



## Choosing Preferences by Constructing Institutions: A Cultural Theory of Preference Formation

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CHOOSING  
PREFERENCES  
BY CONSTRUCTING  
INSTITUTIONS:  
A CULTURAL THEORY  
OF PREFERENCE  
FORMATION

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*P*references come from the most ubiquitous human activity: living with other people. Support for and opposition to different ways of life, the shared values legitimating social relations (here called cultures) are the generators of diverse preferences. After discussing why it is not helpful to conceive of interests as preferences or to dismiss preference formation as external to organized social life, I explain how people are able to develop many preferences from few clues by using their social relations to interrogate their environment. The social filter is the source of preferences. I then argue that culture is a more powerful construct than conceptual rivals: heuristics, schemas, ideologies. Two initial applications—to the ideology of the left-right distinctions and to perceptions of danger—test the claim that this theory of how individuals use political cultures to develop their preferences outperforms the alternatives.

The question of where political ideas come from is not only highly deserving of study, but also within the competence of our contemporary research techniques. I join Bill Riker in commending it to you as one of the truly exciting and significant areas of investigation in our field.

—Herbert Simon

Agreement on political fundamentals cries for an explanation. Why, how, through which mechanisms do people come to think alike about political fundamentals?

—Charles E. Lindblom

**T**he formation of political preferences ought to be one of the major subjects of political

science. Although it is eminently reasonable to study—as most of us, including myself, have throughout our professional lifetimes—how people try to get what they want through political activity, it is also *unreasonable* to neglect the study of why people want what they want. To omit or slight the most important reason all of us have for studying politics, namely, educating our preferences, is a particularly unfortunate lapse for scholars.

I am making a double argument: first, on behalf of the usefulness of a cultural approach in general (rooting explanation in social life) and, second, on behalf of a particular cultural theory (cultures characterized by boundedness and prescription). Readers might find the first more persuasive than the second. There may be

better formulations. My brief for the cultural theory that follows is based upon the usual criteria of parsimony and power, that is, getting the most explanatory and predictive capacity from the fewest variables. Challenges and improvements are welcome.

### Interests As Preferences

Ask political scientists where preferences come from and if they don't just stop the conversation with "haven't a clue" or refer disparagingly to the muddle over ideology, you are likely to hear that ubiquitous catch-all term "interests." Preferences presumably come from the interests people have. Indeed, a sweeping review of the literature done by Michael Thompson and Michiel Schwarz (1985) tells us what we already suspect: politics of interests is the mainstay of political science.<sup>1</sup> Yet, if preferences come from interests, how do people figure out what their interests are (presumably, these do not come with a birth certificate or social security card) so they will know what they prefer? For if interests and preferences are synonymous, we still are no wiser about how people come to have them.

In the beginning, apparently, there were interests—lumpy, fully formed psychological facts, self-evident and self-explanatory. How any one of us would come to know what our interests are need not matter if they are derived from immediate sense perception. Individuals, presumably, size up the situation, distinguish opposing interests, separate the interests of others from self-interest, and choose (or choose not to choose) the self. Instead of this phenomenological understanding—interests are self-evident, chiseled in stone on objects that force themselves as they are upon human perception—I would rely on the convergence of certain strands of work in social science, according to which *meanings are shared*;

they are conferred on objects or events through social interaction.

If the interests that we consider ours are indeed the products of social relations, then the origins of our preferences may be found in the deepest desires of all: how we wish to live with other people and how we wish others to live with us. "The real moment of choosing," as Mary Douglas (1983) maintains, "is . . . choice of comrades and their way of life" (p. 45). But that fateful choice, while broad, is not unlimited.

The first choice—the available combinations of values and practices—is made *for* us. Human beings do not choose what they want, like ordering a la carte, any more than they (so far) select their body parts in any size or shape they want, regardless of the configuration into which these have to fit. Preference formation is much more like ordering *prix fixe* from a number of set dinners or voting a party ticket. Only those combinations that are socially viable, that can cohere because people are able to give them their allegiance, to share their meanings, may be lived. Some things—accepting authority while rejecting it—just can't be done. Only second-level choices (which of the available ways of life do I prefer?) and third-level choices (which policies do I believe are efficacious in supporting my preferred way?) are potentially available to choice. If preferences are formed through the organization of social relations, however, these preferences must come from inside, not from outside, our ways of life—from institutional arrangements.

### Preferences Are Endogenous, Not Exogenous

Ask an economist where preferences come from and you will be told that they are exogenous, external to the system being considered.<sup>2</sup> The motive force for

participation in markets, the desire to do better through living a life of bidding and bargaining by competing for resources, is ruled out as a noneconomic question! Worse still, preferences are referred to as "tastes," for which, as the saying goes, there is no accounting, thus rendering them not merely noneconomic but non-analyzable.

The difficulty for economics conceived as rational choice is stated cogently by R. T. Michael and G. S. Becker (1976):

For economists to rest a large part of their theory of choice on differences in tastes is disturbing since they admittedly have no useful theory of the formation of tastes, nor can they rely on a well-developed theory of tastes from any other discipline in the social sciences, since none exists. . . . The weakness in the received theory of choice, then, is the extent to which it relies on differences in tastes to "explain" behavior when it can neither explain how tastes are formed nor predict their effects. (in Burt 1982, 347-48)

Nevertheless, Becker goes on to state that "all human behavior can be viewed as involving participants who maximize their utility from a stable set of preferences" (p. 348). If preferences are fixed and outside the process of choice, then we cannot inquire into how preferences are formed. The least interesting behavior, instrumental actions, may be explained by preferences; but about the most interesting, preferences themselves, nothing at all can be said. Lindblom is right: "We have impoverished our thought by imprisoning it in an unsatisfactory model of preferences taken as given" (1982, 335).

