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NEW INSTITUTIONALISM AT THE HEURISTIC FRAMES
– HISTORICAL ROOTS, SOCIAL THEORIES, RESEARCH
METHODS¹

Chmielewski, Piotr. 2011. *Homo agens: instytucjonalizm w naukach społecznych*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Poltext.

The discussion over what institutions are has a long tradition in sociology, and the concept itself can be considered as crucial to the analysis of social processes and phenomena. Theoretical reflection on the sociology of social institutions, the role of the social actor in its production and reproduction, and methods of their study, is part of a sociological discourse about the nature of social reality, including the relationships between the individual and society, micro- and macrostructures, and epistemological subjectivism and objectivism. Following the classic sociological theoretical discourse about social institutions it is possible to distinguish between two main directions of analysis which, in different ways, explain the relationship between an individual and an institutional structure: first, functionalism, which emphasizes the primacy of a system over human action, and second, the theory of social action, implying methodological individualism and investigating social change in terms of the results of the activities of individuals.

The understanding of institutions in the new institutionalism, which is a theoretical perspective covered by the reviewed book, can be considered as a kind of attempt to reconcile these two classic trends – the theories of systems, focusing on the determining function of institutions, and the interpretive theories, “releasing” a subject and granting the performative

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¹ The project is financed by funds of the National Centre for Science granted on the basis of decision number DEC-2011/01/B/HS6/01753.

power to create institutions, and to bridge the oppositions between an individual and society and structure and action. In the simplest terms, it can be said that an institution is understood in terms of restrictions which simultaneously facilitate the action of rules appearing in social practices, which might be at the same time transformed and changed, perpetuated and reproduced.

The new institutionalism has been present in the social sciences for more than four decades. The sources of the new institutionalism are highly eclectic, as their roots can be found in the nineteenth-century political theories of moral philosophy, liberal economics (historical school), neoclassicism and the American institutionalism represented by Veblen, Commons and Mitchell (Chmielewski 2011; Scott 2008). The new institutionalists have also been inspired by behavioural and rationalistic theories, as well as the classical sociological ones: the theory of action by Max Weber, phenomenology, and the constructivist concepts of George Herbert Mead and Alfred Schutz. The works of Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu (Fligstein 2009), also cited as important theoretical inspiration, can in some cases be included within the frames of the new institutionalism. Aside from strictly sociological and economic inspirations, the influence of anthropologists such as Mauss, Hubert, and Clifford Geertz is also apparent (Scott 2008).

The explicit conceptualization of an institution from the perspective of the new institutionalism creates many problems, mainly due to the strong internal differentiation of this trend, with its interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and eclectic character. Institutional analysis, which is research on institutions, the processes of their institutionalization and their changes, is set in economic (North 2006), political science (Kenny and Mackay, 2009; Kenny 2007; Mackay, Kenny and Chappell 2011), anthropological (Durão and Seabra Lopes 2011; Ensminger 1998) and sociological research (Alvesson 1993; Bukowski 2013; Green Jr and Li 2011) and relates to different dimensions of social life. Generally, from the perspective of institutionalism, the market processes and economic life are investigated, where one example is the analysis of Douglas North, Ronald Coase, Elinor Ostrom and Oliver Williamson, awarded with the Nobel Prize in 1991, 1993 and 2009 (Górniak 2013: 21). New institutionalism has also been applied to political analysis (Bukowski 2013), urban processes (Grubović 2004) and demographic changes (Lauer and Yodanis 2010). Within the new institutionalism utilitarian trends may be distinguished, including the theory of rational choice, focusing on institutions as the effects of calculation and rational action. This trend focuses on the rather voluntarist understanding of the actions of individuals, whose actions are interpreted from the perspective of entrepreneurship and instrumental purposes, and the ability to mobilize and motivate other social actors to cooperation. As a result of this pragmatic understanding of this agenda as the capacities and the abilities of individuals, social actors have the power to reproduce institutions, their relatively free transmutation dependent *de facto* on their social competence identified with their quite specifically understood social capital (Fligstein 2009; Green Jr and Li 2011). Sometimes the new institutionalism also covers formally distant theories, focusing its agreement at the level of assumptions, such as Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, which sees the consequences of transformation and structural rules in institutions (Chmielewski 2011).

Taking into account this diversity, the new institutionalism should be considered not as ready and relatively coherent sociological theory, but instead – according to Chmielewski – as a ”research program‘ and heuristic framework which interprets social reality” (Chmielewski

2011: 284–285). Despite the heterogeneity of the new institutionalism, there have been some attempts to develop common assumptions, relatively consistent concepts and theorems, and the foundation of a coherent research perspective. One attempt is made in the book reviewed here. Piotr Chmielewski, through the systematization of classical and contemporary institutionalism, derives the concept of an acting human being, *homo agens institutionalist* (acting social actor), and around this core constructs the structure of each chapter (2011: 26).

