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New Russian Institutional Theory about Russia in the Global World / In: European Social Theory: Sources and Challenges (Materials of European Conference on Social Theory. Moscow, Russia, September 2002). Ed. by V. Kulygin & V. Zhukov. Moscow, p. 230-237

The main idea of this article is to estimate the Russia prospects in the global world from the macro-institutional point of view. This topic seeks to give a theoretically grounded answer to the following questions:

- Why do the numerous institutional borrowings from the so called market-democratic model of the European countries (and the USA) do not take root to the full in Russia?
- Why does the transformation process in the former socialist countries not coincide with the main frame of the development of the West European countries, and why does the transformation of the Russian society has its own peculiar, unforeseen features?
- Speaking globally, why is it easier for Russia to come to an understanding with its neighbors in the East and in the South, rather than in the West, why does this take so little effort – comparative to the case of the West?

The new institutional matrices theory is used for the explanation.

The institutions and the law

Before let me make a short remark about the relation between societies' institutional and legal systems, as we see them. This is important as, from the Roman Empire age up to now, a viewpoint is widespread equating institutions and the law.

Modern science has been distinguishing between the two concepts for a long time already. Institutions are increasingly seen as sustainable social relations presented both by formal and informal practices. Institutions are formed naturally. They embed those social relations, which have historically proved their adequacy to the nature of this or that society. Whereas the law is but one of the forms these social relations make their presence in. In other words, institutions are primary social structures, and the law is a form (forms) – reflected in the human consciousness and fixed in legal norms – of the realization of these social structures in particular socialites in a particular period of time. This means that it is impossible to introduce a particular legal norm if it contradicts the institutional structure of the society. The only possible way is to institute the already existing or spontaneously arising order in a manifest, legitimate, i.e. legal form. What are these primary institutional structures? Are they unique for each society, or can we single out several dominant types among them? The theory of institutional matrices developed today is focused especially on these questions.

The theory of institutional matrices: main ideas[1]

In the modern global world, individuals, countries, and nations learn increasingly more and more about each other and make comparisons between themselves. It is rather easy to do when we compare visible and evident results of social development – for instance, living standards, ecological situation, economic indicators, etc. It is, however, much more difficult to compare HOW different countries come to certain results, WHAT social mechanisms, procedures, institutions determine the prosperity in some countries,

and the crisis in the others. It could be useful to turn to social theories when analyzing such unmanifested mechanisms.

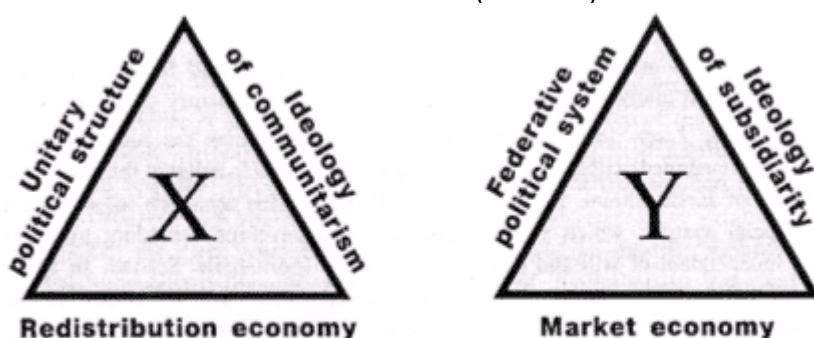
I suppose that the theory of institutional matrices makes the new possibility for a comparative analysis of the evolution and development mechanisms of modern societies.

The theory of institutional matrices singles out two alternative types of primary institutional structures. The distinction between two alternative but mutually complementary types of societies is in line with the general philosophic tradition of dual oppositions dividing the light and the dark, the Yin and the Yang, the woman and the man origin. Thus, there are two types of institutional matrices, which have been called the X-matrix and the Y-matrix. They are at the core of the social order of all countries and determine their qualitative differences.

Before we proceed, let me make an introductory remark number one. In the theory of institutional matrices, the complex and manifold social life is sketchily reduced to 3 dimensions, three main projections of social life – economy, politics, and ideology.

And a second introductory remark. Each of these projections, each of spheres of social life is regulated by corresponding basic institutions. Unlike other institutions (for instance, organizations, rules, or procedures), basic institutions are historically stable social relations, which constantly reproduce themselves, ensure the survival and the integrity of a society in its particular material and technological conditions. Basic institutions are historic invariants of social life. For instance, exchange (buying and selling) is a basic institution. In the theory under analysis, a distinction is made between basic institutions and institutional forms in which they are embodied in particular countries and in various historic periods. Basic institutions are stable, whereas institutional forms are mobile, diverse and dynamic. For instance, the institute of exchange can be embodied in the form of a medieval trading deal, or contemporary contract, or transaction in the financial market. These forms are varied; however, their essence remains the same.

