

Comparative Politics

RATIONALITY, CULTURE,
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Culture in Comparative Political Analysis

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter argues that culture is important to the study of politics because it provides a framework for organizing people's daily worlds, locating the self and others in them, making sense of the actions and interpreting the motives of others, for grounding an analysis of interests, for linking identities to political action, and for predisposing people and groups toward some actions and away from others. Culture does these things by organizing meanings and meaning-making, defining social and political identity, structuring collective actions, and imposing a normative order on politics and social life.

To examine how culture operates, we must approach it through the formal and informal verbal and nonverbal narratives about the social and political worlds that people who are part of a culture share. However, before I discuss culture as a useful, and underused, perspective in comparative politics, three caveats are in order. First, to be useful, culture cannot be defined so broadly as to include all behaviors, values, and institutions lest it lose any distinctiveness and explanatory power. Second, cultures are not formal units with delimited clear borders and membership cards; nor are they fully integrated internally or always internally consistent. Rather, their boundaries, integration, and consistency are regularly subject to contestation. Third, the effects of culture on collective action and political life are generally indirect, and to fully appreciate the role of culture in political life, it is necessary to inquire how culture interacts with, shapes, and is shaped by interests and institutions.¹

It should not be surprising that cultural analyses in comparative politics take many forms, for unlike rational choice theory or institutionalism, cultural approaches are less clear about the domains of politics that are most important to study and the kinds of explanations to offer. There is even less consensus concerning the methods and tools to employ. Lichbach (this volume) distinguishes between subjective and intersubjective views of culture: The subjective

¹ Berman (2001: 241–244) appropriately notes that we should not assume that culture necessarily affects political life, but rather that we need to examine if, when, and how it does.

emphasizes how individuals internalize individual values and attitudes that become the object of study, while the intersubjective focuses on the shared meanings and identities that constitute the symbolic, expressive, and interpretive part of social life (Green 2002a: 9; Klotz and Lynch 2007: 7–9). I argue here for the merits of a postmodern intersubjective understanding of culture (with attention to subjective elements) and against the value of viewing culture as one or more distinctive traits or values that are decomposable into individual-level measurable traits or values. This strong view of culture is completely compatible with the belief that comparison is central to the social science enterprise while not denying its complexities. In making this argument, an important task is to situate recent works in the field in terms of crucial questions that cultural approaches to politics address. However, this chapter is not a review, and there are many additional studies that would be included if reviewing the field were my goal. Rather, it offers an opportunity for me to articulate and elaborate on what an intersubjective cultural approach can contribute to comparative politics. At the outset, it is worth noting that in 1997 I argued that cultural contributions to comparative politics were relatively rare and far less developed than rational choice or institutional approaches. This is not as true today, as scholars in the field and graduate students now take culture more seriously than was the case earlier, although I remain concerned that this is too often done superficially.

Rather than repeat many of the points from the earlier chapter (Ross 1997), I emphasize developments in the field since then and develop more fully parts of the earlier argument that I either had not touched upon or treated briefly, including the central role of narratives in cultural analyses; the power of cultural expressions and enactments in identity-based conflicts; and points of convergence and differences between cultural, rational choice, and institutional frameworks.

Culture is not a concept with which most political scientists are comfortable (Norton 2004). For many, culture complicates issues of evidence, transforming hopes of rigorous analysis into “just-so” accounts that fail to meet widely held notions of scientific explanation (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994: 109–110). Culture violates canons of methodological individualism while raising serious unit-of-analysis problems for which there are no easy answers. To many, neo-Marxists and non-Marxists alike, culture seems like an epiphenomenon offering a discourse for political mobilization and demand-making while masking more serious differences dividing groups and individuals. In addition, cultural analyses raise questions about the mechanisms by which culture shapes politics and challenge widespread assumptions about the causal importance of interests and structures. Each of these potential issues is addressed in this chapter, and while I am not arguing that they are unimportant, I do not view them as sufficiently problematic to warrant throwing the baby out with the bath water. At the same time, I want to be clear at the outset that my argument that culture can illuminate micro- and macro-level political dynamics and provide explanatory mechanisms not revealed by either rationality or institutionalism does not mean that culture always matters or that it

necessarily matters more than other factors. If, and how, culture matters is often a function of context and structure (Posner 2004).² Saying that culture matters is not to say that cultural differences matter; rather, it is to recognize that people sometimes mobilize around differences large and small, but this does not mean they are the source of conflict. For one thing, within-culture conflicts are often the most bitter of all, and there are innumerable cases in which culturally different groups live together peacefully for long periods (Horowitz 1985: 113–124). Instead of thinking that cultures and cultural differences cause conflict (Eller 1999; Posner 2004), we should see cultures as the lenses through which the causes of conflict and mobilization are refracted (Avruch and Black 1993: 133–134).

Cultural analyses of politics challenge the field's preference for methodological individualism and take seriously the postmodern critique of behavioral political analyses, offering the potential for contextually rich intersubjective accounts of politics that emphasize how people understand social and political action (Merelman 1991). In cultural analyses, for example, interests are contextually and intersubjectively defined and the strategies used to pursue them are viewed as context dependent. Narratives – stories, if one prefers – that individuals and groups recount to make sense of their social and political worlds are grounded in the interpretations held by people and groups, their motivations, and events they experienced, and are central to cultural analysis.³

Here I use shared narratives and interpretations – worldviews – mainly to refer to the intersubjective meanings of actors, but they also are ways that social science observers communicate their understanding of events to others (Green 2002: 6; Klotz and Lynch 2007: 12–13; Taylor 1985). Narratives and interpretations both serve as mechanisms linking thought and action and are important methodological tools.⁴ In addition, culturalists pay attention to ritual and symbolic cultural expressions and enactments in everyday life, special occasions and extraordinary moments in studying connections between systems of meaning, the structure and intensity of political identity, and political action.

This chapter has four parts. The first discusses the concept of culture as shared meaning and meaning-making and identifies five contributions analyses of culture have made to comparative political analysis: (1) framing the context in which politics occurs; (2) linking individual and collective identities; (3) defining

² Harrison and Huntington (2000) edited a collection of essays called *Culture Matters*, in which a number of the authors employ a weak trait-based definition of culture and then some provocatively assert that “culture makes almost all the difference.” Many of the analyses emphasize bivariate correlations, often at the country level, and communicate too little about the mechanisms underlying cultural effects or the within-country variation on the variables analyzed, such as specific values and wealth. What I aim to do here is to avoid this sort of “my variable matters more than your variable” claim, and to suggest that it is more productive to think about *when* and *how* culture matters and how culture interacts with structural and strategic variables to help us answer important questions in comparative politics.

³ Sometimes interpretations are best viewed as building blocks for narratives; however, at other times, deeply held narratives give rise to interpretations.

