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ROUTLEDGE ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

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POLITICAL CULTURES

Political culture entered the lexicon of political science in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Intimately linked with the so-called "behavioral revolution," the term signaled a turn away from the study of formal institutions to the informal behavior that breathed life into them. Political culture was heralded as a concept capable of unifying the discipline. By relating the behavior of individuals to the system of which the individual was a part, it promised to "bridge the 'micro-macro' gap in political theory" (Almond and Powell 1966: 51-52; also see Almond and Verba 1963: 32-36, and Pye 1965: 9). In recent decades, however, the concept of political culture has fallen out of academic fashion amidst criticisms that it is tautological, that it is unable to explain change, that it ignores power relations, and that its definition is fuzzy.

We have no intention of bombarding the reader with the myriad definitions of political culture that have been tried and discarded only to reappear without agreement among scholars. One study has counted no less than 164 definitions of the term "culture" (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952). Among students of political culture, the most widely accepted definition views culture as composed of values, beliefs, norms and assumptions, i.e., mental products (see, e.g., Pye 1968: 218). This "mental" definition of culture has the virtue of clearly separating the behavior to be explained from the values and beliefs that are doing the explaining. On the

product of an irrational "ethos" rather than in terms of a rational response to their "marginalized" position in the economic and political structure.

To deny that political culture is shaped by institutional structure, critics continue, makes the concept of culture deeply mysterious and unfathomable. As Hall points out, "unless cultural theories can account for the origins of...attitudes by reference to the institutions that generate and reproduce them, they do little more than summon up a deus ex machina that is itself unexplainable" (1986: 34). We agree that political culture must not be treated as an uncaused cause purportedly explaining why people behave as they do yet incapable of itself being explained. To do so is to posit a world in which values are disembodied, unattached to human subjects. People's continued adherence to certain doctrines and habits must themselves be explained. One way to do this, we believe, is to conceive of culture not only as mental products (ideas, values, beliefs), as is commonly done, or as patterns of social relations, but as values justifying relationships indissolubly bound together.

Political culture is transmitted from generation to generation, but it is not transmitted unchanged, nor is it transmitted without question. Cultural transmission is absolutely not a game of pass-the-parcel. Political culture is a lively and responsive thing that is continually being negotiated by individuals. A plausible theory of political culture must therefore not turn the individual into an

the Achilles heal of cultural theories.

political scientists, some classification of cultures was necessary. Perhaps the most influential was the typology of parochial, subject, and participatory orientations presented by Almond and Verba, who addressed themselves to one of the great questions of post-war social science: why, in the period between the first and second world wars, did democracy survive in Britain and the United States while collapsing on the European continent? A stable democratic polity, Almond and Verba suggest, requires a balanced political culture (the civic culture) that combines both a participatory and subject (or deferential) orientation to politics. Were everyone to participate in every decision, they argue, the political system would be overloaded and governing would become impossible; were everyone to defer to their superiors, democracy would cease to be responsive to citizen needs and thus give way to authoritarianism.

The classificatory scheme advanced in The Civic Culture enabled scholars to make cross-national comparisons among what had hitherto been regarded as completely unique national cultures. The categories could be applied to advanced industrial nations as well as nonwestern, technologically primitive societies. Yet the book's research design--explaining divergent institutional outcomes in different countries--meant that the analytic focus largely remained, as in past anthropological works on national character, at the level of the nation-state. Differences between, rather than within, nations have remained the central focus of inquiry of

Grid-Group Theory

Perhaps the most ambitious effort to order the cultural variation within societies is the grid-group theory formulated by Douglas (1970, 1982). Beneath the luxuriant diversity of human customs and languages, Douglas argues, the basic convictions about life are reducible to only four cultural biases: egalitarianism, fatalism, hierarchy, and individualism. Unlike other attempts at constructing typologies of political culture, Douglas' categories are derived from underlying dimensions.

The variability of an individual's involvement in social life, Douglas argues, can be adequately captured by two dimensions of sociality: group and grid. The "group" dimension, explains Douglas, taps the extent to which "the individual's life is absorbed in and sustained by group membership." A low group "score" would be given to an individual who "spends the morning in one group, the evening in another, appears on Sundays in a third, gets his livelihood in a fourth" (1982: 202). In contrast, a person who joined with others in "common residence, shared work, shared resources and recreation" would be assigned a high group rating" (1982: 191). The further one moves along the group dimension, the tighter the control over admission into the group and the higher the boundaries separating members from nonmembers.

