

10-1-2011

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Original Citation

Swedlow, Brendon. "Editor's Introduction: Cultural Theory's Contributions to Political Science," *PS: Political Science & Politics*, [in symposium on A Cultural Theory of Politics], Vol. 44, Issue 4 (October 2011) pp 703-710.

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PS: Political Science & Politics / Volume 44 / Issue 04 / October 2011, pp 703 - 710

DOI: 10.1017/S1049096511001314, Published online: 18 October 2011

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S1049096511001314

How to cite this article:

Brendon Swedlow (2011). A Cultural Theory of Politics. PS: Political Science & Politics, 44, pp 703-710 doi:10.1017/S1049096511001314

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A Cultural Theory of Politics

Editor's Introduction: Cultural Theory's Contributions to Political Science

Brendon Swedlow, *Northern Illinois University*

Many political scientists first learned of anthropologist Mary Douglas's cultural theory (CT) through Aaron Wildavsky's APSA presidential address (Wildavsky 1987), in which he sought to explain the value of this theoretical approach for political science.¹ Since then, much additional work has been done to develop CT as an ambitious general theory of politics.

This symposium showcases CT's current explanatory power and discipline-wide reach with contributions that provide answers to questions of great interest to political scientists specialized in American politics, comparative politics, international relations, political theory, public law, and public policy. Additional CT contributions to these subfields, as well as to public administration, are surveyed in the text that follows.

At the outset, it is important to note that unlike many other cultural theories, CT is highly complementary to rational choice (RC) and institutional theories of politics and in fact will allow these theories to make significant advances. Unlike most other cultural theories, CT also includes a theory of political change. These distinguishing characteristics of CT are discussed briefly here.

ADVANCING RATIONAL CHOICE AND INSTITUTIONAL THEORIES OF POLITICS

"Thin" versions of RC theory assume that individuals are rational utility maximizers. This assumption of rationality is reasonable across a variety of cultural settings, but without a theory of culture thin versions of RC theory cannot predict which utilities an individual will attempt to maximize.

"Thick" versions of RC theory try to solve this problem by additionally assuming that the utility individuals seek to max-

imize is their own well being, frequently defined largely in material terms. CT reveals these thick RC assumptions about individual utility to be ones associated with an individualistic political culture. These assumptions are reasonable in such cultures and help predict which utilities individuals will seek to maximize in them. As CT-based and other analyses demonstrate (see Chai et al. 2011, this issue), however, these thick RC assumptions are not reasonable in more collectivist cultures, such as hierarchical or egalitarian cultures, or in cultures that are neither individualistic nor collectivist, but rather fatalistic.²

Thus, CT simultaneously pluralizes and bounds rationality. CT pluralizes rationality because it recognizes that there can be more than one objective that is culturally rational to maximize. CT bounds rationality because it posits that there are only a limited number of objectives that are culturally rational to maximize. In RC terms, CT specifies multiple equilibria—that is, multiple solutions to the universal human challenge of living together—but does not allow an infinite number of such solutions. Each of the four cultural types specifies who gets to do what to and with whom under what circumstances, and thus specifies the kinds of behavior that have high utility and the kinds of behavior that have low utility in particular cultural settings. CT consequently achieves the explanatory breadth of thin versions of RC theory while retaining the explanatory depth of thick versions of RC theory (for related discussion, see Chai 1997; Lockhart 1999; Lockhart and Coughlin 1992, 1998; Swedlow 2002b, 2006; Wildavsky 1991b, 1994a).

The concrete advantages of adopting CT's pluralized and bounded conception of rationality are suggested by CT analyses of RC and political economy concepts such as self-interest, altruism, externalities, public goods, and the prisoner's dilemma (Fogerty, Jeanrenaud, and Wildavsky 1998; Lockhart and Wildavsky 1998; Malkin and Wildavsky 1991; Wildavsky 1991b, 1992, 1994a) and by CT studies of the RC politics of violence, voting, public goods, bargaining, and trust (Chai and Wildavsky 1994, 1998; Chai et al. 2011, this issue).

In CT, culture and institutions are not seen as competing concepts or mutually exclusive explanations (Chai 1997; Grendstad and Selle 1995; Lockhart 1999). Rather, institutions are seen as manifestations of social and political relations or orders, which are one aspect of political culture. The other aspect is cultural bias, or political values and beliefs about human nature, the environment, and economics, among other things. Cultural bias is similar to ideology in some respects but not in others (Gastil et al. 2011, this issue;

Michaud, Carlisle, and Smith 2009; Song et al. 2011; Swedlow 2002b, 2008; Swedlow and Wyckoff 2009). Thus, cultural theorists do not distinguish culture from institutions but rather distinguish cultural bias from institutions, while also hypothesizing that cultural biases and institutions come in distinct packages of values, beliefs, and relations called political cultures.