⁴ In this chapter, I refer to both narratives and scripts. In my usage, narratives are the larger accounts and scripts are more specific action-oriented elements found in them.

boundaries between groups and organizing actions within and between them; (4) offering a framework for interpreting the actions and motives of others; and (5) providing resources for political organization and motivation. The second part explains the importance of narratives and interpretations as a way to link the contextually rich details found in particular political settings (be they small communities or countries) to the comparative study of collective behavior such as ethnic and national conflict. The third part considers five critiques of cultural studies of politics: (1) unit-of-analysis issues; (2) the problem of within-culture variation; (3) the difficulty of distinguishing culture from social or political organization; (4) the static nature of culture and its inability to explain political change; and (5) the need to identify underlying mechanisms that suggest “how culture works.” Fourth, the conclusion explores some compatibilities and incompatibilities between cultural analyses and rational choice and institutionalist approaches and concludes that culture is too often ignored as a domain of political life that can enrich how we conceptualize areas such as political economy, social movements, and political institutions in a number of useful ways, often complementing the insights derived from other approaches.

CULTURE AND CULTURAL ANALYSES OF POLITICS

Culture, a central concept in anthropology, has been defined in a wide variety of ways that variously emphasize culture as social organization, core values, specific beliefs, social action, or a way of life (Kroeber and Kluckholm 1952). Most contemporary analyses, however, begin, as I do here, with Geertz’s definition of culture as “an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life” (1973c: 89).⁵ This view emphasizes culture as “webs of significance” that are public, shared meanings, not a collection of discrete traits whose integration is presumed; behaviors, institutions, and social structure are understood not as culture itself, but as culturally constituted phenomena (Spiro 1984). Aronoff writes that “Traditional approaches define political culture in terms of attitudes and values, whereas more contemporary approaches view culture in terms of scenarios and discourses” (2001: 11643).⁶

Culture, from this perspective, is a worldview containing specific scripts that shape why and how individuals and groups behave as they do, and includes both cognitive and affective beliefs about social reality and assumptions about when, where, and how people in one’s culture and those in other cultures are likely to act in particular ways (Berger 1995; Chabal and Daloz 2006; Schweder and

⁵ D’Andrade (1984: 88) points out the radical shift from the view of culture as behavior that could be understood within a stimulus-response framework to culture as systems of meaning, as found in a number of fields. For a more complete discussion of culture as meanings and symbols, see the excellent discussions in Schweder and LeVine (1984).

⁶ For additional critique of the trait based approach see the chapters by Barth (1999) and Urban (1999) in Bowen and Petersen (1999).

LeVine 1984). For purposes of political analysis, I want to emphasize that shared understandings are found among people who have a common (and almost invariably named) identity that distinguishes them from outsiders. Culture, in short, marks what people experience as a distinctive way of life characterized in the subjective we-feelings of cultural group members (and outsiders) and expressed through specific behaviors (customs and rituals) – both sacred and profane – that mark the daily, yearly, and life cycle rhythms of its members (Berger 1995). Cultural symbols, metaphors, and narratives have cognitive meanings that describe group experiences, high affective salience that emphasizes unique intragroup bonds that set one group's experience apart from that of others, and scripts that direct action. People draw upon them to explain the past, interpret the present, and evaluate future action.

It is important to note that even when different individuals understand each other and share a common identity, this does not signify that widely held meanings are necessarily acceptable to all, that all who define their shared identity behave in the same way, or that all hold it equally intensely. Rather, there are often intense intracultural differences and conflict over these matters so that meaning and identity, control over symbols and rituals, and the ability to impose one interpretation rather than another on a situation are frequently bitterly contested (Norton 2004; Ross 2007; Scott 1985). In this same vein, Laitin contends that culture highlights points of concern to be debated (1988: 589) and not just areas of agreement. Participating in the same culture or sharing a cultural identity does not mean that people need to be, or necessarily are, in agreement on specifics, only that they possess a similar understanding of how the world works (Aronoff 2001: 11640).

Some scholars, such as Wedeen (2002), argue that Geertz overemphasizes the integration of culture and fails to consider ways that it is both contested and never fully bounded (also see Fearon and Laitin 2000; Norton 2004). She contends, therefore, that culture should be approached as semiotic practices of meaning-making that emphasize what language and symbols do but also the effects of institutional arrangements, structures of domination, and strategic interests (Wedeen 2002: 714; also see Chabal and Daloz 2006). It “designates a way of looking at the world that requires an account of how symbols operate in practice, why meanings generate action, and why actions produce meanings when they do” (2002: 720). Wedeen argues that emphasizing the meaning-making practices helps to better understand the politics and consequences for how particular meanings become authoritative and identity construction.⁷ Others, such as Aronoff (2001), Bourdieu (1977), Foucault (1979), Norton (2004), and Swidler (1986), also emphasize culture as practice, referring to both

⁷ While there is much that is useful in Wedeen's emphasis on a semiotic approach to culture, as well as her critique of most political culture research and Huntington's (1993) clash-of-civilizations argument, I find her critique of Geertz too strong in places, particularly in faulting his influence for the weakness in earlier political science uses of culture – especially those that appeared more than a decade prior to Geertz's (1973a, 1973c) most influential work on culture.

meaning-making and political relationships that privilege certain actions and groups over others. Ortner (1997) adds that not only are cultures not fully integrated and bounded groups despite the fact that common language usage essentializes culture, but furthermore, in the contemporary globalized world, people sharing a cultural identity and its practices can be highly dispersed and diverse in ways that earlier trait-based or physically bounded conceptions of culture did not consider.

Placing the concept of culture at the center of analysis affects the questions asked about political life (Brysk 1995; Merelman 1991; Wedeen 2002). For example, an interest in distinctive worldviews and identity leads to questions about how differences in worldviews might explain such phenomena as the emergence of particular leaders, their exercise of power and authority, the organization of political decision making, social movement mobilization, or the perception of external threats. At the same time, an interest in culture discourages inquiry into the role of rational self-interest in political choice-making when such questions presume that interest maximization is more or less invariant across cultures and does not need a theory of cultural variation to explain what is viewed as constant (Wildavsky 1987).

Culture contributes to the study of comparative politics in at least five distinct ways. I present these more briefly than in the earlier chapter (Ross 1997), identifying each briefly to help a reader to understand the approach to culture and politics I develop later and how it differs from most studies associated with the term “political culture.” This work is often associated with Almond and Verba’s *The Civic Culture* (1963) and many later studies in the same mold (e.g., Inglehart 1988; Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978). Utilizing data collected from large national samples, the authors sought to explain democratic effectiveness and participation as a function of differences in political culture defined as the particular distribution of patterns of orientation toward political objects that citizens express toward the political system. The civil culture data are more or less consistent with the authors’ theory. However there are important unanswered questions that remain from this and other studies using individual-level survey data to discuss state-level political patterns that arise from the subjective, but not intersubjective, nature of survey data, such as the ways opinions are aggregated to produce collective action and the lack of identification of mechanisms to explain the cross-level linkage (Berman 2001: 241). While survey data could certainly be employed to help us understand meaning and meaning-making, the work in this area rarely does this.

Culture frames the context in which politics occurs. Culture orders political priorities (Laitin 1986: 11), meaning that it defines the symbolic and material objects people consider valuable and worth fighting over, the contexts in which such disputes occur, the rules (both formal and informal) by which politics takes place, and who participates in it. In doing so, culture defines interests and how they are to be pursued. Cultural understandings are at the core of the definition of political communities since people in a community share, in Geertz’s (1973c) words, “schematic images of the social order.” Authority in any political

community is culturally constituted, and its establishment and maintenance are often explained in cognitive and cost-benefit terms as well as in terms of threats of coercion, but it also involves ritual activity that connects people's everyday experience and anxiety to those of the collectivity (Edelman 1964; Kertzer 1988; Turner 1957, 1968).