After these introductory remarks, we can give a definition of the institutional matrix. An institutional matrix is a sustainable system of basic institutions, which regulates the main spheres of social life: economy, politics, and ideology. The difference between the X-matrix and the Y-matrix lies in the contents of institutions that form them (Picture 1).



Picture 1. The difference between the X-matrix and the Y-matrix

An X-matrix is characterized by the following basic institutions:

- in the economic sphere: redistribution centralized economy institutions (term coined by K. Polanyi's). Redistribution economies are characterized by a situation when the Center regulates the movement of goods and services, as well as the rights for their production and use;

- in the political sphere: institutions of unitary political structure;
- in the ideological sphere: institutions of communitarian ideology, the essence of which is expressed by the idea of dominance of collective, public values over individual ones, a priority of We over I.

An X-matrix is characteristic of Russia, most Asian and Latin American countries and some other.

The following basic institutions belong to an Y-matrix:

- in the economic sphere: institutions of market economy;
- in the political sphere: institutions of federative political structure;
- in the ideological sphere: institutions of the ideology of subsidiarity which proclaims the dominance of individual values over values of larger communities, the latter bearing a subsidiary, subordinating character to the personality, i.e. a priority of I over We.

An Y-matrix is characteristic of the public order of most countries of Europe and the USA.

What is the methodology of institutional matrices useful for?

It allows to lay out the societal nature of a society, its institutional dominant which is determined by the type of the matrix – either X, or Y. For example, Russia and China are characterized by the dominance of the institutions from the X-matrix, whereas the USA and Western Europe are dominated by the institutions from the Y-matrix. It is impossible to change the societal nature of a society. Indeed, the social revolution that Marx had predicted and that would have brought a change from private to public property never actually happened in the countries of Europe. To take another example: neither in Russia, nor in China, individual values have become dominant in the public consciousness in the course of the current transformations. As certain sociological studies reveal[2], communitarian values still dominate here.

The methodology of institutional matrices allows to single out basic and complementary institutions in the overall institutional structure of a society. Institutions from a different institutional matrix are complementary ones. For instance, institutions of redistribution (centralized) economy are basic for the economies of Russia and China, and institutions of market economy are complementary ones. On the contrary, market institutions are basic in the economies of the US and the countries of Europe, and institutions of centralized economy are complementary ones. Basic institutions determine the unchangeable societal nature of a society whereas complementary institutions build the social structure “up to the whole” and are the necessary supplement and prerequisite of the normal functioning of a society.

The principle of the dominance of basic institutions over complementary ones is given prove to. In other words, in each particular society, basic institutions characteristic of its institutional matrix dominate over complementary institutions. The latter serve as auxiliary, additional, providing stability of the institutional environment in a particular sphere of society. Just as a dominant gene in genetics, that dominates over a recessive gene and, thus, determines the features of a living organism, so basic institutions set the framework and limitations for the action of complementary, auxiliary institutions. It is argued that the action of basic institutions and corresponding institutional forms is rather spontaneous, unregulated, whereas the development of complementary institutions and forms which, in accordance with basic institutions, assure a balanced development of a particular public sphere,

requires purposeful efforts on behalf of social agents. In the absence of such efforts, the elemental, spontaneous action of basic institutions may bring chaos and crisis to the society.

The institutional matrices theory in the space of social theories

What is the difference of this theory from other conceptions suggesting their own explanations of social evolution? As you know, two extremes could be singled out in these theories (Picture 2).