CT contributes significantly to institutional accounts of politics by specifying the types of institutions that can exist (Grendstad and Selle 1995; Hendriks 1999; Lockhart 1999; Swedlow 2011b, this issue) as well as some conditions that can lead to institutional change (Coyle and Wildavsky 1987; Lockhart 1997, 1999; Swedlow 2011a, b, this issue; Wildavsky 1985). Relations are structured differently in hierarchical, egalitarian, individualistic, and fatalistic institutions. Both hierarchical and egalitarian institutions have strong external group boundaries. But hierarchical collectives are also strongly demarcated internally, usually from top to bottom, whereas egalitarian institutions typically strive to avoid internal differentiation, especially hierarchical stratification. Individualistic and fatalistic institutions, meanwhile, do not rely on organizational boundaries. Individualistic institutions, such as free markets and protections of civil liberties, however, emphasize strong boundaries around individuals. This empha-

predictable forms for each culture (see figure 4 in Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990, 71, for a typology), they can specify the causes of “punctuated equilibria” in policy, scientific, and cultural change, as I argue in my contribution to this symposium and elsewhere (Swedlow 2001, 2002a, b, 2006, 2011a, b). CT and its theory of change can thus explain not only cultural changes, but generally many kinds of political change and development (Chai and Wildavsky 1998; Coyle and Wildavsky 1987; Ellis 1998; Ellis and Wildavsky 1990; Hammer 1994; Lockhart 1997, 1999, 2001a; Malecha 1994; Wildavsky 1985, 1991c, 2001, 2006).

CONTRIBUTING TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUBFIELD EXPLANATIONS AND UNDERSTANDINGS

American Politics and Political Development

CT goes beyond the liberal-conservative continuum in American politics to specify ideological and institutional sources of conflict and coalition in two dimensions of social and political relations, and consequently CT provides a more accurate basis for characterizing ideological and institutional sources of partisanship. Among other things, this two-dimensional conception of ideology creates a place for libertarians or individualists and allows analysts to understand statist and religious and social conservatives as sometimes allied, sometimes

Unlike many other cultural theories, this cultural approach not only explains change but theorizes that change can come from within a culture as well as from outside it.

sis on strong individual boundaries may manifest as conceptualizing individuals as rights-bearing entities who can defend freedom of choice and their property and bodily integrity. Individuals in fatalistic institutions can defend neither collective boundaries nor personal ones; their choices are made by others and their lives are subject to forces beyond their control.

EXPLAINING POLITICAL CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT

Unlike many other cultural theories, this cultural approach not only explains change but theorizes that change can come from within a culture as well as from outside it. CT allows experience with culture and adult socialization processes to cause cultural change, both for individuals and for institutions (Lockhart 1997; Schwarz and Thompson 1990; Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990, 69–81; Wildavsky 1985). CT’s primary theory of change is based on the idea that cultures themselves are theories about the way the world works. Cultures constitute promises and predictions that are tested in a practical way by everyday experience (Lockhart 1997; Wildavsky 1985). To the extent adherents follow cultural prescriptions and are not properly rewarded, or do not follow cultural prescriptions and are not properly punished, they may come to question their cultural commitments.

Events and behavior that are anomalous from one cultural perspective, and/or better explained or understood from another, can be catalysts of cultural change for both individuals and institutions. Because these “cultural surprises” take

conflicting types of hierarchs (Chai and Wildavsky 1998; Gastil et al. 2011, this issue; Jones 2011, this issue; Michaud, Carlisle, and Smith 2009; Ripberger, Jenkins-Smith, and Herron 2011, this issue; Song et al. 2011; Swedlow 2006, 2008; Swedlow and Wyckoff 2009; Wildavsky 2006).