Culture links individual and collective identities. Culture offers emotionally significant connections between the fate of individuals and the group. The crucial connection at work is that of identification, which renders the connection seamless and removes alternatives that on other grounds might be equally plausible. Individual and collection action, this view suggests, are motivated, in part, by the sense of a common fate people in a culture share and involves two distinct elements: the strong reinforcement between individual and collective identity that renders culturally sanctioned behavior rewarding and the sense that outsiders will treat oneself and other members of one's group in similar ways. In addition, the dynamics of within-group identity formation overemphasize what it is that group members actually share and gives greater emotional weight to the common elements especially in periods of high stress, reinforcing their strong sense of within-group linked fate.

Culture defines group boundaries and organizes actions within and between them. Although cultures are not formally bounded entities, culture nonetheless defines identity groups, and in the process specifies expectations concerning patterns of association within and between them. Cultural definitions of social groups – whether they are defined by kinship, age, gender, or common interests – entail clear expectations about how people are to act, even when these definitions are continually contested (Greif 1994; Scott 1985). How such social categories and groups are defined and the norms that regulate their behavior vary cross-culturally. Cultural norms regarding relations between groups in the same culture can be highly elaborate. While cultures differ in how and when they restrict, as well as how they enforce restrictions on, relations, few are silent on these questions.

Culture provides a framework for interpreting the actions and motives of others. Actions, like words, are highly ambiguous, and making sense of them requires a shared cultural framework to ensure that the message sent is similar to, if not identical to, the one received. Few behaviors are so universal that they require little or no interpretation and invocation of culturally available narratives and scripts to help people make sense of ambiguous but emotionally salient situations (Petersen 2005; Ross 1997). Motives are central to cultural analysis because they offer a mechanism to link individual action to a broader social setting (D'Andrade and Strauss 1992).⁸ In many ways, motives in cultural analysis are much like interests in rational choice theory. In statements such as "They were motivated by fear of their ancestors, so they sacrificed half of their livestock" or "Country X had an interest in weakening the military capability of its enemy,"

⁸ This contrasts with Geertz's focus on "inspecting events" and making sense of actors' interpretations of them but his rejection of the idea that we should examine mental structures (1973a: 10–12).

both motives and interests offer a “reasonable” account of why individuals or groups behave in a certain way. Yet, there are also significant differences in the use of motives and interests as explanatory mechanisms that are central to the difference between cultural and rational choice explanations. While interests are assumed to be more or less transparent (some would say given) and universal, motives are knowable only through empirical analysis of particular cultural contexts. As a result, while turning to interests suggests that almost any human group would behave the same way in a certain situation, an emphasis on motives focuses on explaining variation in behavior across groups (Wildavsky 1987). Cultural explanations, as a result, do not deny the relevance of interests but see them as contextually defined and as but one motive among many.

Culture provides resources for political organization and mobilization. Culture offers significant resources that leaders and groups use as instruments of organization and mobilization (Brysk 1995; Edelman 1964; Kertzer 1988; Laitin 1986; Ross 2007). We can think of action-oriented scripts that can be mobilized (Petersen 2005) or what Tilly calls “repertoires of collective action,” referring to “a limited set of routines that are learned, shared, and acted out through a relatively deliberate process of choices. Repertoires are learned cultural creations” (Tilly 1995a: 26; Tilly 1986; Traugott 1995; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly this volume). In his formulation, anthropologist Abner Cohen (1969, 1974, 1981, 1993) spells out more generally the political uses of culture, emphasizing the importance of cultural organizations (formal or informal groups organized around specific cultural practices) and how they use cultural organizations to pursue goals that cannot be pursued directly (Cohen 1969: 201–210).

In discussing religion, the prototypical cultural basis for political organization, Cohen points out that

[r]eligion provides an ideal “blueprint” for the development of an informal political organization. It mobilizes many of the most powerful emotions which are associated with the basic problems of human existence and gives legitimacy and stability to political arrangements by representing these as parts of the system of the universe. It makes it possible to mobilize the power of symbols and the power inherent in the ritual relationship between various ritual positions within the organization of the cult. It makes it possible to use the arrangements for financing and administering places of worship and associated places for welfare, education, and social activities of various sorts, to use these in developing the organization and administration of political functions. Religion also provides frequent and regular meetings in congregations, where in the course of ritual activities, a great deal of informal interaction takes place, information is communicated, and general problems are formulated and discussed. The system of myths and symbols which religion provides is capable of being continuously interpreted and reinterpreted in order to accommodate it to changing economic, political and other social circumstances. (1969: 210)

We must continue to ask why and how the appeals to religious, national, and ethnic identities are so powerful and mobilizable. As Campbell (1983) has suggested, any answer that relies on mechanisms of individual benefit only make sense if we can also account for the strength of individual attachments to groups such as those defined in cultural terms.

THE CENTRALITY OF PSYCHOCULTURAL NARRATIVES
AND INTERPRETATIONS IN CULTURAL ANALYSES OF POLITICS

Cultural analyses are among the oldest works of political science and have taken different forms over time.⁹ Here I simply note a few of their features and then advance what I see as a much more potentially productive way to conduct cultural analysis of politics. In some older works, culture resembles race and is viewed as having a strong biological component. In these, culture is often defined in terms of key distinguishing traits, values, or behaviors and is described in single terms such as “fierce,” “intelligent,” “warlike,” “freedom-loving,” “pious,” “responsible,” “traditional,” or “manipulative.” This work has several problems: It is often not clear what the evidence is for the overgeneralizations about large collectivities; there is scant attention to how these characteristics were produced and reproduced; and these traits are often used very mechanically to explain collective behavior.

More recent works, particularly those associated with political culture studies, often adopt a reductionist framework to explain aggregate-level outcomes and differences in terms of variations across systems in the distribution of individual attitudes, values, and behaviors. All too often, however, there is little concern with the mechanisms that might link these individual-level differences to the collective behaviors of interest. As a result, the connections are often treated as self-evident rather than demonstrated, and alternative ones are not considered. In much of this work the concept of culture itself is undertheorized, and operationally it is overly reliant upon disaggregated, often single, indicators. Finally, too little effort is made to examine actions and meanings from a holistic perspective, resulting in very thin explanations of politics (Fearon and Wendt 2003) and creating little sense of how and why culture is regularly contested and renegotiated.

A better alternative is found in contemporary intersubjective approaches to culture and politics that emphasize meaning and meaning-making and the concept of interpretation that problematizes how political actors understand their world, as well as the relevance of their understanding of it for political action. This perspective is especially interested in linking micro-level frameworks and events to macro-level outcomes via the shared interpretations through which people make meaning from the ambiguous and fragmented elements of daily life (Darnton 1985; Taylor 1985) and the narrative accounts that articulate widely shared understandings about individuals, groups, their motives, and past and contemporary events. In the first edition of this volume, I mainly discussed interpretations and hardly mentioned narratives. Since that time, I have come to distinguish between the two more clearly, seeing interpretations as people’s underlying beliefs, emotions, and worldviews and narratives as the more accessible verbal and nonverbal expression of these underlying elements (Ross 2007). Psychocultural¹⁰ interpretations, then,

⁹ In my earlier chapter (Ross 1997), I discussed some of these approaches.

