

## **Douglass North and the Center in Political Economy, 1984-1990**

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**Abstract:** This article explores Douglass North's intellectual development as a political economist and an interdisciplinary researcher, with focus on his directorship at the Center in Political Economy at Washington University at St. Louis, 1984-1990. The article uses primary and secondary bibliographical references, archival research and testimonies from his former collaborators. His directorship allowed him to work directly with other social scientists for the development of interdisciplinary economic research, which he hoped to label as 'New Institutional Social Science', and it served as a prologue to his mature academic production in the 1990s.

**Keywords:** Douglass North; new institutional economics; interdisciplinarity; political economy

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## Douglass North and the Center in Political Economy, 1984-1990

When Ronald Coase and I started the new institutional economics, I proposed that we call it the “the new institutional social science,” but Ronald said, “if you do, I will not be a part of it.” And so I said, “OK, I withdraw.” Obviously I want Ronald to be with me on it, but I think it was a mistake. And as I get on in life, I think it’s a bigger and bigger mistake, because it is confining our discussion much too narrowly... I think Ronald is a traditional economist, and for him, economics is economics. For me, it never was.

Douglass North<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction

Douglass Cecil North (1920-2015) is one of the most influential economists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, through his work on New Economic History, New Institutional Economics and other economic disciplines, and for seeking to improve economics with insights from other social sciences, and worked on a “new institutional social science”.

He sought knowledge from other disciplines because he saw economics as a fundamental, but incomplete science. His criticism of economics was direct, calling economics “a very narrow field that, by itself, I don’t think is very interesting” (Horn, 2009, p. 170), while claiming that “price theory and opportunity cost – the economic way of reasoning – is the most powerful tool of analysis in *all* the social sciences, and you don’t give that up” (Lyons, Cain and Williamson, 2008, p. 203, emphasis added).

His ambivalent view on the state of economics was reflected on one of his main issues in the 1980s, on how it did not have the tools to approach properly the role of the state and government, i.e., the political economy<sup>2</sup>. This paper attempts to understand how North’s views on political economy evolved, and to which sources he resorted in order to better understand the role of government and institutions in society, using. For this, my article uses, besides bibliographical research, previously unexplored archival material from his papers at Duke University, and testimonies from his former collaborators. His views on these issues also tie in with his view on economics: while he wanted to change the way economics approached political economy, he wanted to preserve the “economic way of reasoning”, and potentially improve it with insights from other disciplines. Therefore, this paper argues that his work as the director of the Center in Political Economy was fundamental to him expanding the view of economics towards other disciplines. He built a great network among not only economists, but also political scientists, sociologists, philosophers, cognitive scholars, among others. This story is told from sources at his archives at Duke University and interviews with his former colleagues.

### 2. Preparations for the Washington University in St. Louis, 1983

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<sup>1</sup> In an interview to Arnold Kling and Nick Schulz (Kling and Schulz, 2011, p. 176).

<sup>2</sup> His dissatisfaction showed in his earlier career, as in this excerpt from an article published in 1950, commenting on R. A. Gordon’s theory of decision making in large corporations: “[The idea that the political-economic power of some groups is significant enough to exert influence on government and other firms] is certainly an incomplete and unsatisfactory conclusion. Perhaps ... [Gordon] has reached the limits of an economic analysis and has arrived at the borders of other disciplines. Gordon himself admits that ‘the crude tools of the political scientist as well as the more precise tools of the economist, need to be utilized’. (The political scientist might complain that the pot and kettle analogy was appropriate here).” (North, 1950, p. 81).

By the beginning of the 1980s, North was about to retire from UW. He was already dissatisfied with what the university's political science department could provide<sup>3</sup> and was losing influence in the economics department (cf. Barzel, 2015). According to Levi (2018-PC), UW "did something very silly" by giving all kinds of benefits to retiring senior faculty without any penalty if they chose to go to other places.

He received two proposals, from the University of South California<sup>4</sup> and the Washington University in St. Louis (WUSTL)<sup>5</sup>, and would eventually choose the latter. There were two main factors that weighed on North's choice: 1) the grant from the Henry Luce Foundation (HLF), and 2) the environment of WUSTL's political science department, which was already a center of rational choice-based political science (cf. Adcock, Bevir and Stimson, 2007).

