Foreword

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On a quick count, five books, two American Political Science Association presidential addresses, two American Political Science Review leading articles, and two APSR “controversies,” all of them dealing with political culture themes, have appeared in the past several years. From a simple quantitative point of view, it is evident that political culture research and theorizing has had a “return,” or as Ronald Inglehart put it, a “renaissance.” And the movements that have most actively polemicized against political culture as an explanatory variable (Marxism of various kinds, and rational choice theory) now seem to have run out of steam, appear to be inclined to negotiate settlements, rather than requiring unconditional surrender.

To speak of a return to political culture implies that there was an earlier time when political culture studies were here at hand and prospering, that this was followed by a time in which this approach declined, and that these studies are once again prospering. I want to comment briefly on these three phases in the history of political culture studies.

In the first several decades of the present century a “culture and personality” school emerged out of a synthesis of psychoanalytic ideas and cultural anthropology. This school, which included such luminaries of the past generation as Harold Lasswell, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Erich Fromm, and many others, sought to explain recruitment to political roles, aggression and warfare, authoritarianism, ethnocentrism, fascism, and the like in terms of the socialization of children—infant nursing and toilet-training patterns, parental disciplinary patterns and family structure, and similar routines and patterns of early childhood.

This school was most influential during World War II, when studies were made of the “national character” of the nations embroiled in the war. But these efforts to account for the political organization and policy tendencies of major nations such as Germany, Japan, Russia, Britain, France, and the United States, by means of hypotheses drawn from observations of child-rearing patterns in the village and tribal community studies of the anthropol-
ologists, and the clinical insights of psychiatrists drawn from the treatment of individual patients proved unconvincing to the mainstream social science disciplines as they rapidly expanded and professionalized in the decades after the war.

In reaction against this psychological and anthropological reductionism, the study of political culture developed in the 1950–1970 period, adopting a more rigorous methodological posture, requiring statistical sampling of large populations and of subcultural groups, the sophisticated construction and analysis of interview schedules, content analysis of the media and other materials, and similar quantitative and scientific procedures. Dominating this period of rigorous political culture research were major investigations such as the University of Michigan American election studies (soon replicated in Europe and elsewhere), the Princeton-Stanford Civic Culture Five-Nation study, and the Harvard Becoming Modern study carried on in six developing countries. These major investigations stimulated many other smaller-scale, survey research studies, as well as secondary analyses of the growing collections of public opinion data. The older tradition of culture-personality research continued largely in the form of psychobiographical studies of political leaders.

The radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s challenged the legitimacy of the free and autonomous university, and particularly the objectivity of the social sciences, arguing that universities served as instruments for the exploitation of the working classes, ethnic minorities, and the Third World, and that the claim of objectivity was simply an ideology supporting and concealing this suppression and exploitation. The legitimacy of political culture research was specifically challenged on the grounds that political and social attitudes were reflections of class and/or ethnic status, or else were the “false consciousness” implanted by such institutions as schools, universities, and the media. If “so-called” political culture was simply capitalist ideology, there was no point in researching it, other than to expose it for what it was, and to bring to the surface the true socialist political culture that would lead to and sustain an equitable society and polity. This view received enough support within the university community, and particularly in the social sciences and Third World area studies, to bring into question the validity of research that attributed some autonomous explanatory power to political attitudes and values. And while studies of this kind continued, they were beleaguered and heavily challenged by the neo-Marxists and the “dependency” theorists.

At least as significant in the discrediting of political culture studies was the attack from the discipline of economics, the introduction into political studies of market and bargaining models. The movement began at the end of the 1950s with the publication of Anthony Downs’s Economic Theory of Democracy in 1957. This was followed by William Riker’s Theory of Political Coalitions, which appeared in 1962.
an abundance of “rational choice,” “public choice,” and “positive political theory” studies of voting behavior, the formation of cabinets, decisionmaking in committees, coalition and decisionmaking in war and diplomacy, and the like, which purported to prove that all these political phenomena could be explained by the simple assumption that voters, politicians, diplomats, and military leaders were rational, short-run-interest maximizers. The practitioners of the rational choice approach asserted that this assumption of short-run interest on the part of political actors came sufficiently close to reality to predict political behavior accurately. Consequently, the study of political culture was largely unnecessary and wasteful of resources, because one could get sufficient explanatory power simply by assuming self-interested short-run rationality. In other words, political culture was not problematic, it was a given. One simply had to plug “rational choice” into any political context, and it would generate the programs and platforms of politicians, the votes of electors and legislators, the decisions of diplomatic bargainers, and the like. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, this “public choice” school in political science became the cutting edge of the discipline, dominating the learned journals and the political science personnel market.

Thus, mainstream political science—both the subjective or the cultural side, and the behavioral or the institutional side—was whipsawed by these reductionisms of the left and the right. But these two movements have in turn been weakened and discredited in the past decade. Social Democratic Marxism was already being questioned in the late 1970s. The increasingly heavy tax, transfer, and regulatory policies of the welfare state were being widely recognized as contributory to inflationary tendencies and serious problems of productivity. The 1980s witnessed a movement to the right in the elections in the advanced democratic nations and a conservative trend in fiscal and regulatory policy, a tendency still in full swing.

The Leninist variety of Marxism began to lose its legitimacy in the 1980s as its failure to bring about a “good society” became increasingly obvious. The incredible then happened: first the collapse of Eastern European communism, and by the mid-1980s the collapse of Marxism-Leninism in the Soviet Union itself. Marxist theorists now began to acknowledge the reality of pluralism, and the autonomy of governmental institutions, recognizing that politics is not simply the reflection of economic structures and process, and that attitudes and values are of importance in the functioning and transformation of economic and governmental institutions.

Similarly, in the 1980s and early 1990s the public choice theorists began to retreat from their intellectually expansive agenda, seeking to escape from the reductionist microrational quandary into which they had dug themselves. This retreat takes the form of a search for “institutions,” a recognition that the rational self-interest models must be set in a context of laws, rules, ideas, beliefs, and values in order to contribute to explanation. Thus the ground has been reopened to a scholarship aspiring to objectiv-
ity, methodologically eclectic and ecumenical. Several varieties of “political culture” studies that had been forced underground or marginalized are now back in operation. Though none of them had completely gone out of business, rigorous survey research, historical and descriptive studies, and important theoretical work on political culture are now generally acknowledged to be making contributions to our understanding of economic growth and democratization. These processes are now understood as having significant psychological dimensions for the understanding of which these various methodologies are essential. This volume is an important step in this “return of political culture.”

Notes