Cultural theory, by contrast, is based on the premise that preferences are endogenous—internal to organizations—so that they emerge from social interaction in defending or opposing different ways of life. When individuals make important decisions, these choices are simultaneously choices of culture—shared values legitimating different patterns of social practices. Always, in cultural theory, shared values and social relations go together: there are no disembodied values apart

from the social relations they rationalize, and there are no social relations in which people do not give reasons for or otherwise attempt to justify their behavior. When choices are not completely controlled by conditions (cultural theory holds), people discover their preferences by evaluating how their past choices have strengthened or weakened (and their future choices might strengthen or weaken) their way of life. Put plainly, people decide for or against existing authority. They construct their culture in the process of decision making. Their continuing reinforcement, modification, and rejection of existing power relationships teaches them what to prefer.

"If political preferences are molded through political experiences, or by political institutions," James March and Johan Olsen (1984) state, "it is awkward to have a theory that presumes preferences are exogenous to the political process" (p. 739). Cultural theory, by contrast, gives preferences an endogenous political explanation: preferences are formed through opposing and supporting institutions.

Rejecting a social science that begins at the end by assuming interests, I wish to make *what people want*—their desires, preferences, values, ideals—into the central subject of our inquiry. By classifying people, their strategies, and their social contexts into the cultural biases that form their preferences, cultural theory attempts to explain and predict recurrent regularities and transitions in their behavior. Preferences in regard to political objects are not external to political life; on the contrary, they constitute the very internal essence, the quintessence of politics: the construction and reconstruction of our lives together.

### **Deriving Preferences from Cultures: Four Ways of Life**

Cultural theory is based on the axiom

**Figure 1. Models of Four Cultures**

Number and Variety of Prescriptions	Strength of Group Boundaries	
	Weak	Strong
Numerous and varied	Apathy (Fatalism)	Hierarchy (Collectivism)
Few and similar	Competition (Individualism)	Equality (Egalitarianism)

Note: Adapted from Douglas 1970; 1982.

that what matters most to people is their relationships with other people and other people's relationships with them. It follows that the major choice made by people (or, if they are subject to coercion, made for them) is the form of culture—shared values legitimating social practices—they adopt. An act is culturally rational, therefore, if it supports one's way of life.

A basic proposition of this cultural theory (which cannot be demonstrated here) is an impossibility theorem: there are only a limited number of cultures that between them categorize most human relations.<sup>3</sup> Though we can imagine an infinite number of potential cultures, only a relatively small number (here I shall work with four) are filled with human activity; the rest are deserted. What makes order possible is that only a few conjunctions of shared values and their corresponding social relations are viable in that they are socially livable.

The dimensions of cultural theory are based on answers to two questions: Who am I? and What shall I do? The question of identity may be answered by saying that individuals belong to a strong group, a collective, that makes decisions binding on all members or that their ties to others are weak in that their choices bind only themselves. The question of action is answered by responding that the individual is subject to many or few prescriptions, a free spirit or a spirit tightly

constrained. The strength or weakness of group boundaries and the numerous or few, varied or similar, prescriptions binding or freeing individuals are the components of their culture.

Strong groups with numerous prescriptions that vary with social roles combine to form hierarchical collectivism. Strong groups whose members follow few prescriptions form an egalitarian culture, a shared life of voluntary consent without coercion or inequality. Competitive individualism joins few prescriptions with weak group boundaries, thereby encouraging ever new combinations. When groups are weak and prescriptions strong—so that decisions are made for them by people on the outside—the controlled culture is fatalistic (See Figure 1).

The social ideal of individualistic cultures is self-regulation. They favor bidding and bargaining in order to reduce the need for authority. They support equal opportunity to compete in order to facilitate arrangements between consenting adults with a minimum of external interference. They seek opportunity to be different, not the chance to be the same, for diminishing social differences would require a central, redistributive authority.

Hierarchy is institutionalized authority. It justifies inequality on grounds that specialization and division of labor enable people to live together with greater harmony and effectiveness than do alternative arrangements. Hence, hierarchies are

rationalized by a sacrificial ethic: the parts are supposed to sacrifice for the whole.

Committed to a life of purely voluntary association, those from egalitarian cultures reject authority. They can live a life without coercion or authority only by greater equality of condition. Thus egalitarians may be expected to prefer reduction of differences—between races, or income levels, or men and women, parents and children, teachers and students, authorities and citizens.

An apathetic culture arises when people cannot control what happens to them. Because their boundaries are porous but the prescriptions imposed on them are severe, they develop fatalistic feelings: what will be, will be.<sup>4</sup> There is no point in their having preferences on public policy because what they prefer would not, in any event, matter.

But none of these modes of organizing social life is viable on its own. A competitive culture needs something—the laws of contract—to be above negotiating; hierarchies need something—anarchic individualists, authority-less egalitarians, apathetic fatalists—to sit on top of; egalitarians need something—unfair competition, inequitable hierarchy, non-participant fatalists—to criticize; fatalists require an external source of control to tell them what to do. "What a wonderful place the world would be," say the adherents of each culture, "if only everyone were like us," conveniently ignoring that it is only the presence in the world of people who are not like them that enables them to be the way they are. Hence, cultural theory may be distinguished by a necessity theorem: conflict among cultures is a precondition of cultural identity. It is the differences and distances from others that define one's own cultural identity.

Alone, no one has power over anyone. Power is a social phenomenon; power, therefore, is constituted by culture. But

the form and extent of manipulation vary. Apathetic cultures are manipulated; fatalists live by rules others make and impose upon them. Manipulation is built into hierarchies; orders come down and obedience presumably flows up. The evocative language of New Guinea anthropology (the "big men" versus the "rubbish men") expresses the growth of manipulation in market cultures as some people cease to possess the resources to regulate their own lives. Egalitarians try to manipulate the other cultures by incessant criticism; they coerce one another by attributing inequalities to corruption and duplicity.<sup>5</sup>

To identify with, to become part of a culture, signifies exactly that: the unviable void of formlessness—where everything and therefore nothing is possible—is replaced by social constraint. Even so, individuals keep testing the constraints, reinforcing them if they prove satisfactory in practice, modifying or rejecting them, when possible, if unsatisfactory. It is individuals as social creatures, not only being molded by but actively molding their social context—shaping the maze as well as running it—that are the focus of cultural theory.