Although the term "grid," as used here, may be unfamiliar to social scientists, the concept it denotes is not. In

by strong group boundaries and binding prescriptions, the resulting social relations are hierarchical. Individuals in this social context are subject both to the control of other members in the group and the demands of socially imposed roles. In contrast to egalitarianism, which has few means short of expulsion for controlling its members, hierarchy "has an armoury of different solutions to internal conflicts, including upgrading, shifting sideways, downgrading, resegregating, redefining" (Douglas 1982: 206). The exercise of authority (and inequality more generally) is justified on the grounds that different roles for different people enable people to live together more harmoniously than alternative arrangements.

Individuals who are bound neither by group incorporation nor prescribed roles inhabit an individualistic social context. In such an environment all boundaries are provisional and subject to negotiation. Although the individualist is, by definition, relatively free from control by others, that does not mean he is not engaged in exerting control over others. On the contrary, the individualist's success is often measured by the size of the following he can command.

A person who finds himself subject to binding prescriptions and is excluded from group membership exemplifies the fatalistic way of life. The fatalist is controlled from without. Like the hierarchist, his sphere of individual autonomy is restricted. He may have little choice

values together, offers an explanation for why members of some social groups find certain ideas plausible, while adherents of other groups do not. Political cultures, from this Durkheimian perspective, not only transmit but also form categories of thought. Rather than simply showing that different people, faced with the same situation, desire different things and confer a different meaning upon the situation, Douglas asks the crucial question: given that different people in the same sort of situation want different things, why do they want the different things they want?

to discriminate between humans and animals, men and women, old and young.

The perils of stealing rhetoric are further evidenced by the experiences of the American Whig party. Repeated failures in national presidential elections led many hierarchical Whigs to adopt the anti-authority rhetoric of the more successful Jacksonian party. Aping Jacksonian rhetoric did help the Whigs become more electorally competitive, but at the same time capitulation to Democratic rhetoric and categories of thought meant that they subverted their own preferred way of life. Within a decade the Whig party disintegrated, and the hierarchical belief system it institutionalized receded from the American political scene. In winning the electoral battle the Whigs lost the cultural war (Ellis and Wildavsky 1989:116-20).

Look at stolen rhetoric in reverse. Were is possible for adherents of each way of life to steal at will the more successful rhetoric of the rival ways, we would have a great deal less variation than is apparent in the world today. Every individual or group would come to sound much like every other. Such a world would be not only homogeneous but unpredictable, for there would be little constraint in individual belief systems. Yet all of us know of people, whether we number them among our personal acquaintances or hear about them as public figures, whose actions and speech are so predictable that we can say what is on their mind and in their speech before they have an opportunity to reveal

differ not only on one or two issues but on a wide spectrum of issues knows that this is difficult to bear. Caught between rival ways of life, the would-be cultural traitor will feel pressured either to move back to whence he came or to become something quite different.

The other constraint on individuals stems from the interconnected character of belief systems. For an individualist to accept the proposition that the forest industry must be regulated is to make an exception to his preference for untrammeled self-regulation. If the exceptions multiply, however, the rule itself at some point begins to be thrown into question. To suggest, moreover, that the unfettered cutting of trees is bad is to acquiesce, even if unintentionally, in the egalitarian view that nature is essentially fragile and to call into question the individualist conception of nature as resilient. And if one comes to believe that the least little upset is suficient to lead Mother Nature to wreak vengeance on the human species, it becomes difficult to justify to oneself and to others the decentralized system of trial and error upon which the individualist life of self-regulation depends. The interdependence of beliefs thus makes it difficult to reject a part without unravelling the whole.

competing ways of life. Thus rather than join in a debate about what is "really" political, we prefer to show how different culturally biased definitions of the political support different ways of life.

Egalitarians desire to reduce the distinction between the political and nonpolitical. Defining the family or firm as nonpolitical or private, egalitarians believe, is a way of concealing and hence perpetuating unequal power relations. Egalitarians view the public sphere, in which all can actively participate and give their consent to collective decisions, as the realm in which the good life can best be realized.

Because individualists seek to substitute self-regulation for authority, its adherents are continually accusing others of politicizing issues. Their interest is in defining politics as narrowly as possible so as to maximize that behavior which is considered private, and thus beyond the reach of governmental regulation. Hence their reluctance to admit the egalitarian charge that private resources ~~influence~~ dominate public decision-making, for this admission would imply capitulation.

If egalitarians see the political sphere as that realm in which human beings most fully realize their potentialities, the fatalist regards the political with nothing but fear and dread. The more power is exercised, the more they expect to get it in the neck. Fatalists respond to their plight by trying to get as far out of harm's way as possible. Unlike the individualist, however, the fatalist does not discriminate

nonpolitical are socially constructed, then the study of political culture must assume a central place in the discipline.

A cultural approach does not try to deny the operation of self-interest as a motivation, but it does insist on asking how individuals come to believe where those interests lie.

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