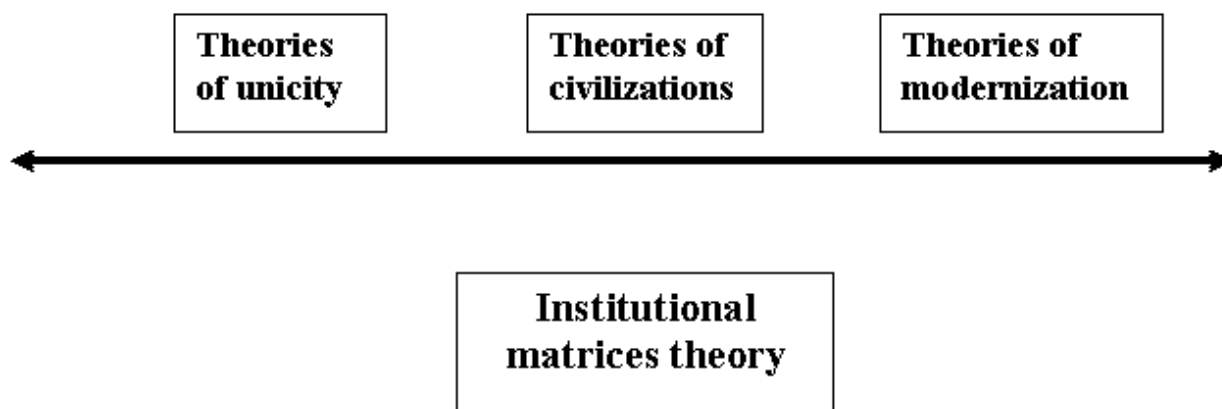


Figure 2. The space of social evolution theories

Mainly anthropological conceptions are at one extreme arguing that each country is unique and follows its own way of evolution. For instance, in Russia, there exists a very popular viewpoint about the originality of Russia,[3] its peculiar position between the West and the East and, as a result, its specific way of evolution.

Various kinds of the theory of modernization are at the other extreme of the theoretical set. They argue that there is a single axis of the social evolution of societies, that is from traditional to liberal ones. Particular countries are simply at different stages of this trajectory – which is true for all the countries. From this point of view, Russia is regarded by some academics[4] as a society which has not gone far enough towards liberalization and which preserves a number of traditionalist values in its social life.

In between these extremes, there are theories that single out several types of societies with similar features and directions of social evolution. Civilization approach in cultural studies is an example.[5] From this point of view, Russia is seen (as an example of Orthodox-Christian civilization which follows the tradition of the Byzantine society).

Unlike the conceptions mentioned, the theory of institutional matrices singles out neither one, nor several, or a plurality of ways of the organization of social life, but rather two alternative ways and, correspondingly, two types of social evolution. The distinction between two alternative but mutually complementary types of societies is in line with the general philosophic tradition of dual oppositions dividing the light and the dark, the Yin and the Yang, the woman and the man origin. Thus, there are two types of institutional matrices, which have been called the X-matrix and the Y-matrix. They are at the core of the social order of all countries and determine their qualitative differences.

Prospects of Russia's Institutional Development

If we accept this theoretical hypothesis, the following answers can be given to the questions, posed at the beginning of the article.

The first question was why do the numerous institutional borrowings from the so called market-democratic model of the European countries (and the USA) do not take root to the full in Russia? Answer is: because they are complementary for our institutional structure. Correspondingly, the institutions of redistribution, unitary state, and communitarian ideology set up the framework for our economy, politics, and ideology. Therefore, the forms borrowed from the practice of European countries are naturally transformed having to adjust to a qualitatively different institutional environment. For instance, the use of tender and competition procedures does not call off the main role of state structures in the process of decision-making on their results.

The second question was why does the transformation process in the countries of Central and East Europe not coincide with the main frame of the development of the West European countries, and why does the transformation of the Russian society has its own peculiar, unforeseen features? The answer is that the European countries have identical institutional matrices. They belong to the Y-matrix, i.e. are characterized by the historic dominance of the market institutions, federative political order, and the individual ideology of subsidiarity. The Post-war Soviet influence did not change the nature of this institutional matrix (this is impossible), it just temporarily swerved these countries from the evolutionary trajectory determined by their institutional matrix. With the weakening of the Soviet influence, the former socialist countries just restore (though not always quite smoothly) the dominance of their home, familiar institutions.

As far as Russia is concerned and unlike the situation in European countries, the transformation of its society implies not only the restoration of the dominance of the Y-matrix institutions. The transformation process in Russia requires a “renovative restoration” of the dominant position of our X-matrix institutions, a designation of reasonable niches for the complementary Y-matrix institutions, and a search for the new, modern institutional forms, which would embed the basic and complementary institutions in the modern age.

Finally, the third question was why it is easier for Russia to come to an understanding with its neighbors in the East and in the South, rather than in the West, why does this take so little effort – comparative to the case of the West? The answer (or rather, one of the answers) is also connected with the nature of the institutional matrices of our countries.