Suppose a new development occurs. Without knowing much about it, those who identify with each particular way of life can guess whether its effect is to increase or decrease social distinctions, impose, avoid, or reject authority—guesses made more definitive by observing what like-minded individuals do.<sup>6</sup> Of course, people may be, and often are, mistaken. To seek is not necessarily to find a culturally rational course of action. Gramsci's would-be capitalists may try to establish hegemony over others, but they are often mistaken about which ideas and actions will in fact support their way of life. They may, for instance, use governmental regulation to institute a pattern of cumulative inequalities that convert market arrangements into state capitalism, leading to their ultimate subordina-

tion. To be culturally rational by bolstering one's way of life is the intention, not necessarily the accomplishment.

If social life is the midwife of political preferences, how do people get from culture to preferences? Perhaps politics is too complicated to allow many people to figure out what they prefer.

### **"Preferences Need No Inferences"**

An obstacle to the development of a theory of political preference formation is the view, dominant in psychology until recently, that cognition must precede affect. For if "preferences are formed and expressed only after and only as a result of considerable cognitive activity" (Zajonc 1980, 154), then it would indeed be difficult to explain how most people, including many who engage only in minimal cognitive activity, at least in regard to politics, come to have so many preferences. If, however, one goes along with Zajonc and the considerable literature he cites "that to arouse affect, objects need to be cognized very little—in fact minimally" (p. 154), more promising theoretical avenues open up. Preferences, Zajonc continues, "must be constituted of interactions between some gross object features and internal states of the individual" (p. 159). But how, we may ask, do preferences get from object features to internal states?

The cultural hypothesis is that individuals exert control over each other by institutionalizing the moral judgments justifying their interpersonal relationships so they can be acted upon and accounted for. The prevailing view is that the inter-relatedness among attitudes in the mass public is low, that is, people are inconsistent. Now, criteria of consistency expressing what ought to be related to what are not found in nature but, like the categories of culture I am expounding, are imposed in an effort to make sense out of

people's political behavior. If these criteria are incorrectly or insufficiently specified, they will make people's opinions unrelated where another set of criteria would make them more consistent. When there is a question as to whether it is the people who do not understand what they are doing or we social scientists who do not understand the people, I am inclined to think that *we* have fallen down. All of us in social science are looking for bedrock, for the most basic value and factual premises that we can hypothesize as lying behind specific political and policy preferences. My claim is that this foundation lies in social relationships, roughly as categorized by political cultures.

foundation lies in social relationships, roughly as categorized by political cultures.

How does the social filter enable people who possess only inches of facts to generate miles of preferences? What is it about cultures that makes them the kind of theories that ordinary folk can use to figure out their preferences? The ability of people to know what they prefer without knowing much else lies at the crux of understanding preference formation. Culture codes can be unlocked, I maintain, because its keys are social. By figuring out their master preferences, as it were—who they are and are not, to what groups they do and do not belong—they can readily figure out the rest. A basic reason people are able to develop so many preferences is that they actually do not have to work all that hard. A few positive and negative associations go a long way.

It is no more necessary for a person to verbalize about culture than it is necessary to know the rules of grammar in order to speak. The stock phrases "one of us" versus "one of them" goes a long way. Preferences might come from insight into general principles, but, because meanings have to be shared, ideologues and theorists often discover that their views are

rejected or modified by others. Preferences can and do come sideways, from identifications, experiences, and conversations. What matters is not how preferences are first proposed (many are called but few are chosen) but how they are ultimately disposed through the presence or absence of social validation. It is not the lone individual, after all, who creates what is called *ideological constraint* ("one thing entailing another") among preferences but social interaction among adherents of a particular culture in contrast to other cultures whose identifiers have different preferences.

### Heuristics

Brady and Sniderman, in pursuing a closely related question, "How . . . can citizens make sense of groups—that is, know which is relevant to which issue and which stands for what—without having to know a great deal about them?" (1985, 1073),

focus on the operation of an affective calculus, or, as we call it, a *likability heuristic*. This calculus is organized around people's feelings toward groups such as liberals and conservatives. Clearly, many in the mass public lack a firm understanding of political abstractions. All the same, many know whom they like, and, equally important, they also know whom they dislike. If coherent, these likes and dislikes can supply people with an affective calculus to figure out the issue positions of strategic groups. We suggest that in this way many in the mass public can figure out who wants what politically without necessarily knowing a lot about politics. (pp. 1061–62)

The more people are able to choose sides—ours versus theirs—"the more they appreciate the differences between the issue positions of the two sides. What counts, then, is not how people feel toward groups, one by one; rather it is how they feel toward *pairs* of opposing groups" (p. 1075). It is precisely this pairing or, more accurately, this triangulation of rival cultures, I believe, that enables people to position themselves in political life.

Preferences may be rationalized from the top down, specific applications being deduced from general principles. But complexity of the causal chains invoked leaves people who lack a capacity for abstract thought unable to form preferences. Reasoning in steps is also slow. Without social validation at each step, moreover—which is difficult to achieve—the chain of reasoning may snap. Fortunately, faster methods are available. People can know what they believe or whom they trust without knowing how the belief is derived. Sniderman, Hagen, Tetlock, and Brady (1986) agree that such bottom-up processes operate on white attitudes toward blacks. In their view

It may be nearer the mark to say that citizens, so far as their reasoning about policy is affect-driven, start at the beginning of the chain, taking account of their feelings toward blacks. Then, rather than working their way along the chain hierarchically, from general to specific, they skip over the intermediate links of the chain and go straight to its end. Having reached the end of the chain, they work their way backwards and fill in the missing links. That is to say, not only do they reason forwards, from general to specific; they also reason backwards, from specific to general. And, because they can reason both forwards and backwards, with affect guiding them, they can indeed figure out what they think about questions, such as the reasons for racial inequality, they may not ordinarily think about. (p. 33)

Mediating their perceptions through their cultures, people can grab on to any social handle to choose their preferences. All they need are aids to calculation.