The objective of WUSTL for the grant was to "catalyze and galvanize a whole series of collaborative teaching and research efforts among members of [WUSTL] humanities, social sciences and law faculties who have interests in topics relating to the general area of Law and Liberty and who would bring to the discussion of these issues the special perspectives of other disciplines." (WUSTL, [1983a]-DCNP p. 3). After introductory considerations on the nature of liberty, on why the grant would help to understand the development of liberty in the West and to where it is evolving, they delineate the following obligations of the future receiver of the Henry R. Luce Professorship in Law and Liberty: 1) the annual Luce Lecture, 2) being part of faculty seminars, 3) teach two courses in the undergraduate program – aimed at undergraduate students, to attract them to the minor in Law and Liberty<sup>6</sup>, with an interdisciplinary focus being the objective.

Although North's name is not mentioned in the request, it was clear that it was made with him in mind, with the emphasis in both history and institutions, and their practical application in liberty, a theme in which WUSTL had a great interest. James Alt (2020-PC) mentioned that he and Kenneth Shepsle (2020-PC) had been in talks with North to bring him to WUSTL, as well as Alexandra and Lee Benham (2020-PC; Morrow, 1983-DCNP) worked for the position<sup>7</sup>. Thus, North moved to St. Louis in the fall of 1983, to become the first Henry R. Luce Professor of Law and Liberty.

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<sup>3</sup> North had attempted to create an undergraduate program in political economy at UW in the 1970s. Besides area electives such as microeconomics and political science, the program offered a course in property rights with Yoram Barzel, another in Marxist political economy with Margaret Levi, and a seminar co-taught by Levi and North (Levi, 2018-PC).

<sup>4</sup> The proposal from the University of South California involved a yearly salary of US\$70,000, plus a US\$6,500 travel budget, amenities, and a flexible teaching load of four "course equivalents", that could be yearly fulfilled with two large courses (such as Principles of Economics), but still larger than WUSTL's proposal (Aigner, 1983-DCNP). The salary was inferior to the one offered by WUSTL (US\$75,000; Morrow, 1983-DCNP), and the cost of living in California must have been a factor, however, the promise of tenure (in the margin of Morrow's letter, North handwrote "Tenure?") and the possibility of guiding the future Center in Political Economy were more enticing, as North (1983d-DCNP) wrote: "the Saint Louis job had some special characteristics that dovetailed so closely with interests that it came out in the top."

<sup>5</sup> Levi (2018-PC) recollected her influence in his decision: "I told him that, for his purposes, [WUSTL had] the best, if not one of the best political science departments in the country, because there were people like Barry Weingast, Kenneth Shepsle and Jim Alt. But they were really thinking about how to use neoclassical economics to inform political science and to transform both neoclassical economics and political science, which they did." Adcock, Bevir and Stimson (2007, p. 277, n. 55) note that, after Shepsle and Weingast left WUSTL, they left for Harvard and Stanford, respectively, and became head of these departments already in the 1990s; they consider their move as an evidence of the success of the program.

<sup>6</sup> The minor in "Law, Liberty and Justice" was directed by Derek M. Hirst, and it was a liberal education degree, focused on the concepts of liberty and critical examination of texts (Blanken, 1982, p. 21). It was an initiative from the History department, but it also involved the departments of English, Philosophy, Economics, Psychology, Political Science and Law (WUSTL, [1983], p. 3).

<sup>7</sup> There is a chance that his former colleague at UW, Morris D. Morris helped him to earn the HLF grant. Morris was an experienced economic historian and worked with North in UW – the first two boxes of North's Papers at Duke contain more materials from Morris than North himself – and Morris is listed as the Henry R. Luce professor in The Comparative Study of Development, Brown University (Meeting...1984-DCNP). However, besides this network link, there is no further evidence.

Thus, he started laying down the foundations to his work in St. Louis. He wrote to Jack Hexter, from the History department (North, 1983b-DCNP), and Murray Weidenbaum (North, 1983c-DCNP), from the Business School, requesting cooperation. North also arranged for John Nye to be hired as the first assistant professor of economic history (Nye, 2020-PC).