¹⁰ I use the term “psychocultural interpretations” to describe how shared interpretations are acquired through individual-level psychological (and social-psychological) mechanisms that are

are the building blocks for psychocultural narratives that are more readily accessible and use common everyday shared understandings to offer plausible accounts of the world.

Psychocultural Narratives and Interpretations

Psychocultural narratives are socially constructed explanations for events – large and small – in the form of short commonsense accounts (stories) that often seem simple to outsiders.¹¹ The evocative images they contain, and the judgments they make about the motivations and actions of one's own group and those of opponents, are readily available and emotionally powerful. The images are found throughout a society's symbolic landscape and communicate many specific emotions and positions, including intergroup power relations and messages about inclusion and exclusion. Narratives explain past, present, and future events in emotionally meaningful ways that render alternative action possibilities more or less plausible. In examining narratives, one should be less concerned with their truth or falsity than with their emotional power and plausibility in specific political contexts.

Narratives are not always internally consistent, and in-group disagreement about parts of a narrative and its meaning can produce divergent reactions (Aronoff 2001; Wedeen 2002). Cultural analyses of politics are especially interested in situations where there is contestation among competing narratives (e.g., differences between religious and secular Jews in Israel or between Israeli Jews and Palestinians). Why and how one narrative comes to achieve dominance over another for a time is an important question that cultural analyses address. Narratives are best understood as existing at different levels of generality in which consensus is invariably greater on the general themes than on more specific details, and various elements – especially those with more specificity – are regularly added, discarded, rearranged, emphasized, and deemphasized. All cultural traditions have access to multiple preexisting narratives that provide support for a range of plausible actions in anxious times, and when dominant narratives develop, it is clear that they are not made from whole cloth, but are grounded in selectively remembered, interpreted experiences and projections from them that resonate widely in a group, as Lustick (2006) argues in his analysis of the U.S. “war on terror.” Finally, narratives are renegotiated and changed in subtle or even major ways as contexts change.

widespread in a culture. The term “psychocultural” brings together the psychological processes central to the construction of these interpretations and cultural dynamics, emphasizing that these orientations are not just personal, but rather are nurtured and socially reinforced, linking individuals in a collective process, amplifying what is shared, and emphasizing differences among groups. The same dynamic is relevant to understanding psychocultural narratives as well (Ross 1993a, 2007).

¹¹ For a more extended discussion of psychocultural narratives, their key features, and their use in the analysis of cultural contestation, see Ross (2002: chap. 2; 2007).

Psychocultural narratives have several key features that I have found especially useful for studying the politics of cultural contestation (Ross 2007: chap. 2). First, they are selective accounts, drawing on key images and events from a group's collective memories as they are relevant to contemporary situations. In narratives, past events serve as (often timeless) metaphors and lessons that guide present and future action. Politically relevant narratives contain both accounts of collective fears and threats to identity, as well as recalling past heroic deeds and triumphs (Volkan 1997). Many collective accounts are ethnocentric, adopting a morally superior stance and demanding high in-group conformity in periods of stress while externalizing responsibility for a group's present troubles. Narratives evolve, particular scripts in them gain or lose their emotional intensity, and their elements take on new relationships to each other as contexts and relationships change. A good example of this evolution is seen in the increased importance of Jerusalem and its holy sites in both Israeli Jewish and Palestinian narratives in the past 120 years. It is not that current narratives have no older roots – for they do – but rather that there was a marked shift in the context as each group aggressively asserted its rights and denied those of the other.

Psychocultural narratives play three different substantive roles in political life. They can be, and are most often seen as, *reflectors* of deeply held cultural understandings and beliefs. Examples include textbook accounts of a nation's history or national anthem. Second, they can be examined as *exacerbators* or *inhibitors* of within- or between-group differences in ways that variously escalate or deescalate conflict. One example is found in Lustick's (2006) interpretation of the spate of novels, films, and television shows in the United States that reinforced the fear of terrorism and the need for a "war on terror" to make the country safe following the September 11 attacks. Third, they can serve as *causes* of action, not because ideas get people to act directly but because they frame action alternatives such that certain options get serious consideration while others are virtually ignored. For example, following September 11, the Bush administration successfully framed the attacks as terrorist acts, while the 1994 attacks on the World Trade Center were treated as criminal actions. Once they were framed this way, the government actions considered appropriate included going to war in Afghanistan and Iraq and altering civil liberties and privacy rights. Of course, these three categories are not mutually exclusive, and any narrative may serve more than one function.

Conceptually and methodologically, interpretations and the narratives through which they are communicated are a key tool to examine culture and politics. The rich accounts found in the images of the world people offer point to intense concerns, assumptions about the organization of social and political relations, and the possibilities for political action. These images are obtainable, in part, through public and private accounts. However, simply presenting the transcripts of individuals' stories is insufficient, for texts do not speak for themselves and often make little sense to an outsider (Scott 1985: 138–141). It is difficult to derive much significance from detailed, highly contextualized

interpretations whose meanings are often not self-evident (Chabal and Daloz 2006). Laitin (1988) says that connecting culture and action requires detailed local ethnographic knowledge and experience for a rich contextual understanding.¹²

The interpretations and narratives of particular interest here are accounts of the world that people within a culture widely share in the sense that they are mutually understood. When supported by one's social world, these plausible accounts offer psychic and social protection from the ambiguities and uncertainties of existence, reinforcing social and political bonds within groups. The power of psychocultural interpretations and narratives lies in their shared social character, not in those idiosyncratic features that distinguish one person's account from another's. As Taylor writes, "they are not subjective meanings, the property of one or some individuals, but rather inter-subjective meanings which are constitutive of the social matrix in which individuals find themselves and act" (1985: 36).

At the core of psychocultural interpretations are internalized, shared orientations rooted in the earliest social relationships that help people in a culture make sense of inherently ambiguous, highly charged events that characterize their lives (Ross 1993a). Psychocultural interpretations draw attention not just to what people do to each other but also to what one group of people think or feel that another group of people is doing, trying to do, or wanting to do. In a context of suspicion and uncertainty, not only actions, but also presumptions about the intentions and meanings behind the actions (or inactions), play an important role. This is crucial, for in few political situations do external events provide clear explanations for what is occurring; to develop these, individuals turn to internal frameworks and groups turn to their collective memories, which then shape subsequent behavior. While participants in any dispute can often tell someone "just what the conflict is about," this precision is often illusory, so political scientists too hastily see this as evidence of flawed decision making and/or faulty information processing. However, it is more useful to view these "errors" as important data about social dynamics.

In many situations, different parties don't agree on what a conflict is about, when it started, or who is involved, for they operate from (but are not aware of) alternative frames of reference. Many disputes, whether they are between families in a community or the world's states, involve parties with a deep history, which, of course, includes long lists of accumulated grievances that can be trotted out and appended to newer ones as political conditions shift (Scott 1985). Historical memory and the symbols evoked in its recounting become emotionally important as alternative events are invoked by each side or the same event is interpreted in very different ways.