"How," Paul Sniderman and his colleagues ask, "do people figure out what they think about political issues, given how little they commonly know about them?" (Sniderman et al. 1986, 2). They state that "three heuristics are of particular importance: affect (likes and dislikes); ideology (liberalism/conservatism); and attributions of responsibility (the so-called desert heuristic)" (p. 2). The desert heuristic is a version of system versus individual blame through which adherents of political cultures seek to hold others

accountable for their behaviors. "Liberal" versus "conservative" stands as a surrogate for equality of condition versus equality of opportunity, that is, for the rivalry of egalitarian and market cultures. (When "liberal" meant "laissez-faire," its cultural associations were different.) The two heuristics—desert and ideology—are related: market forces blame individuals (they are undeserving); egalitarians blame the system (it is oppressive). Liberals dislike conservatives because they "blame the victims," while conservatives dislike liberals because they encourage irresponsible behavior. All these aids to calculation are ideological (or, to use the anthropological term, cosmological) in the sense of rationalizations for preferred social relationships.

I agree entirely that

it would be . . . a mistake merely to enumerate various heuristics; a mistake partly because they are likely to proliferate endlessly; a mistake more fundamentally because it is necessary to understand how these aids to judgment are themselves interrelated. It is, that is to say, necessary, to understand how people work their way, step by step, through a chain of reasoning. And to understand how they manage this, one must establish what they do first, then second, then third. (Sniderman et al. 1986, 47)

Cultural theory attempts to unify heuristics by suggesting that these chains have but one link: the internalization of external social relations.

### Schemas

Another entry for understanding the formation of political preferences has now appeared—schema theory. According to Pamela Conover and Stanley Feldman (1984), this theory views "people as 'cognitive misers' who have a limited capacity for dealing with information, and thus must use cues and previously stored knowledge to reach judgments and decisions as accurately and efficiently as possible" (p. 96). Political cognition is about how different schemas, such as

party identification and economic class, organize perception. How are the schemas that form our preferences formed?

Although the logic of schemas may appear similar to that of cultural theory—a small number of premises generating a large number of premises—this appearance is misleading. Cultures are not disembodied ideas; they are not merely cognitive.<sup>7</sup> The mental activity has a purpose: the justification of desired social practices. It is both together, shared values indissolubly connected to social practices, that make up cultural theory. Comparing cultures means just that—comparing cultures as totalities with values and practices joined, not isolated.

The concept of schemas, essentially a reinvention of our old friend "attitudes" under a new name (like "political behavior" for "political science"), falls prey to the same disability—the endless proliferation of explanatory constructs until there is an attitude or a schema for every act. I think that the notion of schemas lacks a crucial element that cultural theory offers: a systematic context from which preferences can flow. Let us try a couple of quick tests.

### Two Tests of Cultural Theory: Ideology and Risk

Cultural theory is open to tests normally applied in social science: *retrodiction* (Can it explain historical puzzles? [Ellis and Wildavsky 1986]) and *prediction* (Does it account for future events better than do other theories?). The degree of incorporation into group life and the degree of prescription can be measured so as to arrive at (forgive the cumbersome expression) intersubjective coder reliability. Jonathan Gross and Steve Rayner's book, *Measuring Culture*, does just that.

One test of cultural theory is conceptual-historical; I contend that the cultural categories described here fit far better in accounting for political prefer-

ences than the usual left-right, liberal-conservative dimensions. A second test is both contemporary and future-oriented; I claim that perception of danger and disposition toward risk—from technology and from acquired immune deficiency syndrome—are better explained and predicted by cultural theory than by competing theories.

### **A Confusion of Cultures: Competitive Individualism versus Egalitarian Collectivism**

The single worst misunderstanding about U.S. politics, in my opinion, is the joining together as a single entity, called "individualism," two separate and distinct political cultures with opposing preferences for policies and institutions—competitive individualism and egalitarian collectivism. Between equality of opportunity (enabling individuals to accentuate their differences) and equality of results (enabling them to diminish their differences), there is a vast gulf.<sup>8</sup> To say that equal opportunity is empty without more equal results is to say that the latter is more important than the former.

Individualistic cultures prefer minimum authority, just enough to maintain rules for transactions, but they do not reject all authority; if it leaves them alone, they will leave it alone. While egalitarians also like to live a life of minimal prescription, they are part and parcel of collectives in which, so long as they remain members, individuals are bound by group decisions. This critical distinction in group-boundedness, the freedom to transact for yourself with any consenting adult vis-à-vis the requirement of agreement with group decisions, makes for a radical difference in the formation of political preferences.

The confusion to which I am objecting manifests itself more generally in the use

of dichotomous instead of triangular designations of political cultures. The most infamous of these is left versus right. Left, or liberal, presumably designates a tendency toward greater use of central government for policy purposes, including an inclination to welfare state measures designed to be at least somewhat redistributive. Presumably, right, or conservative, signifies a disposition against central governmental intervention in the economy but of greater respect for collective authority. As political shorthand, these terms have their uses. But for purposes of political analysis, they obfuscate more than they clarify. The preference for greater use of government may stem from a hierarchical culture in which the individual is subordinated to the group. Yet the very same preference for central governmental action may be rooted in a desire to reduce all social distinction, including those on which hierarchies are based. Hierarchies and egalitarian collectives may, in certain historical contexts, ally themselves in favor of redistributive measures, yet they may also, at the same time, be bitter opponents in regard to respect for authority. For equalization of statuses would destroy hierarchy. It is not easy, as the Catholic Church is learning, to say that all forms of inequality are bad but that popes and bishops are good (Wildavsky 1985a).

The left-right distinction is beset with contradictions. Hierarchical cultures favor social conservatism, giving government the right to intervene in matters of personal morality. Thus egalitarians may support intervention in the economy to reduce economic differences but not intervention in social life to maintain inequality. Libertarians, who are competitive individualists, oppose both social and economic intervention.

A division of the world into left and right that is equally inapplicable to the past and to the present deserves to be dis-

carded. Efforts to read back the left-right distinction into U.S. history, for instance, succeed only in making a hash of it. In the early days of the republic, egalitarians pursued their objectives through severe restrictions on central government because they then regarded the center as monarchical, that is, hierarchical. Nowadays, after decades of dispute and struggle, they regard the federal government as a potential source for increasing equality. Their egalitarian objectives remain constant, but their beliefs about what will be efficacious instruments of policy vary according to the conditions of the times (cf. Banning 1978).