Since CT was first introduced to US political science by Wildavsky, and he specialized in studying American politics, most of the applications of the theory in this area reflect his interests and those of his students and collaborators. The theory helped Wildavsky make new contributions to topics on which he was an expert, such as the politics of the budgetary process (1986a, 2001), the American presidency (Ellis and Wildavsky 1989, 1991; Wildavsky 1991a, 1993a), and federalism (1998a), as well as allowed him to delve into areas that were new to both him and the theory, both inside American politics and beyond it (as discussed below). Wildavsky and his students and collaborators conducted CT analyses of American political development on topics as varied as the development of town and church in Puritan New England (Hammer 1994), the role of abolitionists in the coming of the civil war (Ellis and Wildavsky 1990), the cultural foundations of populism (Malecha 1994), the rise of radical egalitarianism (Ellis 1998; Wildavsky 1991c, 2006), the dilemmas of presidential leadership (Ellis and Wildavsky 1989, 1991), and cultural influences on the ideology, partisanship, and voting behavior of political activists and the public (Chai and Wildavsky 1998; Wildavsky 1991c, 2006; see also Ellis and Thompson 1997;

Gastil et al. 2011, this issue; Jones 2011, this issue; Ripberger, Jenkins-Smith, and Herron 2011, this issue; Swedlow 2008; Swedlow and Wyckoff 2009). Charles Lockhart provides a nice overview of CT explanations of American political development with linkage to RC theory (2001a).

Comparative Politics

CT is ideally suited for comparative political studies because its theoretical dimensions and the cultural types they generate—along with the values, beliefs, and relations that constitute these cultural types—create a framework for structured, focused comparison. This framework is pitched at a sufficiently abstract level to travel through time and space while being concrete enough to prevent undetectable conceptual stretching (as further discussed in Swedlow 2001, 2006). CT analyses have been used to compare supranational organizations, nation states, and sub-national political units, including nongovernmental organizations and civil society social structures, including the family, as well as individuals. Cross-national or cross-state comparative political research using CT includes studies of budgeting (Wildavsky 1986a, 2001), environmental and financial regulation (Carriere and Scruggs 2001; Lodge and Wegrich 2011, this issue; Verweij 2000), political culture and ideology (Grendstad 1999, 2003), and democratic institutions (Lockhart 2011, this issue). There are also a range of comparative policy studies—on mental health (Swedlow 1994), language (Mamadouh 2002), aging (Lockhart 2001b; Ney 2010), transportation (Hendriks 1999; Hoppe and Grin 2000; Ney 2010), technology (Hoppe and Grin 2000), economics (Intriligator, Wedel, and Lee 2006), and foreign and domestic policy (Grendstad 2001). In addition to studies of American politics, CT also has been applied to numerous area studies topics in many other countries in the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Australia (see bibliography in Wildavsky 2006).

International Relations

CT is also ideally suited for studying international relations because key components of political cultures as they are conceived in CT are social and political relations. Moreover, the social and political relations of the four ways of life specified by CT are simultaneously specifications of four ways of making decisions, constituting authority, and exercising power. These are core concepts and concerns shared by those who study and engage in politics in general and international politics in particular. Marco Verweij uses CT to analyze the cultural biases of realist, neo-realist, social constructivist, and other theories of international relations (1995, 1999b, 2011). He also suggests how various problems in international relations might be solved by constructing culturally “clumsy” institutions that draw on the wisdom of all the cultural biases (1995, 1999a, 2011; Verweij and Thompson 2006). A variety of other applications are being developed. Veronica Ward (1998) proposes an integrated theory of state and non-state actors. Sun-Ki Chai and his collaborators are pioneering the use of CT to analyze and anticipate the outbreak of political violence around the world (for some foundational analysis, see Chai and Wildavsky 1994 and Herron and Jenkins-Smith 2006). And Hank

Jenkins-Smith and his collaborators analyze the cultural bases for shifting national security coalitions in US public opinion regarding terrorist threats and nuclear weapons (Ripberger, Jenkins-Smith, and Herron 2011, this issue).

Political Theory

In striving for a general theory of politics, CT builds on similar efforts reflected in the history of political theory, extending through more recent social and political theory, including contemporary efforts being made by RC, institutional, biopolitical, and other theorists. Accordingly, CT should attract the attention of political theorists whose stock-in-trade is to analyze a theory's elements, structure, assumptions, premises, inconsistencies, antecedents, proponents, and influences, and compare the theory to others of its kind. Indeed, cultural theorists themselves have compared CT to the theories of Baron de Montesquieu, Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Bronislaw Malinowski, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, and Talcott Parsons (Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990). Contemporary social and political theorists whose work cultural theorists have critically examined and compared to their cultural approach include Gabriel Almond, Edward Banfield, Daniel Elazar, Jon Elster, Ronald Inglehart, Lucian Pye, Robert Merton, Arthur Stinchcombe, and Sidney Verba (Carriere and Scruggs 2001; Grendstad and Selle 1997, 1999; Lockhart 2011, this issue; Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990; Wildavsky 1991b).