The same factors that push actors to make sense of a situation also lead to cognitive and perceptual distortions because the desire for certainty is often

¹² This is the same claim that many students of the U.S. Congress have made over the years.

greater than the capacity for accuracy. Not only are disputants likely to make systematic errors about the “facts” underlying interpretations, but the homogeneous nature of most social settings and cultural amplifiers reinforces these self-serving mistakes. What is most crucial, however, about politically relevant narratives and interpretations is the compelling, coherent account they offer to the parties in linking discrete events to general understandings. Central to such interpretations is the attribution of motives to parties. Once identified, the existence of such motives seemingly makes it easy to “predict” another’s future actions and, through one’s own behavior, to turn such predictions into self-fulfilling prophecies. For this reason, it is appropriate to suggest that rather than thinking about particular objective events that cause conflicts to escalate, we ought to be thinking about the interpretations of such events that are associated with escalation and those that are not.

This is seen vividly in stories about long-standing ethnic conflicts that contain the culturally rooted aspirations, challenges, and deepest fears of communities. Volkan (1997) develops the term “chosen trauma” to refer to a specific experience that comes to symbolize a group’s deepest threats and fears through feelings of helplessness and victimization. He provides many examples of such events, including the Turkish slaughter of Armenians, the Nazi Holocaust, the experience of slavery and segregation of African Americans, and the Serbian defeat at Kosovo by the Turks in 1389.¹³ If a group feels too humiliated, angry, or helpless to mourn the losses suffered in the trauma, Volkan suggests that it then incorporates the emotional meaning of the traumatic event into its identity and passes on the emotional and symbolic meaning from generation to generation. In escalating intergroup conflicts, the key metaphors, such as the chosen trauma, serve both as a rallying point and as a way to make sense of events that evoke deep fears and threats to existence (Horowitz 1985; Kelman 1987). Only when the deep-seated threats these stories represent are addressed, Volkan suggests, is a community able to begin to conceptualize a more peaceful future with its enemies.

Cultural Expressions and Enactments

Starting from a perspective that views culture as a template that people use to make sense of the world, we should be especially attentive to ways in which these templates are linked to cultural expressions and enactments that mobilize in-groups and out-groups through the invocation of contrasting and polarizing responses (Ross 2007). Many expressions and enactments consist of displaying mundane objects or performing behaviors such as language use (think Quebec, the Basque country) or clothing (think about Islamic headscarves in Europe).

¹³ See Volkan (1997) for a discussion of what he calls “chosen traumas” and of the relevance of this concept for understanding long-term ethnic conflicts. The flip side is the chosen glory in which a group perceives triumph over the enemy; this is seen clearly in the Northern Irish Protestant celebration of the Battle of the Boyne in 1689 every July 12 and in the Independence Day celebrations in many countries.

Others involve single events such as the publication of the Mohammed cartoons in Denmark. Finally, there are regular, but not daily or ordinary expressions such as the Japanese prime minister's yearly visits to the shrine that includes the remains of some of the country's World War II war criminals, Ku Klux Klan rallies in the United States, Orange Order parades in Northern Ireland, or Hindu nationalist mobilization calling for the (re)construction of a temple to Rama in Ayodhya. Examining such expressions and enactments is a tool to get at deeper levels of meaning for groups and to better understand the fears, hopes, and worldviews of those involved in social interactions ranging from cooperation to contestation.

Cultural expressions and enactments connect group narratives and identity in many ways. Public ceremonials, religious ceremonies, calendrical festivals and holidays, theatrical presentations, television programs, literature, public discourse, distinctive clothing and foods, and language use are some of the common ways that narratives – or key parts of them – are enacted, communicating and reinforcing in-group understandings. Merelman's (1991) comparative study of political culture makes good use of diverse forms of expression including television programs, corporate publications, textbooks, and magazine ads, along with survey data as data sources in his comparative examination of the United States, Canada, and Britain. In another interesting example using a cultural indicator of collective political orientations, Regan (1994) relates sales of war toys and the popularity of war movies to U.S. militarization. More recently, Croft (2006) provides a detailed analysis of American popular culture, including films, television programs, and human and political discourse, to explain how the war on terror has become naturalized and used to promote the Bush administration's domestic and foreign policy aims.

In addition to considering single expressions or enactments, we can examine a society's symbolic landscape to ask how it communicates social and political inclusion and exclusion (Ross 2007, 2008). The symbolic landscape consists of the public images found in physical objects and other expressive representations in public spaces – especially sacred sites (which are not necessarily religious ones) – and other emotionally important and visible venues, as well as group representations in the mass media, theater, school textbooks, music, literature, museums and monuments, and public art. Symbolic landscapes reflect how people perceive and experience their world and others in it, but they can also be significant shapers of these worlds when they establish and legitimate particular normative standards and power relations within and between groups (Cosgrove 1998). Symbolic landscapes communicate inclusion, exclusion, and hierarchy, and portray dominant and subordinate groups in particular ways. The meanings a symbolic landscape conveys and the narratives it invokes invite us to ask: Who is present and who is absent in public representations? What are the qualities of the people and objects portrayed in them? Who controls the representations, and to what extent are they contested? How is hierarchy portrayed, and what qualities are associated with particular positions within a society's hierarchy?

Inclusion and exclusion are often powerfully expressed through the restriction or expansion of a society's symbolic landscape. Exclusion of groups from the symbolic landscape is an explicit form of denial and an assertion of power. In contrast, a more inclusive symbolic landscape can be an expression of societal inclusion that communicates mutuality and a shared stake in society. It renders the previously unseen seen, gives voice to those once voiceless, and can offer powerful messages to reshape relations between groups. Through inclusion, groups can identify more easily, and can help mourn past losses and express hopes and aspirations for a common future. As symbolic statements of acknowledgment, it is no wonder that some public sites and the representations they contain can become the source of intense controversy, raising issues such as: What stories do they choose to tell about themselves? How is this related to who can speak for the group? Who controls its narrative and the images associated with it (Linenthal 1993, 2001)?

Culture can be part of an explanation for many political phenomena. In analyses of conflict, for example, we see how narratives evolve as a result of escalation reinforcing and hardening in-group worldviews, and in-group solidarity and out-group hostility both increase. Not all cultural mobilization in conflict situations leads to conflict and violence, however, and one interesting comparative question asks when this turn to violence does and does not occur. For example, Laitin (1995) offers a controlled comparison emphasizing culturally constituted differences in social organization to explain the frequent use of political violence in the Basque protest in Spain and its relative absence in nearby Catalonia. As a result, the differences in the use of violence between the regions are not a function of objective differences or their relative deprivation, but of the cultural organization of each community, which affects the likelihood that the ethnic revivals in each one will turn to violence.

Raymond Cohen (1990, 1991) shows that culture can frame how political leaders understand the actions and words of those from other states and how such cultural assumptions can complicate the task of diplomatic negotiations in his examination of Egyptian–Israeli negotiations over time (1990). In a second study, he details how cultural miscommunication has affected U.S. negotiations with Mexico, Egypt, China, India, and Japan, arguing that differences in time frames, the importance of context, language, and an individualistic versus collectivist ethos all are important in either inhibiting or facilitating negotiated efforts to deal with substantive issues. Focusing only on “substance” and ignoring culture, he contends, leads to serious missed opportunities and failures where successes might have emerged.