Two basic themes can be distinguished. The first roots the reflection of the new institutionalism within historical concepts (Chapter 1), the political economy of Thorstein Bunde Veblen (Chapter 2), John Rogers Commons (Chapter 3) and the classical sociological theories (Chapter 4). Classical theories, analyzed by Chmielewski, are critical towards a rational vision of a human being: they consider individuals as actors immersed in the culture, subjects with a complex nature “interlaced” in the context and in institutions –similarly to modern institutionalists – the habits and rules of action which simultaneously limit and stimulate potential human activities. Chmielewski’s review, although it is rather a synthesis and reconstruction of the well-known classic works, systematizes and organizes knowledge about the institutional tradition and sets contemporary theories within historical foundations.

Much more interesting (from the perspective of the researchers of the new institutionalism) are the following chapters (5–8), which are an attempt to organize and analyze a variety of contemporary theories and to develop assumptions, both ontological and methodological, that constitute the frameworks of the heuristic trend.

Chmielewski considers the central concept of new institutionalism in the category of human action, understood as an intentional one, but not always consciously; he recognizes the institutional analysis for a fundamental method of research of human actions, established in a moderate methodological individualism, which is a tool for exploring and understanding social institutions. The core of the analysis is the research on the recursion of relations between actors and institutional structures, which means how institutions shape human actions and how this action builds social institutions (Chmielewski 2011; Ensminger 1998). Among the basic assumptions defining a trend of the new institutionalism, distinguishing it from the classic perspectives, Chmielewski points out (similarly to Lowndes and Scott): the orientation on the rules and their processes; recursion of rules and human practices (associated with interactivity); emergence and incrementality of institutions in relation to actions; heterogeneity; institutional isomorphism and a dependency of rules on the environment; as well as the simultaneous endogenous, but irreducible to explicit constructivism, character of institutions (Chmielewski 2011; Grubović 2004).

Chmielewski examines institutions through the frameworks of categories of efficiency and effectiveness, that is, he considers institutions not as perfect entities, but as entities always characterized by limitations, and renegotiated in long-term processes. Institutions, according to this important thinker, cannot be considered as realities supporting the common good, but rather the welfare of individual interest groups – institutionalized actions for the selected community. Thus, Chmielewski sees in institutions conflicting and stratified rules, but, at the same time, the basis of collective life, its organization and the foundation for the establishment of communities. Institutional analysis in this context is the study of a bridge between the individual and society, and the same institutions as the mechanism mediating

between micro and macro levels, which are “transforming activities of human individuals in a structured society” (2011: 200).

This conviction is a basis for a vision of an institutional change proposed by Chmielewski. A new institutionalist believes in changes implemented to actions of individuals at the micro or mezzo levels, but macro-structural changes at the level of systems are treated as still requiring adjustments at the level of social groups (2011: 291). Aggregated institutions constitute the social order, that is “relatively permanent rules for the organization of social life”, which is as variable as the institutions are.

Change of a social world is a consequence of human activity, and therefore is not impersonal, but motivated by the individual. The study of social change is the analysis of an acting subject, his roots in knowledge and reflexivity, and interpretative abilities which associate devising a course of action. Therefore, the process of giving meanings to societal rules is one of the basic mechanisms of institutionalization, and language as a tool for interpreting the world is both a vehicle of rules and their carrier (Chmielewski 2011; Scott 2008).

The function of language in institutionalization is a subject of reflection in new institutional theories, although it is often analyzed rather superficially and often treated rather as an taken-for-granted axiom (see e.g. Hodgson 2007; Hodgson 2006; Meyer 2006; North 2006). In the penultimate chapter Chmielewski reflects more deeply on the role of language as the primary institution in the process of institutionalization. He also derives the methodological assumptions of the new institutionalism from his assumptions of the linguistic aspect of institutional reality. Within a language can be found scripts, calques, and schemes causing rules, therefore one of the main efforts of the researcher of institutions should be to analyze the linguistic practices as causal to the rules and recursive.

The last chapter summarizes and clarifies the methodological assumptions which are part of the abovementioned moderate methodological individualism. Chmielewski’s main thesis implies that institutional rules are created and changed by human beings, revealed inhuman experience as a kind of routine, but more importantly, as an institutionalized routine neither empirically available nor directly observable. The researcher can reach them only by analyzing human actions, including abovementioned language practices, considering them as a source of information not so much about a language itself, but rather the non-discursive reality.

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