Cultural theorists have also used their theory to analyze the cultural biases and coherence of the theories of classical liberal political theorists, such as Thomas Hobbes (Enzell and Wildavsky 1998) and John Stuart Mill (Lockhart 2000; Lockhart and Wildavsky 1993); to help construct democratic political theory (Hendriks 2010; Lockhart 2011, this issue; Verweij and Thompson 2006; Wildavsky 1993b, 1994b); and to analyze the shortcomings of various contemporary works of normative political philosophy (Wildavsky 1989), as well as to assess the normative implications of CT (Lockhart and Franzwa 1994).

Public Administration

CT is fundamentally an organizational theory—or, more dynamically, a theory of organizing and disorganizing (Thompson 2008)—and consequently should be of significant interest to scholars of public administration and organizations. Among other things, CT can help these scholars specify and study organizational types that are significantly different from the hierarchical organizations with which they are most familiar while also allowing them to identify important hierarchical continuities among traditional, feudal, patronage based organizations and modern Weberian bureaucracies. CT can also help these scholars understand New Public Management as an effort to make hierarchical government agencies operate on individualistic market principles and Collaborative Management as an effort to transform these bureaucracies in an egalitarian direction (see also Swedlow 2002a, 2011a, b, this issue). The most comprehensive attempt to articulate what CT can contribute to studying organizations can be found in Christopher Hood's work (1998). Some of

Wildavsky's efforts in this area can be found in his studies of budgeting (1986a, 2001), and in several essays on problems, leadership, information bias, and responsibility in organizations (2006). A number of other organizational theory and public administration scholars have contributed significant insights and analyses as well (e.g., Coyle, 1997, 2006; Grendstad and Selle 1995; Hendriks 1999; Maesschalck 2004).

Public Law

To the extent that CT captures basic sources of social and political conflict and coalition, public law may be frequently expected to record the victories, defeats, and compromises of these cultural struggles. At any historical moment, of course, cultural battles occur on a legal terrain that is shaped by the victors and treaties of previous cultural wars, so that the legal manifestations of these cultural legacies differentially advantage current cultural combatants. Wildavsky's applications of CT to public law topics are collected in Wildavsky 2006, to which Robert Kagan has written a foreword articulating the general value this approach holds for public law scholars (Kagan 2006a). Legal scholars have found CT helpful in explaining why US legal institutions and practice in the United States are more adversarial than those in Europe and Japan (Kagan 2001); relationships among criminal behavior, law, and penal approaches in the United States and Europe (Giles-Sims and Lockhart 2005; Mars 1982, 2000; Mars and Weir 2000, 2001a, b; Sparks 2001; Vaughan 2002a, b, 2004); types of administrative justice (Halliday and Scott 2009); adjudication of legally relevant facts in the United States (Kahan 2010; Kahan et al. N.d; Kahan, Hoffman, and Braman 2009); development of US tort law (Kagan 2006b; Polisar and Wildavsky 1989); land use decisions made by US courts (Coyle 1993; Swedlow 2002a, 2009, 2011a, b, this issue); and environmental, health, safety, and financial regulation in the United States and Europe (Coyle 1994; Lodge and Wegrich 2011, this issue; Lodge, Wegrich, and McElroy 2010; Swedlow et al. 2009; Verweij 2000).

Public Policy

CT specifies the kinds of policy processes that different political actors consider to be most legitimate and the political values and beliefs that these actors seek to transform into public policy. In other words, CT specifies the contents of four means-ends pairings that should be at the heart of political conflict and coalition over public policy. As the founding Dean of the University of California, Berkeley, School of Public Policy, Wildavsky turned to CT because it promised to help him analyze public policy (Swedlow 2002b, 2006). Policy scholars have articulated the general value of this cultural approach for policy analysis (Geva-May 2002; Hoppe 2002a, b; Kahan and Braman 2006; Klitgaard 1997; Swedlow 2002b) and have also used CT to understand, explain, and predict policies regarding industry and economic development (Intriligator, Wedel, and Lee 2006; Wildavsky 1986b), technology (Hoppe and Grin 2000; Kahan et al. 2009), transportation (Hendriks 1999; Hoppe and Grin 2000; Ney 2010), language (Mamadouh 2002), abortion (Stenvoll 2002), aging (Lockhart 2001b; Ney 2010), mental illness (Kahan et al. 2010; Swedlow 1994), land use (Coyle 1993, 1994; Swedlow 2009, 2011a, b, this issue), water