Interpretations and Narratives as Methodological Tools

If, as Freud suggested, dreams are the royal road to the unconscious, in cultural analyses of political events, psychocultural narratives and interpretations are key methodological tools. They begin with people's accounts of their daily worlds, and comparative researchers of all persuasions easily recognize many of the

forms in which such accounts appear, such as formal written materials, historical documents, public discourse, government records, law cases, systematic observations, and survey data. In addition, the rich accounts often needed in cultural analysis can only be obtained through ethnographic field research; in-depth interviews and life histories; structured interviews; extended case analysis of trouble cases; and cultural expressions and enactments. Certainly the process analysis that Migdal, and McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly advocate in their chapters in this volume is central to cultural analysis, with its emphasis on interpretations.

Analyzing narratives and interpretations over time is a tool for understanding the contested nature of history and for discerning how one account comes to be accepted as “what really happened” while other plausible stories are rejected. Interpretations of the past are found in how people talk and write about it, but are also found in the public rituals and myths built around key events in the national or ethnic past and in public performances that are not always explicitly political. The rituals and myths are significant because of the meanings and metaphors surrounding a group’s history they communicate and reinforce emotionally, and because of the political mobilizing potential they have in the hands of political entrepreneurs.

The central goal of cultural analysis from a meaning and identity perspective is to understand, from the worldviews of actors in a particular context, why certain actions are undertaken and others are not. What this entails is asking why and how people then adopt particular worldviews and how their specific scripts become important in political mobilization or quiescence. Bridging the gap between a researcher’s understanding of a particular context and the elements in local actors’ narratives, and the connections between them, requires calling on cultural understandings and working to develop mediating explanations that make sense to cultural insiders and are seen as plausible by outsiders.

Examining rituals is critical to understanding how most people construct and understand political reality (Edelman 1964, 1988; Kertzer 1988: 77–101). Political rituals offer meaning in ambiguous, uncertain situations and are crucial to the dynamics of identity construction and maintenance, particularly in periods of change. In bringing certain people together, culturally rooted rituals and the scripts underlying them simultaneously exclude others. Powerful political rituals are those that utilize culturally powerful symbols, metaphors, and meanings to create and structure perceptions of reality; often this involves pitting one group against another by raising fears and threats to the point that people are all too ready to undertake strong action in the name of the group. The power to control ritual is important for the following reason:

Indeed, ritual is an important means of influencing people’s ideas about political events, political policies, political systems, and political leaders. Through ritual, people develop their ideas about what are appropriate political institutions, what are appropriate qualities in political leaders, and how well the world around them measures up against these standards. (Kertzer 1988: 79)

Spelling out how culture renders specific symbols and rituals significant in a particular context, and how they both create and reinforce political identities, is central to this dynamic (Brysk 1995; Kertzer 1988). For example, whereas some analyses emphasize elections as citizen choice-making, a focus on symbol and ritual draws attention to how political parties and candidates in their quest for power use culturally shared metaphors and fears in their appeals to citizens and to build compliance among them (Wedeen 1999). Policy positions or candidate choices, we now understand, are not just about the issue preferences of individuals; we also must ask how such orientations are or are not consonant with shared cultural understandings and identities. Invocation of symbols and use of rituals do not just indicate points of consensus; they are also efforts to overcome contradictions in situations of disjunction (Kurtz 1991: 149). This richer understanding of the cultural roots of politics has produced an interest in how political rituals create (rather than just reflect) meanings and shape actions (Gusfield 1966). In short, rituals frame issues that establish compelling priorities. In doing this, they are important instruments of control and, from a Gramscian perspective, are central mechanisms for obtaining and maintaining power. Through analyses of meaning construction and meaning-reinforcing rituals, we can examine social movements as well as the mass media, which provide not only access to core knowledge but also the frameworks for making sense of it to citizens of mass democracies (Dayan and Katz 1992).

With a few rare exceptions, the most successful work linking culture and politics will not rely on only one source of data or a single tool for data analysis. Our most interesting theories are complex and highly contingent, and cannot be simply accepted or rejected on the basis of one crucial piece of evidence. Instead, we need to obtain areas of convergence between independent data collected using a wide range of methods to have confidence in a set of findings, as Campbell and Fiske (1959) advocated long ago. Exclusive reliance on one type of data to study the interplay of culture and politics, as is found in some survey researchers such as Inglehart (1988), inevitably produces a thin, almost content-free sense of culture and points to few dynamics of how culture produces the political effects it does.¹⁴ Instead, a more useful approach is found in Scott (1985), Laitin (1995), Petersen (2002), and Bowen (2007), in which a range of evidence is marshaled to explain phenomena that are not self-evident: the presence of everyday, but not overt, resistance among Third World peasants; why in Spain the Basque revival has been violent, while under very similar circumstances, the Catalan one has not; the shifting choice of targets of ethnic violence; and why France came to pass a law in 2004 banning Islamic headscarves in public schools.

Two Examples. Political scientists write about narratives more than ever these days in an effort to describe and analyze micro-level events. The concept has

¹⁴ My critique is on the aggregative nature of cultural explanation as a cluster of attitudes built from the survey data employed. Jackman and Miller (1996), in a reanalysis of the data, suggest that even the empirical claims Inglehart makes are unwarranted.

even made its way into rational choice analyses (Bates, de Figueiredo, and Weingast 1998), albeit with an interest in analytic narratives aimed at providing a coherent analytic explanation for events rather than capturing the contextually grounded worldviews and motivations of local actors. Here, it is probably useful to describe two very different political analyses that give a central role to culturally rooted narratives in their explanations for particular outcomes.

Roger Petersen (2002) seeks to explain the targets and the intensity of violence across the twentieth century in Eastern and Central Europe.¹⁵ His account is rooted in the emotional activation of pressing concerns through the invocation of a specific historically and contextually rooted narrative. For each of the emotions he considers – fear, hatred, resentment, and rage – Petersen derives specific predictions about who the local targets of violence are most likely to be, and he generates competing predictions to be able to evaluate the relative explanatory power of each emotion. The emotions each narrative activates serve as the linkage mechanism between micro-level and macro-level collective action. “Each emotion-based narrative provides an explanation of how, in the face of social complexity and fluidity, such a brutal simplicity comes to frame outlooks and motivate action” (Petersen 2002: 3). In the end, he finds that while the resentment narrative, centered on a belief and a sense of unjust group status, provides the best predictive and descriptive fit for a variety of cases of ethnic conflict in Eastern Europe, he also finds that there are situations when fear, hatred, and rage seem to operate as well.

The power of Petersen’s book is his ability to articulate specific narratives associated with distinct emotions and then to suggest ways that each might have operated in specific ethnically based violence in the region at different periods of time. His ability to identify competing hypotheses and to make specific testable predictions is rare and powerful. The mechanisms are explained in terms of social psychological theories, while the narratives are deeply rooted in the historical and cultural experiences of the region, providing a powerful example of how psychocultural narratives are deeply implicated in ethnic interaction and actions.

