; p – subjective probability of punishment; U_{BN} – utility of benefits from noncompliance; U_p – utility of punishment (negative); U_{IdN} – utility of moral self-condemnation due to acting inconsistently with one's ideological beliefs (negative); and where U_{IdC} and U_{IdN} are functions of the strength of the individual's ideological conviction.

One could also speak about “legitimacy” as a feature of a particular institution or system of institutions. It would be defined as the shared ideological conviction that a particular institutional arrangement is morally right and fair, usually with an ideological justification of this judgment. The more people believe and the stronger their ideological conviction that an institution is the way it should be, the better or stronger legitimacy it has. “To put the issue precisely” – after North – “the premium necessary to induce people to become free riders in positively correlated with the perceived legitimacy of the existing institution” [North 1981, p. 54].

The line of inquiry represented by Proposition 1 enabled North to explicate the role of ideology in contracting: ideologies are seen as factors of reducing transaction costs because costly enforcement (increasing pU_p) is less necessary when sufficiently strong perceptions of fairness (resulting in high U_{IdC} and U_{IdN}) prohibit partners from violating a contract. It follows that:

Proposition 2: “The importance of ideology is a direct function of the degree to which the measurement and enforcement of contracts is costly” [North 1992, p. 479]. The more measurement of performance and enforcement of institutions are costly, the more it makes a difference whether people believe that the rules of the game are fair or unfair, *ceteris paribus*.

3. Ideological change

A closely related issue is the possibility of an individual changing his or her ideological beliefs as well as determinants of such decisions. North himself suggests four alterations of relative prices that are likely to alter an individual's perception of fairness of an institutional arrangement, which are:

- a) an alteration in property rights which denies individuals access to resources that they have already come to accept as customary or just;
- b) a decline in terms of exchange away from what came to be regarded as a fair exchange ratio;
- c) a decline in relative income position away from one accepted as fair;
- d) A decline in the costs of information or an improved accessibility of alternative ideological systems [North 1981, p. 50].

Why would relative prices and individual's own benefits promote a change of his or her ideological attitudes? This can be explained by further consequently

assuming utility maximizing individuals “maximizing at every margin”. According to Proposition 1, ideological convictions influence the overall utility derived by the individual. If now one simply lets the individual choose his or her set of ideological beliefs, one could hypothesize that a utility maximizing entity would choose such an ideology from an accessible set of ideologies, that would maximize his or her overall utility in a given pay-off context of obeying or non-obeying institutions. In other words, changes in ideological conviction will be shaped by shifts in opportunity costs of individuals given an institutional context. If the opportunity cost of complying with one’s ideology $(1 - p)U_{BN} + pU_p$ turns out too high, the individual will seek to alter the ideology so as to enable him or her to grasp the benefits of breaching an institution U_{BN} without incurring much disutility U_{IdN} . This leads to the next proposition.

Proposition 3: As long as for an individual facing only one institution:

$$TU_i = \sum_{j=1}^n U_j + U_B + U_{Id} \rightarrow \max \quad (2)$$

where U_j is the utility derived from the consumption of regular consumption goods; and as long as there are accessible and subjectively convincing alternative ideologies at sufficiently low cost, an individual will seek to change his or her ideological beliefs so as to maximize his or her total utility, i.e., the individual will be seeking either to make ideological beliefs sufficiently justify the behavior that maximizes U_B and/or to minimize the moral self-condemnation U_{IdN} resulting from his or her behavior violating his ideological convictions.

The idea that ideological beliefs can be changed following shifts in opportunity costs might seem especially controversial. Many hold a belief that human beings “never stop searching for”³ the objective Truth in moral and religious matters, because the “unresolved riddles of human existence (...) weigh heavily on the hearts of men”.⁴ And, therefore, that the matter of moral and religious beliefs is methodologically exempt from any kind of inherently selfish and “mundane” rational choice analysis, and any ideas of “exporting the economists’ explanatory scheme” to the spheres of morality and spirituality constitutes a “threat to the multidimensional image of man” [Klimczak 2007, p. 114]. Here only a few brief counterarguments can be given against such concerns.

Firstly, the assumptions of a utility maximizing entity are only methodological assumptions, devoid of any psychological content and ambitions of being “realistic” in the Friedmanite sense of the word. To put it in Friedman’s own words, “Significant hypotheses will be found to have “assumptions” that are wildly inaccurate descriptive

³ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Point 27.

⁴ See Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, Point 1.

representations of reality [...] A hypothesis is important if it ‘explains’ much by little, that is, if it abstracts the common and crucial elements from the mass of complex and detailed circumstances” [Friedman 1966, p. 14]. In other words, if economists are confident to be claiming nothing about human psychology, they must be, and are, claiming still less about the ontology of the human being.

Secondly, beliefs that people hold, and those upon which they act might not be completely identical. The issue of the argument are ideological convictions expressed in behavior in the context of many compromises with reality people must make in everyday lives. They could, for example, cherish an honest pursuit of objective religious truths, but be put into an socio-economic context where they regretfully act along other ideological beliefs.