### 3. Director North at the Washington University in St. Louis, 1984-1990

The first thing North did in the WUSTL was to start organizing his research center. According to the preliminary report (Shepsle, Weingast and North, 1983-DCNP), the “Political Economy Program” was still in its infancy, with a few seminars in the second half of 1983, in the topics of history and economic development, and the American constitution. For a while, it worked as a semi-formal research center as well – the Committee on Political Economy. The primary objective was to create both an undergraduate program in political economy (which proposal had been completed at the time of the report writing, with courses in economic history, property rights and game theory ready to be offered; see Annex 1), and a PhD. program also in political economy, to which they note that there was a “rapidly growing market” (*ibid.*, p. 2; see Annex 2). There were talks with the Business School to create a minor in political economy for the Business graduate school as well. In the first year, it managed to attract well-known visitors, such as Thomas Schelling (Harvard), Richard McKelvey (Caltech), and William Riker (Rochester), who would become involved as a visiting professor of WUSTL for 1983.

However, the report also pointed to problems that would become constant: although the funding from HLF sustained the program comfortably for years, it was still not in the same level as other pure economic programs, such as Harvard or MIT. They observed that the program “is not the best program in political economy and more important is in *continuous danger* of losing its best faculty” (*ibid*, p. 3, emphasis added), to which they did later.

The luncheons in the first year were important to discuss the fellows’ research, focused on the boundaries of social sciences and its applications in political economy, and they were fundamental to the discussions leading to the Center. Hosted at the Lantern House Chinese restaurant, a place “lauded in *Esquire* magazine for its exquisite banquets” (Constantin, 2013, p. 92), the archives mention the presence of not only the economists of the center, such as Arthur Denzau, Lee and Alexandra Benham and Barry Weingast, but also political scientists such as Kenneth Shepsle, Randall Calvert, James Alt, and William Riker. It also included members of WUSTL’s Business School, such as Seth Norton<sup>8</sup>, Ken Lehn, Bill Marshall and John Binder, plus the philosopher Ned McClennen, an important figure in establishing a philosophical foundation for rational choice theory (WUSTL, 1983b-DCNP); sometimes Jean Ensminger, Jack Knight or Gary Miller joined them (Nye, 2020-PC).

In the beginning of the academic year of 1984, the committee became a “full-blown” Center for Political Economy with the formal appointment of North as its first director (Danforth, 1985-DCNP). Its functions continued the same: to create both graduate and undergraduate programs in political economy, promote seminars, workshops and courses, and inviting speakers. One important recognition was the appointment of North, along with James Alt, to the editorship of the series “The Political Economy of Institutions and Decisions” of Cambridge Press<sup>9</sup>. Focused on the political economy of institutions, the series has currently over 70 volumes. Alt (2020-PC) considers this to be the most important thing he did with North.

North also served on the committee to develop the Institute on the Evolution of Freedom, led by Jack Hexter (Danforth, 1985-DCNP), which would become WUSTL’s Center for the History of Freedom, focused on studying the evolution of liberty and representative government in the West

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<sup>8</sup> Norton (2020-PC) related his work at the Center involved research between franchising with foundations in Coase and Williamson’s work.

<sup>9</sup> Available at <http://abre.ai/bdyU>.

(Davis, 1993)<sup>10</sup>. Another important interdisciplinary cooperation came with the organization of a week-long public choice conference in Halifax, with Jon Elster (Danforth, 1985-DCNP).

The cooperation with WUSTL's Business School is worthy of notice, since a few members of the Business School were fellows of the Center since its inception. The Center saw Business as a discipline had a lot of potential rigorous applications for political economy (Miller, 1987-DCNP). The undergraduate program in Business offered a minor in political economy and the Business School contributed to the budget of the Center (North, 1987-DCNP). North himself tried to convince dean Robert Virgil to not let go of Matthew McCubbins and Gary Cox, both associated with the Center (North, 1986b-DCNP). One of the most important joint ventures was the "Conference in Political Economy and Business", that happened between March 19-21, 1987 (Conference...1987-DCNP). It consisted of five sessions on corporate voting, strategy of firms in regulatory process, political and financial models, economics of organizations, and a roundtable on the role of political economy in business; it attracted outside scholars such as Roger Noll, Michael Bradley, Rex Thompson, among others (Tentative...1987-DCNP).