In Russia, like in China and other countries of South-Eastern Asia, the X-matrix institutions are dominating. Therefore, the institutional forms based on these common institutions seem so natural and easy to understand to us. Therefore, despite the great cultural and historic differences, it is easier for our countries, our peoples, and our governments to come to an understanding. And therefore, the close collaboration between Russian and the countries of the East is inevitable, just as inevitable as the close collaboration between the European countries and the USA that share one institutional matrix.

Russian Sociology in the Development of European Social Theory

Though a product of abstract human speculations, social theory, nonetheless, is a certain reflection of social circumstances surrounding the social scientist. It is not by chance that certain traces of the author’s national bias and environment are always present in both classical and contemporary methodological models. Thus, Marx was accused of an absolutization of the “English way of the development of capitalism”; Karl Polanyi called Adam Smith’s market theory “a mere commonsense knowledge of the reality around us”; Weber’s views are tinged with the famous German pedantry.

It can be inferred, therefore, that the European social theory does not possess the necessary prerequisites to conceptualize a different type of social experience characteristic of non-European societies and civilizations. In my view, this argument is true of the American sociology too, as the modern United States – and it had been already Talcott Parsons to make the point – are but a transference of European social orders onto the American continent.

The Russian sociology, which from the moment of its institutionalization was developing primarily within European traditions, however has always dealt with another – “non-European”, “non-western” – Russian social reality. The unique combination of the European sociological education of Russian social scientists, on the one hand, and of the necessity to comprehend a qualitatively different social order, on the other, objectively leads to the situation of emerging the theories for conceptualizing the peculiarities of the social development in the West and the East.

The current period of the transformation of the Russian society opened up boundaries for inter-cultural contacts and led to the need to re-consider Russian experience in the context of similar processes in other countries. Such circumstances catalyzed the development of theories aiming to conceptualize and describe social processes in countries of different cultural-civilization types. As a result, Russian social scientists suggest new theoretical hypotheses: the theory of institutional matrices is one of them.

Conclusion

The institutional matrices are mutually complementary, and the difference between them is natural, just like, for instance, the division into males and females. To identify and clearly articulate the qualitative characteristics of the X- and Y-matrices helps find better opportunities for building a transparent, well thought-out basis for the interaction between the countries with difference matrix types.

Similarity or dissimilarity of institutional matrices, on the one hand, form the potential barriers and preferences for the state nations communication. On the other hand, it provokes intensive institutional exchanges between the nations with different types of institutional matrices. The new global order comes about as the result of contribution of these two main institutional economic, political and ideological models. The understanding of the institutional nature of the neighbor would allow to make this collaboration more smooth and take into account each one’s peculiar features.

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[1] For more details see: Kirdina S. G. Institutional Matrices and Development in Russia (2nd revised and supplemented edition). Novosibirsk, 2001 (In Russian). Summary in English. <http://www.kirdina.ru/>

[2] Yadov, V. Russia as a Transforming Society (A Resume of the Long-Standing Discussions between Sociologists) [Rossia kak transformiruyusheesya obschestvo (resyume mnogoletnikh diskussiy sotsiologov) // Society and Economy (Obschestvo I ekonomika), 1999. no. 10-11.

[3] See, for instance, Pokrovsky, N. The Inevitability of the Strange World: The Involvement of Russia in the Global Community [Neizbezhnost' strannogo mira: vkluchenie Rossii v global'noe soobshchestvo] // Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology (Russia), 2000, no. 3.

[4] Akhiezer, A. Russia: A Critique of Historical Experience (Socio-cultural Dynamics of Russia) [Rossia: kritika istoricheskogo opyta (Sotsiokulturnaya dinamika Rossii)]. Vol. I: From the Past to the Future [Ot proshlogo k buduschemu]. 2nd ed., revised. Novosibirsk: Sibirsky Khronograf, 1997; Lapin, N. Ways of Russia. [Puti Rossii]. Moscow: Institute of Philosophy RAS, 2000.

[5] See, for instance: Hantington, S. A Clash of Civilizations [Stolknovenie tsivilizatsiy] // Political Studies (Polis), 1994, no. 1; Schpengler, O. The Sunset of Europe [Zakat Evropy]. Novosibirsk: Nauka, 1993; Danilevsky, N. Russia and Europe: An Approach to Cultural and Political Attitudes of the Slavic World to the German-Romanic One [Rossia i Evropa. Vzglyad na kulturnye i politicheskie otnoshenia slavyanskogo mira k germano-romanskomu.] SPb: 1869 // Zarya, 1869. no. 5-9; Toynbee, A. A Study of History. Vol. 1-12. L., N.Y., Toronto. 1939-1961.