Thirdly, “practical vagueness” of ideological and especially religious doctrines is a fact well known to social scientists. Attitudes concerning capitalism, socialism, income redistribution, private property, free trade, or government regulation seem to be very weakly correlated with people’s religious affiliations and degrees of religiosity, and representative bodies and leading thinkers of most denominational families produce a great variety of statements on economic issues [Iannaccone 1998, pp. 1477-1478]. L.R. Iannaccone comments that “it would seem that every religious tradition and sacred literature contains enough ambiguity to justify any number of economic positions” [Iannaccone 1998, p. 1478]. Even if one doesn’t concentrate only on socio-economic issues, the diversity of beliefs among Catholics concerning lifestyles and private-life morality is immense despite the fact that they declare to be believing basically the same theology. Additionally, varieties of monarchic, capitalist and socialist systems respectively demonstrates how easily different operational rules and value judgments can be derived from a more or less defined set of general ideological principles.

Finally, the theory of cognitive dissonance in cognitive and social psychology has taken a closer look at the very moment of changing ideological beliefs. It has repeatedly been demonstrated that the cognitive dissonance about one’s own moral self-esteem is so strong a motivation that it makes the observed changes of ideological beliefs understandable. The human mind possesses a wide array of self-esteem defense mechanisms and rationalizing behavior for the event of one behaving inconsistently with one’s moral beliefs. They include: self-reassuring comparisons with other people, internalization of group norms, acceptability heuristic and obedience to authority, excuses from and dilution of responsibility, seeking external justification, autopersuasion, as well as numerous cognitive heuristics and self-serving biases in gathering and interpretation of data, to name a few, well elaborated examples [cf. Aronson *et al.* 1997]. It seems that our mind is sufficiently equipped for the task of maintaining a stable, positive self-image, not so much dependent on the stability of our moral behavior or beliefs.

These arguments of course do not solve the outlined methodological controversy, but they seem to indicate that changes of ideology in a way consistent with Proposition 2 are neither impossible nor unlikely.

4. Ideology and collective action

Turning to the second Northian question about ideology and collective action, one could start with distinguishing two roles ideology plays or two effects it has for collective action. First, ideology has an internal effect for mobilizing group behavior by mitigating the free rider problem. Potential moral discomfort U_{idN} of free riding discourages participants from doing so. In accordance with Proposition 2, the larger the group, the more comprehensive and convincing an ideology it needs to achieve its goals *ceteris paribus*⁵ (which helps understand for example the continuous concerns and ultimately unsuccessful pursuits of communist leaders to evoke the “class consciousness” of the masses).

And secondly, ideology has its external effect. Ideologies help shape perceptions of the social partners and competitors about moral legitimacy of the existing institutional system, about whether it should be changed and how. In accordance with Proposition 3, we should expect interest groups to “put on their banners” such ideologies that would enable them to maximize the net profits of an institutional change, treating “culture as a toolkit”⁶ from which to choose effective ideologies. In accordance with Proposition 1, if a group of interest succeeds in manipulating their opponents’ ideological convictions so that they overrun their concern for their personal benefits, it could find the costs of a beneficial institutional change lower or the benefits of the change higher. This logic of inquiry was applied for example by B. Baysinger, R.B. Ekelund, and R.D. Tollison in their analysis of mercantilism. In Adam Smith’s and Marc Blaug’s words, mercantilism was “a tissue of fallacies grounded upon the popular notion that wealth consists in money” [Blaug 1997, p. 11]. But its adoption as an economic doctrine by European monarchies was not based on its perceived inner “truth”, but rather was a result of an effective demand for regulatory rents by each country’s domestic manufacturers and merchants [Baysinger *et al.* 2008, p. 476]. In a similar manner, American rebels “picked” Locke’s “Two Treatises of Government” to use it in 1776, though it had been waiting to be discovered since 1690, only when his ideas fit perfectly to give grounds for the Declaration of Independence of the United States [North 1994a].

In the context of a modern democratic state, lobbying for a regulation or rivalry of pressure groups means spending resources not only on convincing the rulers (politicians) but also the public (voters) about the legitimacy of claims of groups. For instance, under Stigler’s and Peltzman’s theories of regulation, the regulator (concerned with the number of supporters) will not be indifferent whether or not a group demanding regulation has convinced the public about its necessity or fairness. Increasing the price of a commodity and thus gaining support of a group of interest

⁵ In this case meaning that there happens for example no world war, creating dramatic artificial shifts in political opportunities.

⁶ For the origin of this term see Zweynert [2009].

selling it will be the less costly, the more justified the increase seems for the buyers. Both Stigler and Peltzman include in the decision process of a regulator a variable described as “(net) probability the he who is taxed (or deprived of benefits) opposes” which obviously increases with the tax rate (decrease of U_{BC}) but also decreases with “dollars spent on campaign funds, lobbying and so on, to educate voters” [Peltzman 1976, pp. 214-216] (i.e., spent to increase U_{IdC} and/or to increase pU_p). It seems likely that some of these “voter education” expenditures will be incurred by interest groups, so as to manipulate the ideological convictions of the voters, for which the ruler is concerned. For a current example, in May and June 2011 trade unions in Poland organized costly demonstrations in cities to raise general concern for increasing the minimal wage, although the majority of population might not be much personally interested in the minimal wage issue.