With the renewal of the HLF grant in 1987 for more three years, along with the increase the funding to US\$90,000 (Luce III, 1987), the Center also expanded its activities. Besides the joint conference with the Business School, the center managed to attract scholars, such as anthropologist Jean Ensminger<sup>11</sup>, Victor Goldberg, who was a visiting scholar for a semester and ran a workshop on law and economics (Goldberg, 2020-PC), and John Drobak, who co-taught a course on property rights for 25 years (Drobak, 2020-PC). The Center also hired Norman Schofield in 1987 (North, 1987-DCNP), who became the acting director that year (Miller, 1987-DCNP). The move was necessary because North worked in completing *Institutions...* (North, 1990) and other important works, such as North and Weingast (1989). Therefore, North had to lower his administrative load, allowing him to concentrate mostly in research activities – his last two HLF reports focused more on his academic writings than in administrative and networking activities (Danforth 1989-DCNP; North, 1989-DCNP).

One of his most important interdisciplinary actions was the *Working Group on the Emergence of Social, Political and Economic Institutions*, an initiative of the Committee on Basic Research of the National Scientific Council to study interdisciplinarity among the social sciences, of which North was the chairman, from 1983 to 1985. The members of the working group were Robert Bates (political science), Robert Brenner (history), James Coleman (sociology), Elizabeth Coulson (anthropology), Kent Flannery (archeology), Vernon Smith (experimental economics) and Neil Smelser (sociology). It was a massive attempt to create interdisciplinary work in order to explain the evolution of institutions, and its final report proposed guidelines for cooperation between social sciences under the study of institutions, recommending to the National Scientific Council financial support to cross-disciplinary research centers and to laboratories focused on experiments in social sciences (North et al, 1985-DCNP, p. 16).

In the first semester of 1990, North asked to be relieved from his directorship, leaving Norman Schofield to be the new *de facto* director (Israel, 1990-DCNP). After leaving the position, North continued to be a fellow and promote interdisciplinary research between the boundaries of different sciences, this time with cognitive science, helping to create a program on Philosophy, Neurosciences and Psychology, co-teaching some courses in cognitive science and economics (Horn, 2009, p. 169), and the Center for New Institutional Social Science<sup>12</sup>. His research would continue with the study of

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<sup>10</sup> A copy of Hexter's proposal is in North's archive (Hexter, 1985-DCNP).

<sup>11</sup> The Center also invited the anthropologist Keith Hart, a move hyped up in their report (Milford, 1987-DCNP), to make it a main center in political economy and anthropology, with five appointments in the area; Hart had to refuse due to personal reasons (Hart, 2020-PC).

<sup>12</sup> According to Berliant (2020-PC), both the Center in Political Economy and the Center for New Institutional Social Science were extinguished in the 2010s. The former, due to Norman Schofield's death in 2019, and John Patty and Maggie Penn leaving; the latter was phased out due to North's death. Their sites can only be accessed through an internet archive,

ideology, which Ambrosino and Fiori (2018, p. 4) argue it belongs to North's mature phase, after 1990 (though incubated in his period as director of the Center), the intersection of economics and cognitive science (North, 2005), and the origins of social orders and violence (North, Wallis and Weingast, 2009). His work following the directorship of the Center, however, is an issue to another occasion.

In the end, North's work in the Center provided a testing ground for his project of political economy. He was among people with similar thinking, who wanted to apply economic tools to improve both economics and political science, social sciences in general, with the intention of having future practical applications, and trying to remedy the issues for which he criticized NEH so much. One of the issues of rational-choice based political economy is that while economics contributes with *the* economic method, political science calls the attention to institutional concerns that economists tend to trivialize (Ordeshook, 1990, p. 26), which sounds like a rather unequal exchange.

Nevertheless, North attempted to absorb knowledge from other fields. As Drobak (2020-PC) put, "you can see [his] move from Economic History, to Cliometrics, to Public Choice, to Property Rights, to Political Economy, to Institutions, to Cognition and Belief Systems, and finally to Violence." He never went as far as William Riker, for example, who claimed that rational choice is the *only* model capable of giving a robust psychological and social base to social science (Riker, 1995, p. 40). He also had doubts about rational choice scholars such as Ferejohn, Fiorina and Shepsle. In a letter to Barry Eichengreen, he wrote "I, myself, am quite critical of such models because I think they assume information feedback and knowledge on the part of voters and representatives which are absolutely ridiculous", because they do not consider the subjective models and ideology of the agents (North, 1990-DCNP).