John Bowen (2007) asks a simple question: How was it that in 2004 France came to pass legislation that banned the wearing of Islamic headscarves (and other religious symbols) in schools? He also puzzled about how a piece of “cloth came to stand for certain fears and threats” that produced an intense conflict (2007: 4). Bowen’s analysis emphasizes the power of the dominant French Republican narrative to frame the debate and the specific options that were and were not actively considered. He aptly describes his project as an “anthropology of public reasoning” in which he connects political philosophy, public policy, and common sense, asking how people deliberate on an important social issue that connects micro-events to macro-level outcomes. To do this, Bowen weaves

¹⁵ See Petersen for another case in which he skillfully uses data on how a specific event unfolded to explore the impact of memory and cultural schema – an abstract mental model containing specific scripts – “by trying to establish the foundations of cultural schemas in the actual experiences and memories of individuals and communities” (2005: 133).

together the narrative about how the French understand the common good, the importance of the nondenominational state as the protector of its citizens and the guarantor of order and liberty, and the threats that intermediate identity groups and public religious practices represent to France. In this widely shared narrative, the public school is the key tool for inculcating a common understanding of society and for creating citizens who are not divided into distinguishable and unchangeable identity groups.

As the conflict intensified, the “reasonableness” of the proposed legislation dominated political talk to the majority of those on the left and right and in media coverage, so that there were never really questions about whether the law would have any impact on the deeper underlying issues such as unemployment, inequality, segregation, and discrimination that were the real sources of ethnic tension in France. In the process, there was little or no interest in what the people wearing the headscarves had to say about their reasons for doing so; instead, their actions were simply widely criticized for promoting communalism, Islamism, and sexism, each of which was seen as a strong threat to key French values and practices. The Islamic voices that the French heard (and wanted to hear) were those of “reasonable” (meaning not practicing) women and men who opposed headscarves and favored the law banning them. In making his argument, Bowen provides a rich micro-level account of French politics, competition and differences among Islamic organizations in France, media coverage, the official hearings, and parliamentary debates.

In the end, the imposition of the powerful narrative framed the conflict so that “what ensued were tempestuous debates about what *laïcité* *should* be and how Muslims *ought* to act, not in light of a firm legal and cultural framework, but in light of a disappearing sense of certitude about what France was, is, and will be. Hence the desperation; hence the urgency” (Bowen 2007: 33). Whose voices were heard mattered because they defined and moved the political actions leading to the eventual outcome. What Bowen does especially effectively is to offer a specific, well-developed explanation of how a widely shared psycho-cultural narrative plays a critical role in shaping understandings and actions in the course of a long-term conflict. He makes it clear that the outcome was not inevitable, that there were at key points differences in interpretation and clashing views, key actors whose framing and actions moved the conflict in a particular direction, dramatic media events that crystallized public opinion and political positions, and exogenous events such as events in Algeria, 9/11, and the second Intifada that further affect the conflict in the French context, making specific actions more or less likely than they were earlier.

CRITIQUE OF CULTURAL ANALYSES OF POLITICS

Cultural studies of politics have been subject to a number of strong criticisms that deserve consideration. Perhaps the most significant problems arise over methodological issues such as the lack of precision about culture as a unit of analysis and the question of within- versus between-cultural variations. Others are concerned with the vagueness of the concept of culture and the difficulty

of distinguishing culture from related concepts such as social organization, political behavior, and values. Some are worried that since culture suggests relatively fixed, unchanging patterns of behavior, it is not useful in accounting for changes in behavior and beliefs. Finally, there is concern that cultural analyses are not sufficiently explicit concerning the mechanisms linking culture and political action. Each of these concerns is worth some attention. However, it should be clear that my view is that none of these problems is fatal and that in cultural approaches to comparative politics, like those rooted in interests or institutions, the best way to address the conceptual and methodological problems is through a multimethod search for convergence rather than abandonment of the paradigm.

Unit-of-Analysis Issues

Defining the unit of analysis precisely – be it voters, states, wars, or international organizations – is one of the first lessons of most methods seminars in political science. “What is a culture?” some political scientists ask, meaning, “How do I know one when I see it?” since culture is not a unit of social or political organization with readily identifiable boundaries. Furthermore, the imprecision of common language use makes it very unclear what are a culture’s borders. As a result, we hear references to Western culture, French culture, Breton culture, rural Breton culture, and so on. Where does the parsing stop?

The unit-of-analysis problem is about what constitutes the core of a culture and also how to identify its edges (Barth 1969). Where does one culture stop and another begin? Since cultures, unlike states or political parties, are not formal units, treating them as independent units of political analysis can be troubling indeed. While this may seem like a devastating critique, it is just as true that neither states nor voters are truly independent units either, although most cross-nation and survey analyses assume they are. What is probably more useful is to be more sophisticated about interaction effects and the influence of one unit upon another.¹⁶

Conceptually, the best answer is that the appropriate level of analysis depends on what one wants to explain. Horowitz (1985) says that which level of cultural identity is the most salient at any moment depends upon where someone is and what he or she is doing with whom. However, this is not always an easy-to-use methodological guide in empirical research. Probably the best answer to this methodological question is to begin with the recognition that cultural identity is layered and situationally defined.¹⁷ People hold multiple identities, some

¹⁶ Galton’s Problem refers to the fact that in cross-cultural (and cross-national) samples, assumptions about the independence of units are often inappropriate and that substantive correlations among culture traits can reflect diffusion and borrowing rather than functional association. The most useful response is not to ignore this problem, but to build diffusion hypotheses into models to test the relative power of each pattern (Ross and Homer 1976).

¹⁷ Another answer comes from Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky (1990), who argue that culture is seen in distinct ways of life that they define in terms of Mary Douglas’s grid-group analysis. “Group” refers to the extent to which an individual is incorporated into bounded units, while “grid” refers to the degree to which a person’s behaviors are circumscribed by externally imposed restrictions. Different individuals or states can, in their view, exhibit different degrees of each of

identities partially overlap, and the boundaries can shift across issues or contexts. Despite the methodological problems this can present, we cannot ignore culture if we think it is important, so we should make decisions about units of analysis based on what we are trying to explain rather than on abstract criteria intended to identify a set of cultural units akin to a list of all UN member states.¹⁸ In addition, there are a number of other procedures we can use to define cultural units in particular pieces of research. For example, we can use operational criteria such as asking people how they identify themselves and others, and we can use social consensus about particular cultural groupings and their boundaries. The point is that a task for research is to identify relevant groupings in whatever situation is under study. The fact that people possess multiple identities or that identities can change over time does not invalidate such analysis; it just makes the research more complicated.

Political culture research in the Almond and Verba tradition sought to solve the problem by defining culture as the aggregate of individual orientations within political units. Almond and Powell (1966), for example, define political culture as “the pattern of individual attitudes and orientations towards politics among members of a political system” (1966: 23). Reducing culture to the sum of individual attitudes is hardly adequate, however, since it ignores both the context in which particular attitudes are held and the shared understandings that organize clusters of intersubjective orientations (Merelman 1991). Culture, as a result, is not about meaning, meaning-making, and identity; rather, it is simply a frequency distribution on a set of single-attitude items – a kind of machine with totally interchangeable parts. While studying individuals is part of how we can understand culture, as both Taylor (1985: 37) and Geertz (1973a) argue, culture is not the property of single individuals. Rather, it is an emergent property rooted in social practices and shared understandings that cannot be uncovered through survey data alone. For this reason, individual-level survey data are but one tool for studying political culture. They must be used in conjunction with other data to provide a rich, coherent portrait of any single culture or comparisons between cultures.