and flood control (Gyawali 2006; Lach, Ingram, and Rayner 2006; Linnerooth-Bayer, Vari, and Thompson 2011), climate change (Jones 2011, this issue; Rayner and Malone 1998; Verweij 2006), firearms (Kahan, Braman, and Gastil 2006), and myriad other environmental, health, and safety risks (Jenkins-Smith and Smith 1994; Kahan et al. 2010; Ney 2010; Peters and Slovic 1996; Schwarz and Thompson 1990; Swedlow et al. 2009; Wildavsky and Dake 1990). Policy scholars interested in the implications CT and symposium contributions have for policy theory and public policy should look for related forthcoming articles by symposium authors in the *Policy Studies Journal*.

CONCLUSION AND INVITATION

We hope that you enjoy reading symposium contributions and that they spark your interest in learning more about CT and how it might help advance the study of topics in which you are interested. If you would like to see further work by symposium authors on symposium topics, the *Policy Studies Journal*, as indicated, will be featuring a number of related pieces with roughly twice the data and analysis found here. We welcome comments on symposium contributions that will help us develop these analyses.

Symposium contributions and the studies surveyed in this introduction represent only a fraction of CT applications in political science. More disciplinary contributions can be found in the bibliography included in the most recent volume of Wildavsky's collected papers (2006). Among other things, the bibliography includes many applications to traditional cultural studies topics that have not been much referenced or discussed here. CT has been applied to study the role high culture, popular culture, and many other kinds of culture—and many other kinds of civil society and nongovernmental organizations—play in politics. Indeed, significant evidence for CT's explanatory power and reach as a political theory is found in CT analyses of literature, language, art, music, film, food, sport, family, sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, identity, religion, science, and many other topics.

As the contributions to this symposium and the foregoing survey of theoretical and subfield contributions indicate, much work has been done since Wildavsky's 1987 APSA address to develop CT as a general theory of politics. But much more remains to be done (see, e.g., Swedlow 2001, 2002b, 2006, 2011a; Swedlow et al. 2009; Verweij et al. 2011, this issue, for discussion of some directions for further research). This symposium represents an open invitation to all political scientists to invest in further developing CT. This effort promises to pay significant dividends in developing a general theory of politics while advancing the study of subfield topics. This undertaking will require the time, talent, and energy of scholars from every part of the discipline. Political science's other general theories of politics, such as RC, institutional, and bio-political accounts, should be rigorously compared to CT, and efforts to integrate complementary aspects of these theories need to be made while jettisoning weaker elements of each. Seemingly competing theories and concepts often explain different aspects of what a fuller theory would encompass. Consequently, seemingly competing theories frequently

can be synthesized to specify unspecified aspects of each other's accounts of politics.

Attentive readers of CT applications will notice differences in the way CT is theorized, conceptualized, and operationalized. This variation creates challenges for those who are interested in understanding, applying, and assessing CT. These variants also suggest the maturity of CT, because, as political theorists know, it is typical for general theories like CT to develop differing interpretations over time. Moreover, as the contributions to this symposium demonstrate, CT is robust against these differences, with significant findings being produced regardless of the variant being used. This suggests that CT is actually tapping and explaining important political variation. Nevertheless, efforts to compare and reconcile other general political theories with CT should be extended to comparing and reconciling variants of CT. So, if you want to try applying CT, I would suggest you choose a variant that makes sense for the topics on which you work, apply it, and then, having applied it, see if you like the results. If you do, then you are welcome to see what you can contribute to reconciling differences among variants. ■

NOTES

I thank Hank Jenkins-Smith, Michael Jones, Charles Lockhart, Martin Lodge, Chandra Hunter Swedlow, and Marco Verweij for valuable comments in the preparation, and Anthony Clarke for research assistance.

1. Douglas named the theory grid-group theory after its two dimensions of social relations, grid and group.
2. These four cultural types are generated from two dimensions of social relations in CT, as discussed further in the contributions to this symposium and can be viewed in figure 1 of my contribution (Swedlow 2011b, this issue). For a theorization, conceptualization, and operationalization of CT that differs significantly from other symposium contributors, see Gastil et al. 2011, this issue. Their dimensions generate cultural types that are hybrids of individualistic, hierarchical, and egalitarian political cultures, while dispensing with the fatalistic political culture.

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