Without knowledge of the historical context, and therefore, without being privy to the internal discussions through which shared meanings are worked out, it is impossible to explain why a given culture prefers certain institutional arrangements and instruments of policy at one time and different ones on other occasions. How, nowadays, make sense of the Republican alliance of economic free markets and social conservatism or the Democratic combination of statism with distrust of authority? Is it the "left" that supports the authority of central government and the "right" that opposes it, or is it the "right" that respects authority and the "left" that denigrates it?

The division of the political universe into liberals and conservatives, when based on innate tendencies toward change, is bound to be misleading because historical context alters whatever the various political cultures wish to preserve. Given the current extent to which most proposals for government action involve redistribution of income or regulation of business, it is not surprising that people who are opposed to these policies have learned to dislike change. So, when asked, they reply that most change is for the worse. People who prefer these programs respond that they like change. Were the tables turned, so that most legis-

lation was in favor of maintaining social and economic differences, say anti-abortion and anti-inheritance taxes, contemporary liberals would learn that most change is bad and their conservative opponents that change is by and large good.

In a rich analysis of differences and similarities among left- and right-wing activists, McClosky and Chong (1985) conclude that "thus, paradoxically, despite its patriotic fervour, spokesmen of the radical right are profoundly antagonistic to the status quo" (pp. 346-47). It is paradoxical if conservatism is identified with resistance to change but not if desire for change depends on perceived distance from desired behavior. Those who look at life from the conservative perspective "continually lash out against what they consider to be the government's conciliatory stance towards Communism, its support for welfare programmes, (which, in their view, rewards laziness and lack of initiative), its encouragement of moral depravity (sexual license, tolerance of abortion, homosexuality, etc.), and its lenient treatment of criminals" (pp. 346-47). If readers believed that, they might also want big changes. What kind of changes we want depends not nearly so much on our predispositions toward change per se, as if the destination did not matter, but on the gap between desired and actual power relationships.<sup>9</sup>

The further the distance between the real and the ideal, the greater the desire for rapid and radical change. If this proposition is correct, it should follow that "left" or "progressive" forces, when they consider existing power relationships more desirable than proposals for change, should cling to the status quo with as much passion as any reactionary who prefers the last century to the present. Wandering in the void between the Articles of Confederation (interpreted as minimal central authority) and the Constitutional Convention (which, by com-

parison, elevated central power), the anti-federalists preferred the past to the future. Worrying about the return of monarchy or, just as bad, monarchical principles, the individualist Jacksonians (who believed that equality of opportunity, rigorously enforced, would lead to relative equality of condition), fought a rearguard action against commercial capitalism.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the Federalist party (a hierarchy coalescing with market forces to form an establishment) fought to achieve and maintain the relative centralization of the Constitution—a radical change from the immediate past.

An advantage of cultural theory is that it handles both economic and social issues without strain. Conover and Feldman (1981) wrote that

traditionally, it was assumed that the meaning of ideological labels and self-identifications could be easily summarized in terms of a single dimension: the liberal/conservative continuum. In recent years, however, this viewpoint has undergone some modification. The decade of the 1970s ushered in a variety of "social" issues—abortion, marijuana use, the Equal Rights Amendment—which did not fit easily into the traditional liberal/conservative spectrum. Because of this, many researchers now posit that the meaning of ideological labels and self-identification must be interpreted within the context of two liberal/conservative dimensions: one economic and one social. (p. 168)

Using cultural concepts, however, makes such ad hoc category massage unnecessary. Individualists, being nonprescriptive and anticollectivist, prefer minimal economic and social regulation. Egalitarians, combining nonprescription with collective decision, prefer strong economic but weak social regulation. And adherents of hierarchy, joining hard group boundaries to heavy prescription, desire strong social and economic regulation. Presumably, students of cultural theory would not be surprised at a U.S. president who (combining market individualism with social hierarchy, like his party) urges compulsory urine tests to detect drug users.

## Culture and Risk

Comparing perceptions of danger is especially useful as a test of cultural theory. The subject abounds with anomalies; it is fiercely contested; rival theories are already in place; and, best of all, readers can check out the performance of cultural theory vis-à-vis its competitors by reading their daily newspapers.

"Ideology," Samuel Barnes (1966) reminds us, "is one of the most frequently cited and inadequately understood subjects of empirical inquiry" (p. 513).<sup>11</sup> In an effort to improve the situation, a number of anthropologists (Claude Levi-Strauss, Clifford Geertz, David Schreider, Ward Goodenough) have brought up the concept of cultures as "ideational codes" (Elkins and Simeon 1979). For Geertz, "culture is best seen not as complexes of concrete behavior patterns—customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters . . . but as a set of control mechanisms—plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call 'programs')—for the governing of behavior" (Elkins and Simeon, 1979, 129). In order to give greater precision to this research program, Elkins and Simeon list a number of questions (regarding people's assumptions about causality, human nature, the "orderliness of the universe") that would get at who is controlling whom or what controlling which. Let us take one of their most explicit questions—"Should one try to maximize gains, or to minimize losses? In other words, what assumptions are made about the relative payoffs of optimistic or pessimistic strategies?" (p. 132)—and compare the kind of answers given by cultural theory with the kind given by other theories of risk-taking and risk-aversion.

In discussions of technological danger, one theory is that people are reacting to the actual dangers; they are risk-averse because the risks are rising. Another theory is psychological; there are risk-taking and risk-averse personalities. Still

another theory concerns an intuitive sense of justice: people are willing to accept dangers that are voluntarily undertaken, but they reject risks that are imposed on them. In *Risk and Culture* (1982), Mary Douglas and I argue that perception of danger is a function of political culture, risk acceptance going along with approval of individualistic and hierarchical cultures and risk aversion with egalitarian opposition to these other cultures on the grounds they are coercive and domineering. Put briefly, we contend that the debate over risk stemming from technology is a referendum on the acceptability of U.S. institutions. The more trust in them, the more risk acceptance; the less trust, the more risk rejection.<sup>12</sup>

Consider, in this context of competing explanations, a variety of survey findings. The first, a survey of the feelings of a variety of elites about the safety of nuclear power plants shows, among other things, an immense gap (far greater than survey research usually produces) between nuclear energy experts (98.7%) and the military (86.0%) saying "safe" compared to relatively tiny proportions of leaders of public interest groups (6.4%), movie producers and directors (14.3%) and elite journalists (29.4%). The difference between people expected to support and to oppose authority is very great (Rothman and Lichter 1985).

