



Traditional Beliefs and Their Consequences. A Research Agenda

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The scholarly investigation of tradition, traditional beliefs and practices has traditionally been the domain of historians, anthropologists, sociologists of religion and philosophers of religion. In recent years, however, political scientists and economists have started paying increasing attention to the political and economic consequences of traditional beliefs and practices.

With the exception of Baris and Pelizzo (2023), who attempted to explain the persistence, the diffusion and, possibly, the growing popularity of traditional beliefs, the studies produced in the line of inquiry have attempted to explore the political consequences of traditional beliefs.

Given the importance of trust for the functioning of political institutions in democratic settings, one theme that this growing body of research has explored in recent years is the traditional-beliefs-trust nexus (Tobacyk, 1983; Sjöberg, Lennart and af Wählberg, 2002; Goodkind *et al*, 2011). The most recent contribution to this line of inquiry suggest the existence of an inverse relationship between the level of trust in a given society and the pervasiveness of traditional beliefs.

A second stream of inquiry has explored the impact of traditional beliefs and a traditional mindset on electoral behavior. In this regard, the analyses performed by Harakan *et al* (2023) revealed that traditionally minded individuals are more inclined to vote for a government party than for an opposition party, even if the government party is secular and the opposition party is religious.

A third stream of inquiry, that builds on both classic modernization theory and the neo-modernization theory pioneered by Inglehart and his collaborators, has explored the relationship between the presence/

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pervasiveness of traditional beliefs and the attitudes towards democracy. Consistently with the findings presented by Inglehart and Baker (2000), the more recent studies (Pelizzo and Kuzenbayev, 2023b) produced in this line of inquiry have shown that traditional societies are less pro-democratic (or more pro-authoritarian) than societies in which traditional beliefs are less pervasive. Furthermore these more recent studies have shown that individuals who engage in traditional practices are less pro-democratic than individuals who do not engage in such practices. While the findings presented in the more recent studies corroborate the claims originally advanced by Inglehart and Baker (2000), it is essential not to overlook some crucial differences between them. The most obvious of such differences concerns the operationalization of tradition. For Inglehart and Baker (2000) a traditional mindset could be inferred from a respondent's attitudes towards gender relation and gender discrimination as well as from her level of patriotism and religiosity. The more recent studies instead assess the traditional-mindedness of a respondent depending on whether she believes in magic, in superstition, in the power of amulets or on whether she invokes the aid of the spirit of the dead ancestors. In other words, the first difference between the old approach to operationalizing the traditional mindset and the new approach centers on whether religiosity represents one (and possibly the most important) sub-dimension of a traditional mindset or not. In contrast to the early studies conducted by neo-modernization theorists (Inglehart and Baker, 2000), the more recent studies argue (Harakan *et al*, 2023; Pelizzo and Kuzenbayev, 2023a; Pelizzo *et al*, 2023) that religiosity should not be used as a proxy for tradition. There are at least three reasons why the most recent studies in this line of inquiry have advanced this claim. The first reason is that, as the most recent studies conducted in this research tradition have noted, tradition and, more specifically, a traditional mindset are multifaceted phenomena. As such they do encompass, among other things religion and religiosity, but they also include other features that have nothing to do with religion. The second reason, as Pelizzo, Turganov and Kuzenbayev (2023) recalled, is that the adoption of religion and the penetration of new religion is mediated by the pre-existing, traditional practices and beliefs. For instance when "Christianity and Islam became the most popular religions in the African continent, they were only embraced superficially, as the deeper belief system in the continent remained fundamentally structured by traditional practices and beliefs. This deeper, primordial, original set of traditional beliefs still manifests itself, for example, in superstition" (Pelizzo, Turganov and Kuzenbayev, 2023:875). The third reason is that, as the analysis of responses provided by Muslim respondents' attitudes toward democratic/authoritarian rule revealed, these attitudes were not shaped by religion, but rather by whether and to what extent they had a traditional mindset or engaged in traditional practices. The analysis of German survey data painted the same picture: (positive) attitudes towards Hitler and National-Socialism were a function of whether respondents held traditional beliefs (superstition) and not of their religion or religiosity. Furthermore, some of the studies devoted to the exploration of the political consequences of traditional beliefs have shown that the impact of traditional beliefs (such as the belief in magic and/or superstition) is the opposite of the impact of religion and/or religiosity. Religious people in Germany are less inclined to positively assess Hitler than non-religious people, while traditionally-minded (superstitious) individuals are more inclined to provide a more positive assessment of Hitler and the National-Socialist regime than individuals who do not hold on to traditional beliefs. Similarly respondents' attitudes toward democratic/authoritarian rule in 27 Muslim societies were shaped by respondents' attachment to traditional beliefs but not by their religiosity (Pelizzo and Kuzenbayev, 2023b).

This line of research has shown, so far, that tradition matters. It has also shown that to properly appreciate the political consequences of traditional beliefs and practices, scholars need to develop a more nuanced understanding of what tradition is and/or of the way in which it could be more properly operationalized. Methodological considerations aside, scholars need to develop a better understanding of why, how, and under what circumstances traditional beliefs matter. The only way to do so is to do beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries and engage in proper inter-disciplinary research. Given its inter-disciplinary focus, the *Current Research Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* is the ideal venue to promote this kind of research and to contribute to the expansion of boundaries of inquiry and to shed some light on issues and questions that have not yet been adequately addressed.

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