Abstract:

Family systems shape social institutions, yet they are rarely considered in histories of economic development. In this paper, we show that a suite of social conventions—such as age gaps at marriage, brideprice, sequestration, and discrimination and violence against women—are over represented in polygamous societies as compared to monogamous societies. This dichotomy can be explained on the grounds that polygamy produces a chronic scarcity of marriageable females. We argue that this suite, which we call *gamos* and which we quantify by two different methods, has demonstrably significant consequences for social, institutional, and economic development.

Introduction:

Every human, indeed every large primate, begins his or her integration into society at birth in the ecological niche defined by its mother, for it is there that we learn, by example, how to interact with others and whom to trust. Yet where is the family in economic history? Douglass C. North, founder of the NeInstitutional Economics (NIE), argues that 'institutions are the rules of the game,' and more specifically that institutions are humanly devised constraints that serve to reduce uncertainty and transaction costs, acting thereby to improve economic performance. The NIE's definition of institutions includes taboos, culture, and social norms, all of which are propagated from generation to generation through the family, though not exclusively so. Alongside these, the NIE also considers formal constraints, of which constitutions and codified property rights are prime examples. Thus it might seem that the family is squarely in the analytical framework of the NIE, but that is not the case because the NIE has chosen to focus on formal constraints only. The NIE has been unsuccessful in incorporating informal constraints, in which family values or structure might be implicated. North highlights the paradoxically pervasive influence of norms on the long-term performance of economies, but neither he nor Oliver Williamson, who reiterates the point, offers an explanation, nor to our knowledge does anyone else.

The Social Conventions of Polygamous Society

Polygamy is an asymmetric marriage contract—formal or informal, secular or religious, legal or illegal—that deprives the bride of the right of further marriage while preserving that right for the groom. Even in societies where it is permitted, generally fewer than 1 in 3 married men are polygamous, and more typically, fewer than 1 in 10. Though seemingly few in number, the mere possibility of such asymmetric two-party contracts requires the tacit approval of most members of the community and supporting institutions that extend far beyond the sphere of the two individuals themselves. Social conventions consistent with those contracts and their institutions will affect almost everyone within the sphere of permission. The driving mechanisms of polygamous convention and their consequences are the subject of this section.

A Compact Model of the Wealth of Nations

Cross-sectional analyses of the relative wealth of nations are fraught with challenges, chief among them being unsuitable dependent variables, e.g., GDP, a failure to account for economic performance through time, and a failure to account for cultural norms variously conceived as embeddedness by Granovetter and Solow or informal constraints by North. We describe a causal, compact model of development that surmounts these challenges: the human development index is used in lieu of GDP; coevolving institutions are excluded from the list of independent variables, and the most important of all social norms, polygamous convention, is included in that same list. The result is a historically consistent, 5-variable model that explains more than 77% of the variance of HDI across 177 nations.