A second poll compares the general public to executives of small and large corporations and environmentalists on a variety of preferences related to politics and public policy. Whereas around two-thirds of the general public and executives favor a strong defense, only a quarter of environmentalists give it a high priority. Maintaining order in the nation gets around 80% or more from everyone else but just 47% from environmentalists. On an egalitarian issue, such as having more say at work, the situation is reversed. Two-thirds of environmentalists and the general public give it a high priority but

only a quarter of executives in large companies and two-fifths in small ones do the same (Bloomgarden 1983). Polarization of elites is evident.

A third study surveys business and ecology activists vis-à-vis the general public in West Germany in regard to their political positions on a left-right basis. It is obvious that ecologists and business elites are divided (twice as sharply as the general public) on ideological grounds. Similarly, in a study of voters in the United States Senate, Kalt and Zupan (1984) report, "It turns out that politicians consistently package liberalism and environmentalism together—the correlation between the LCV [League of Conservation Voters]'s and the ADA [Americans for Democratic Action]'s rating scales is 0.94." But why are the two found together?

Nuclear war may well be the greatest contemporary risk of all. Glenn Sussman (1986) has conducted a survey of U.S. and British anti-nuclear weapons activists in which he asked them to rate four goals: fighting rising prices, giving the people more say in important governmental decisions, maintaining order in the nation, and protecting freedom of speech. A priori there is no reason to believe that these activists have anything else on their minds except opposition to nuclear war. Yet approximately two-thirds valued more say in government as their first priority while maintaining order got less than 5%.<sup>13</sup> If one posits a cultural connection between this "anti" activism and opposition to existing authority as egalitarian, the low ranking of "order" makes more sense. Viewing environmentalists as protestors against egalitarian institutions (recall their concern about "endangered species" and corporations that cause cancer) helps us understand their political alliances. Because Berkeley constitutes a kind of political-medical museum for this purpose, we can observe a member of the city council, accused of

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**Table 1. The Double Polarization in West Germany, 1980:  
Left Versus Right**

Respondents	(n)	"How would you describe your political attitude?"					
		Strong Left	Middle Left	Center	Middle Right	Strong Right	No Position
Ecology activists	(98)	9%	27%	29%	15%	3%	14%
General public	(1,088)	3	16	39	23	6	12
Business leaders	(130)	1	8	30	49	8	3

Source: Milbrath 1981a, 1981b; Lauber 1983.

spending too much time on foreign affairs instead of local concerns, respond, "You can't explain one without the other. If the money was not going to Central America, we would have the money to fix the sewers."<sup>14</sup>

Why, if we are dealing with a reasonable adaptation to emerging knowledge, do attitudes to political authority distinguish so well positions on nuclear power? Why, if there are major personality differences, do ecologists and environmentalists and businessmen divide so neatly on general ideological grounds? Why, if it is the voluntary/involuntary distinction that matters, are there such strong and similar differences on public order and defense? Rooting explanation in adherence to several different ways of life rather than the usual left-right dichotomy, I think, makes more sense out of the data.

A striking contemporary example connecting culture and risk comes from perceptions of acquired immune deficiency syndrome. The more hierarchical the group, I hypothesize, following cultural theory, the more it minimizes technological danger as the price of progress while maximizing fear of casual contact with people who have AIDS. For, in its view, when people violate divine commandments, the Lord brings plague. Conversely, egalitarians tend to grossly overestimate the dangers from technology (on grounds that the social and economic relationships they dislike are bad for your

health) while minimizing the dangers from casual contact with carriers of AIDS. Gays are good in the egalitarian view because they are antiestablishment and because they reduce differences among people. Only cultural theory explains why, when we know a group's general ideology, we can tell how much danger they will impute to technology versus AIDS.

Now this conclusion, which is sure to be contested, depends on a substantial scholarly apparatus. How can laymen, that is, most of us most of the time, figure out what our preferences ought to be?

### The Calculation of Preferences

How do people make so much, derive so many preferences, from so few clues? We know that most people are not interested in or knowledgeable about most issues most of the time. Consequently, the clues must be exceedingly simple. Even the highly educated and interested cannot know much about most matters of politics and policy, yet they are able to generate and express preferences when necessary. Indeed, the educated may well be getting more than their due from social scientists. Though they do know more about a few major issues than the less educated, people with high levels of formal education have many more preferences than they can know much, if anything, about. It is

likely, therefore, that the highly educated have many more unfounded preferences than do those who have far fewer preferences about subject matter of which they know little.

Rational people, I have argued, support their way of life. By answering two questions, they are able to discover their cultural identity: Who am I? (free to negotiate or bound by a group?) and What should I do? (follow detailed prescriptions that vary with role or decide for myself?). Knowing who they are and are not—the cultures to which they do and do not belong—helps them to begin sorting their preferences. Cultural identity enables individuals to answer for themselves the crucial quantitative and qualitative questions about preferences: How many are they expected to have? What kind should these be? Fatalists know that they do not need to know anything (it won't matter) except what others tell them to do. They are prescribed to, not prescribing. Members of hierarchies can rule in whatever goes with their station and rule out whatever does not. By relying on others whose duty it is to take care of whatever they neglect and by positive reinforcement of this nonparticipation—it is normative not to act above (or, for that matter, below) your station—both groups come to learn how much of what kind of preferences they are expected to have and how much they can leave to the authorities. Individualists are expected to figure out for themselves whether and to what extent participation is worthwhile. There is no onus on nonparticipation.<sup>15</sup>

Overall, it cannot be too difficult to arrive at preferences on most matters, because everyone does it. Just as we consider our connections with those who advocate petitions as a quick way of determining whether we would feel comfortable in signing, so do people in general learn how to know what they ought to prefer without knowing much about it. People who do not pay much attention to

politics or public policy can nevertheless develop preferences by getting them from Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee's (1954) well-known ("But," as James Stimson [1986] reminds us, "we keep forgetting it") two-step flow of communication from activists to less attentive citizens. Stimson (1986) shows that "mass perceptions track activist positions." His thesis is that this social connection "accounts for the riddle of inattentive electorates who seem to know much of what they need to know to make policy informed choices." Wholly in the spirit of cultural analysis, Stimson concludes "that many of the things that matter in political life . . . have very little to do with individual psychological processes. They are macro behaviors, such as mediated cognitions, that require for understanding a focus on 'between' rather than 'within' individual effects" (pp. 4, 19, 20). All I would add is that "between . . . individual effects" become "within individual effects."