And yet, he made an effort to emphasize how important the "economic way of reasoning" is (North, 1999), and to bring model-focused economists to the Center, such as Norman Schofield (Shepsle, 2020-PC), trusting him enough to succeed him as director. Earlier, the undergraduate and graduate programs in political economy had a prevalence of economic disciplines (see Annexes 1 and 2); he considered "modeling political economy", with the use of rigorous mathematics, a fundamental concern for the marriage of economics and political science (North, 1999, p. 317). His article co-authored with Barry Weingast on the role of institutions in the English Glorious Revolution (North and Weingast, 1989) encased his view of a practical intersection between economic history and political economy – out of his *oeuvre* during his directorship, it is his most important work. However, he was also dismissive of approaches to economic history that did not consider the primacy of economic factors<sup>13</sup> (cf. Boldizzoni, 2011, p. 111). According to Wallis (2017, p. 4), his approach had no role for professional historians due to their lack of economic theory. But still, he recognized the non-ergodicity of history, that "the future is not going to look like the past" (North, 2011-DCNP).

#### 4. Conclusion

North was, as the great Brazilian musician Raul Seixas sung, a "walking metamorphosis" (*metamorfose ambulante*), rather than having certainty of everything, he was in constant change. And yet a few things remain constant throughout his career, such as the concern with treating history as an economic affair and the origins of economic development, to the point that he lamented in one of

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though (<https://web.archive.org/web/20011219175710/http://cniss.wustl.edu/> and <https://web.archive.org/web/19991001111503/http://artsci.wustl.edu/%7Eepolecon/>)

<sup>13</sup> In a letter to historian Mary Schweitzer, North (1993-DCNP) wrote he was "not sure that it is possible to persuade historians of the value of economic reasoning" and argued that historians should study the new institutional economics, instead of the zero transaction costs approach that is standard of economics. In a letter to Stephen Podes (North, 1990-DCNP), he wrote that "most historians in the United States really don't understand the methodological problems that underlie the way they provide explanations." It must be said that he added "don't" in a handwritten edit. A smart aleck would point the odds of a Freudian slip.

his last interviews: “we don’t explain the transition completely. We don’t explain in a satisfactory way how political systems evolve and how you get adaptive efficiency” (Snowdon, 2016, p. 143).

His most favored term “New Institutional Social Science” never became as famous as “New Institutional Economics”. Its foundations, however, have been launched in his research in economic history and started to mature in his period as the director of the Center in Political Economy, where he had leeway to build networks with a plethora of scholars: political scientists, philosophers, historians, business and law scholars, anthropologists, cognitive scientists, besides economists. This was only possible through his role as not only a researcher, but also as a bureaucrat.

His criticism of economics and other fields has always been biting, – for example, with five articles published in the 1970s criticizing cliometrics – and yet his refusal to fully abandon neoclassical economics meant he was interested in improving economic theory. He engaged in what Albert Hirschman (1970) called “practice of voice”, attempts to influence an organization, established economics in North’s case, from inside, without leaving its structure and rational choice theory. Wallis (2017, p. 7) argued that this was his style: “Doug was a very warm person, but he was also a real curmudgeon. He could be cranky and he was often given to saying that economists don’t know s\*\*t”. Just like Socrates to the Athenians, North assumed to himself the role of a “gadfly”, whose function was “not to tell philosophical truths but to make citizens more truthful” even with such crude language (Arendt, [1954] 1990, p. 81).

North transited between many different disciplines of the social sciences, and this might create different interpretations of his work. But, as Wallis (2020-PC) commented, North “was always an economic historian and economist”, and “not interdisciplinary for the sake of being interdisciplinary”. I would add that he was also always a development economist. I have analyzed his role as a political economist and this article focused on his period as a director of the Center, which served as a prologue to his mature period in the 1990s; analyzing his role as a development economist, his posterior work, and his influence in the current studies of economic history and political economy, are themes for future research.

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