On the other hand, ideologies can serve to defend the institutional *status quo* concerning, for example, political institutions. By assuming for simplicity that the stream of benefits for the ruler is constant, a utility maximizing ruler would then be organizing relations with constituents in such a way so as to minimize the costs of effectively staying in office. The ruler faces then the problem of minimizing costs of effectively making the constituents or subjects obey the existing rules of the political system. According to Proposition 1, the ruler has the following possibilities of increasing constituent compliance:

- coercion, i.e., increasing pU_p in the form of political or economic repressions of the disobedient;
- patronage, i.e., increasing U_{BC} of especially influential or powerful individuals, by direct transfers of cash, but more frequently by hospitality of the king’s court, granting monopoly privileges, exempting from income taxes, and so on, to give just a few examples from a great variety of patronage practices from across history;
- legitimization – increasing the legitimacy of the system, i.e., increasing U_{IdC} and U_{IdN} . The rationale of ideological content in state-sponsored education or favoring a clergy of a religion legitimizing the system on religious grounds, is straightforwardly put by North, in accordance with Proposition 1: “The costs of maintenance of an existing order are inversely related to the perceived legitimacy of the existing system. To the extent the participants believe the system is fair, the costs of enforcing the rules and property rights are enormously reduced” [North 1981, p. 54].

Obviously, a cost-of-ruling-minimizing ruler will choose such a combination of coercion, patronage, and legitimization so as to minimize the sum of these expenses. But, because the costs of maintenance of the police, judiciary, and clientele are likely to be high relative to the costs of hiring ideological inventors and educators, one could expect some form of state ideology to be quite ubiquitous. Still, from Proposition 2 it follows that the relative meaning of ideology and state-sponsored efforts of legitimization in different socio-economic systems will be different. Under

capitalism, with relatively high U_{BC} , ideological justifications of the very system will not play an important role in everyday state politics, whereas under feudalism and socialism, with low U_{BC} and possibly relatively high U_{BN} , the legitimizing ideology is relatively more important and so the efforts of ideological indoctrination are substantial.

5. Conclusions

In the words of Douglass C. North from his Nobel Prize Lecture in 1993, “History demonstrates, that ideas, ideologies, myths, dogmas, and prejudices matter; and an understanding of the way they evolve is necessary for further progress in developing a framework to understand societal change” [North 1994b, p. 362]. In Poland, despite growing NIE and other economic literature, it still lacks coherent and satisfactory explanations and the role of ideology and religion in Polish transformation and contemporary public life. All the phenomena observed by North, including “ideological education, propaganda, and symbols [...] appeals to justice and fairness, and immense investments made by politicians, employers, labor leaders, and others, in trying to convince participants of the fairness or unfairness of a contractual arrangement” [North 1984, p. 258] – all of them can also be observed in contemporary Poland.

This paper serves as a preliminary sketch for an agenda of much further research. The aim of this particular paper was to demonstrate how new institutional economics, mainly the works of Douglass C. North, can help us understand more of ideology, religion and “how they evolve”, contrary to some formalist and over-abstract traditions of economic theory as well as without any harm for the spiritual dimension of these issues. Indeed, it seems that the framework of neoclassical institutional analysis, to some extent presented in the this paper, is very promising in the area of the scientific study of beliefs, ideologies, and religions, with results possibly significant not only for scholarship and policy-making, but potentially also for personal edification.

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MOŻLIWOŚCI ZASTOSOWANIA NOWEJ EKONOMII INSTYTUCJONALNEJ W BADANIACH RELIGII I IDEOLOGII

Streszczenie: W artykule podjęto próbę wykazania dużego potencjału wyjaśniającego teorii ekonomii w ogóle, a nowej ekonomii instytucjonalnej w szczególności, w zakresie ideologii i religii. Do tego celu służy prezentacja koncepcji Douglassa C. Northa dotyczących roli przekonania ideologicznego (*ideological conviction*) w kontraktowaniu, działaniach zbiorowych oraz zmianie instytucjonalnej. W artykule pokazano, jak decyzje w ramach ograniczeń wyznaczanych przekonaniami ideologicznymi (*ideological beliefs*), jak również decyzje dotyczące wyboru przekonań ideologicznych mogą być wyjaśniane poprzez zastosowanie modelu jednostki maksymalizującej użyteczność w ramach perspektywy nowoinstytucjonalnej. Uzasadniono również tezę, że instytucjonalno-ekonomiczna interpretacja przyjmowania i zmian ideologii i religii przez ludzi ani nie oznacza zamiarów demaskatorskich, ani nie pociąga za sobą implikacji redukcjonistycznych.

Słowa kluczowe: nowa ekonomia instytucjonalna, Douglass C. North, ideologia, religia, teoria ekonomii.