"System" or "person" blame are dead giveaways. The slightest clue as to whether the authorities and the institutions vis-à-vis individuals are at fault helps people know whether they want to go along with egalitarian or hierarchical or market policies. Anyone who thinks that attribution of blame to "the system" or to individuals is not diagnostic should consult Table 2 from Verba and Orren, in which they address that very question to a variety of elites. The differences could hardly be greater (Wildavsky 1985b).

If it were necessary to go back to the cultural source each time a new preference is involved, building back up to the actual preference through some sort of chain of inference, many people could not manage the complexity; hence there would be far fewer preferences. Consequently, concerted political action would be a rarity. Near universal preference formation requires that preferences be inferred from all possible directions. Culture is the India rubber man of politics, for it permits pref-

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Table 2. Poverty in the United States

Group	Fault of Poor	Fault of System
Business	57%	9%
Labor	15	56
Farm	52	19
Intellectuals	23	44
Media	21	50
Republicans	55	13
Democrats	5	68
Blacks	5	86
Feminists	9	76
Youth	16	61

Source: Verba and Orren 1985, p. 74.

erences to be formed from the slimmest clue. By knowing who or what is involved, the arena or institution of involvement, the subject or object of involvement, people know whether they are supposed to have preferences and what these preferences ought to be.

What is it that enables everyone to come up with reliable solutions to the problem of preference formation whenever it arises? The one source all human beings know something about is their social relations.

### Cultures Constitute Our Political Selves

Even when I carry out *scientific* work—an activity which I seldom conduct in association with other men—I perform a *social*, because *human* act. It is not only the material of my activity—like language itself which the thinker uses—which is given to me as a social product. *My own existence* is a social activity.

—Karl Marx

The view of human life as suffused in social relations makes the study of institutions central to political science. To use Elkin's apt expression, "Values are thus 'in' politics, not above or outside it. Hannah Arendt makes the point when she comments that in political activity 'the

end (telos) is not pursued but lies in the activity itself'" (1985, 17-18). Michael Oakeshott's (1962) insistence on good form and better manners, his "idioms of conduct," is based on the understanding that the purposes institutions create are expressed in their practices (Elkin 1985, 17-18). Elkin goes on to say that "the institutions are a way in which citizens experience each other and for different institutions the form of experience is different. . . . Political institutions constitute the citizenry in the sense of . . . giving it an organized existence" (pp. 16-17). Wolin (1986) defines democracy as I would a political culture: "Democracy involves more than participation in a political process. It is a way of constituting power" (p. 2). Similarly, Connell and Goot explain that "politics must be invoked not merely as the outcome of political socialization but a cause thereof as well" (Cook 1985).

On the level of ideas, a research program on political culture would seek to increase our understanding of how opposed visions of the good life are selected, sustained, altered, and rejected. As social scientists following Robert Merton and knowing, therefore, that unanticipated consequences are a staple of social life, we want to understand what else we choose when we choose our political cultures.

The Great Depression was a market phenomenon. The great holocaust was perpetrated by a hierarchy (the Nazi party) that tolerated no rivals. The second greatest holocaust was perpetrated by egalitarians (the Cambodian Khmer Rouge) (Jackson n.d.). Deadly visions as well as virtues are also rooted in our public lives. Appraising the consequences of living lives of hierarchical subordination or of the purely voluntary association of egalitarian liberation or of the self-regulation of individualistic cultures, at different times, on different continents, with different technologies, languages, and customs would be a remarkably productive research program. So would comparing cultures rather than countries or, put precisely, comparing countries by contrasting their combinations of cultures. Such a research program would enable us to test the general hypothesis that how people organize their institutions has a more powerful effect on their preferences than any rival explanation—wealth, technology, class, self-interest, tradition, you name it. The field of preference formation is open to all comers.

## Notes

This essay is the presidential address presented on August 28, 1986 at the 82nd annual meeting of the American Political Science Association.

1. "Interest explanations are reason explanations. That is, when we explain an action by pointing to the interest that prompted, produced, or motivated it, we allude not to a human cause but to a *reason* or *ground* for acting" (Ball 1979, 199). Reasons justify our behavior to others.

2. See a perceptive paper by James March for a list of "the properties of tastes as they appear in standard prescriptive theories of choice." His list includes two properties of special interest: "Tastes are *relevant*. Normative theories of choice require that action be taken in terms of tastes." Yet, "tastes are *exogenous*. Normative theories of choice presume that tastes, by whatever process they may be created, are not themselves affected by the choices they control." As March observes, "each of these features of tastes seem inconsistent with observations of choice behavior among individuals and social institutions" (1978). Keith Hartley's paper

"Exogenous Factors in Economic Theory" explains the general perspective, "Utility or preference functions are central to neoclassical economics and are assumed to be given" (1985, 470).

3. Michael Thompson and I are working on a book, *The Foundations of Cultural Theory*, that will attempt to demonstrate this proposition.

4. "Fatalistic attitudes are discernible in many Romanian literary creations, indeed even in folklore. The most famous Romanian folk ballad is 'Miorita,' or 'The Lamb.' It is the moving, beautiful story of a Moldavian shepherd whose fellow shepherds plot to kill him and steal his flock. Learning of the plan from his 'wonder lamb,' the young shepherd makes no move to keep it from being carried out. He serenely accepts his fate, comforted by the thought that he will be reunited with nature" (Shafir 1983, 405).

5. Michael Thompson argues in favor of the viability of his hermit category, a marketlike people who, however, seek subsistence rather than domination, to escape (a) from manipulating others and (b) from being manipulated themselves. I wish them luck (see Thompson 1982).

6. A test of cultural consistency is provided by what March and Harrison call "Postdecision Surprise." When things go badly, the excuses should fit the culture. The market-oriented should accept more personal responsibility than the members of a hierarchy; egalitarians should blame "the system" (see Harrison and March 1984).

7. Many more cultures can be conceived than can be lived in. As Robert Lane says, "Although for every act there is an implicit or explicit belief to justify the act, the reverse is not true; not every thought, fantasy, image, or argument is reflected in behavior, especially since thoughts often rehearse alternative lines of behavior. The world of behavior, therefore, is smaller than the world of thought; the two worlds are not isomorphic" (Lane 1973, 97).

8. Another common confusion is mixing up egalitarianism with exclusive hierarchies because they are both passionate and moralistic in defending their strong group boundaries. The fervor of the exclusive hierarchy comes from its simplicity: only a small number of prescriptions are applicable to the vast diversity of life forms. Deviance (and, hence, deviants) are excoriated. The difference is that whereas egalitarians find society at fault because the distances between people are too large, members of hierarchies believe that the moral spaces are too small. The lack of complexity in small hierarchies means that they are left without sufficient variety for the objects they wish to control. Therefore, they get rid of people who do not fit either by labeling them as deviants or treating them as moral trash, thus removing them from those who deserve to be taken into account in making decisions. The alternative is to co-opt more people by creating moral, and hence social, compartments for them. Using variety to

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cope with complexity (as in Ashby's "Law of Requisite Variety"), however, greatly increases the size (the number and diversity of subunits) of the hierarchy. Once hierarchy is complex, as almost any but the most rudimentary government must be, its fervor declines because of the necessity of accommodating a broad range of values and adjusting relationships among more diverse life-styles.

9. For the reasons given, I disagree with the view that liberals are pro- and conservatives anti-change (see McCloskey and Chong 1985; and Robinson 1980).

10. The widespread belief among those who theorized about Jacksonian democracy in his time, a belief apparently shared by their supporters in the citizenry as well, was that equality of opportunity, meticulously followed, would lead to an approximation of equality of result. The operation of economic markets, unimpeded by the federal government, would eventually approximate real equality of condition as closely as innate differences in human ability permitted. At the very least, central government would not add artificial to natural inequality, thereby preserving representative government. Individuals would be allowed, indeed encouraged, to keep all gain that resulted from the unfettered use of their own talents. But everything artificial and unnatural, everything government imposed on man in his free state, such as charters, franchises, banks, and other monopolies, became anathema. It is this belief—not in equality undefined nor in just one kind of equality but in the *mutual reinforcement of opportunity and result*—that I think made the United States truly exceptional. Another way to describe U.S. exceptionalism is to say that liberty (i.e., individualism) is held to be compatible with equality (egalitarianism). Just as supporters of hierarchy understand that their organizations are likely to be rigid and egalitarians recognize that perfect equality is unattainable, so adherents of U.S. individualism understand that liberty can conflict with equality and vice versa. What they deny is that this conflict is immutable, and what they affirm is that their two cherished passions, liberty and equality, can reinforce one another (see Wildavsky 1986).

11. The impasse comes through in these two comments: 1) "There is mounting evidence that mass publics do not react in ideological terms. It seems equally true that much contemporary political conflict has an ideological dimension" (Barnes 1966, 513). 2) "Although the conceptual and methodological problems with ideological belief systems are serious enough for Bennett to have called for a moratorium on empirical research pending the development of better concepts and measures, a 'cottage industry' of comments and rebuttals continues to fill the journals with challenges to each and every piece of research" (Hamill, Lodge, and Blake 1985, 850).

12. Often distinctions are made between active

and passive risk (active risk being more voluntary and controllable by the individual and passive risk less voluntary and perhaps uncontrollable) in order to justify why certain risks are more and other risks less acceptable. But the distinction is misleading. One might imagine a static social system whose values, including its rules of accountability, were petrified. The people who conferred meaning on objects must have lived long ago, no one having come along since with any changes to make. Classifications are clearly labeled and immobile. Then, and only then, might one allocate dangers according to those that are active and voluntary and, therefore, properly subject to governmental regulation or prohibition. Once social change enters the picture, however, the active-passive distinction is constantly redrawn. We now see that egalitarians consider the dangers stemming from technology (nuclear power or chemical carcinogens) as a passive risk, while they perceive the dangers stemming from casual contact with sufferers from acquired immune deficiency syndrome as an active risk. At the very same time, adherents of hierarchy view the dangers of technology as actively chosen. To say a danger is voluntary is tantamount to saying it is acceptable; involuntary dangers imposed on passive people, by contrast, are unacceptable. Classification and decision are one and the same. If the anger against institutions were comprehensive enough, suicides would be owed redress by the implacable institutions that drive them to their undeserved and involuntary end. Just as "we the people" are the ones who confer meaning on these distinctions, so we are also the ones who change these meanings.

13. The actual figures are 1) more say: U.S. citizens 64.5%, British 68.6%; 2) order: U.S. citizens 4.3%, British 2.1%; 3) freedom of speech scored a little over 25%; 4) rising prices were 4% or below.

14. *Oakland Tribune*, 10 August 1986.

15. This discussion of the conception of apathy as a part of cultural bias is congruent with Carole Pateman's view that "there is more than one way to interpret the norm of political efficacy and the other norms and values traditionally associated with democracy; there is more than one view on what 'really' constitutes responsiveness of leaders and so on, and these differences in interpretation also encompass divergent notions of what form[s] of democratic institutions actually embody, or give practical expression to those norms and values" (1971, p. 304).

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### <sup>9</sup> **Similarities and Differences between Left-Wing and Right-Wing Radicals**

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### **<sup>11</sup> Ideology and the Organization of Conflict: On the Relationship Between Political Thought and Behavior**

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