Within-Culture Variation Can Be Substantial

It often seems easy to say what members of formal groups have in common. But what exactly do people of a given culture share? My answer emphasizes shared worldviews – but not necessarily particular values or beliefs – and a common

the five combinations they identify over time. However, viable social units, they argue, are not characterized by the presence of only one culturally defined way of life. While I find much of their analysis of the interaction between values and social structure quite useful, it is less evident to me that making the way of life the unit of analysis provides a guideline that is easy for researchers to use, since they say that multiple orientations can exist in the same culture or subculture and that individuals may have different orientations across time and situations.

¹⁸ This does not mean that such a list of societies that represent the world’s cultures, such as one of the samples developed in cross-cultural research, is not useful in many situations.

identity. Operationally, this can be ambiguous, however, for we know that people who themselves identify as members of a culture (or any organized group) are likely to differ in terms of values, lifestyles, political dispositions, religious beliefs and practices, and ideas about common interests. In addition, Strauss cautions that while there may be some variation in schemas (what I have been calling worldviews) across individuals in the same culture, even those with very similar schemas may not internalize exactly the same things, and that the ambiguity of metaphor produces variation in responses (Strauss 1992: 10–11). In short, there is also within-culture diversity (Norton 2004). However, this is not necessarily any more of a problem in dealing with culture than it is in dealing with other units (or even with intraindividual variation in behavior or attitudes over time). LeVine argues that emphasizing culture as common understandings of the symbols and representations they communicate does not mean that there is necessarily a problem with within-cultural variation in thought, feeling, and behavior (LeVine 1984: 68).

A second answer is that often what is more crucial politically than agreement on content is that people share a common identity, although this still leaves open the question of different degrees of identification and differences in the actions people are willing to undertake in the name of that identity. Shared identities mean that people see themselves as similar to some people, different from others, and open to potential mobilization on the basis of these differences. What an emphasis on identity stresses, once again, is that the relevant critical aspects of cultural similarity and difference are defined in specific political contexts. It is also the case that often what people believe they share may be at odds with reality because perceptions of cultural homogeneity overemphasize what is actually shared, minimizing within-group differences while stressing between-group differences. In this dynamic, in-group conformity pressures will lead people both to selectively perceive greater within-group homogeneity on critical characteristics than actually exists and to generate greater actual homogeneity and group conformity in situations where perceived threats to the culture are great.

Distinguishing Culture from Other Concepts

Some uses of culture, such as much of the early work on national character, defined culture so broadly as to include society, personality, values, and institutions. In fact, nothing was really excluded. The very broad use of the concept of culture is also found among social scientists emphasizing culture as a source of the social integration of a society. This perspective, probably clearest in functional theory in British social anthropology, uses culture to refer both to distinct elements of social organization and to the “fit” between different parts of a cultural system and the integration of the whole. The problem here is not the concept of culture but the way it is used. As noted previously, the focus on culture as meaning and meaning-making is distinct from social structure and behavior. D’Andrade makes this particularly clear in his description of culture “as consisting of [a] learned system of meaning, communicated by means of

natural language and other symbol systems, having representational, directive, and affective function, and capable of creating cultural entities and particular senses of reality. Through these systems of meaning, groups of people adapt to their environment and structure interpersonal activities" (1984: 116). In addition, Spiro's (1984) clear distinction between culture as a system of meaning and what he calls "culturally constituted elements," referring to social structure, behaviors, beliefs, rituals, and so on, is particularly helpful.

Distinguishing between culture and culturally constituted elements allows us to differentiate between cultural meanings and identity on the one hand and structure, behaviors, and individual beliefs on the other. Structure, from this perspective, is reflective of (and to some extent derived from) culture, but it is independently measurable, and an important empirical question concerns the conditions under which the correspondence between culture and various culturally constituted elements is high and when it is not. We also can examine hypotheses about change and consider how culture, structure, and other phenomena do and do not shift in patterned ways.

Culture and Change

Cultures are commonly viewed as slow-changing entities, and there is some real merit in this position at times with respect to identities (Horowitz 2002). How, then, can the concept of culture help comparativists deal with issues of political change, especially relatively rapid developments such as the end of military rule in many Latin American states during the 1980s, the breakup of the Soviet empire, or the peaceful transition in South Africa?

Three points are worth making. First, cultural analyses are probably no better than any other partial theories, such as interest or institutional ones, available in comparative politics at explaining many change situations. But few of our theories are good at this at all. In addition, there are some change phenomena for which each is most powerful, and some aspects of change are surely not best explained in cultural terms. Second, interestingly, while it is not clear that cultural theories would have explained the fall of the Soviet empire very well (many other comparative political theories share this feature), a political cultural analysis is probably a good deal better at accounting for the ebb and flow of politics in the region in the early years of the transition than many of its rivals (Eckstein et al. 1998). Particularly in unstructured, changing settings, cultural interpretations and assumptions about the motivations of others can be especially important in accounting for political processes in which there are few or no institutionalized procedures to guide action. Third, few contemporary views see culture as a static, unchanging phenomenon marked by fixed beliefs and unalterable practices (Eckstein et al. 1998). Instead, the emphasis is on the interactive, constructed nature of culture, which suggests a capacity to modify beliefs and behaviors, including shifts and rearrangements in the salience of specific cultural understandings (Goode and Schneider 1994; Merelman 1991; Wedeen 2002).

Culture can play a significant role in change when change-oriented groups and their leaders find that change meets their core needs. They often can articulate culturally meaningful narratives to mobilize supporters, as occurred in South Africa during the transition from apartheid to democratic rule. Defining culturally legitimate possible alternatives both builds support and can challenge a regime. Brysk argues that this is particularly powerful when it involves reframing elements of identity in a way that mobilizes supporters, produces agenda change, and challenges the legitimacy and authority of existing policies and institutions (1995: 580–582).

Mechanisms Underlying Cultural Explanations

Asking “how culture works” raises two different questions: (1) how does the organization of any particular culture produce the specific effects attributed to it? and (2) why are appeals to cultural identity so powerful that people are willing to take high risks in its name? The first question is about the organization of culture, and the second is about its mobilizing power.

Theories giving culture a central explanatory role must specify how the effects attributed to culture come about (Berman 2001). It is not good enough to simply say, “They did it because they’re Germans.” While this statement implies that non-Germans (such as the Japanese or French) would have behaved differently, adding a clause to this effect doesn’t really enhance an explanation a great deal. Only when one starts to say why Germans are likely to behave in a certain way that is different from the way Japanese or French behave (in what is presumed to be an equivalent situation) do we begin to have an adequate explanation that pays attention to the content of culture and also says something about how it is learned and reinforced (Strauss 1992; D’Andrade 1992). Learning and reinforcement involve institutional contexts in which a person practices and then masters key behaviors, infusing them with emotional significance.¹⁹ Petersen’s study of ethnic violence calls on another mechanism – emotions – that narratives evoke at the micro level to explain uncentralized and uncoordinated macro-level behavior.

Social experiences within institutions such as schools, religious organizations, kin groups, and later in work and leisure settings all provide cultural messages about values and expectations that are selectively reinforced. It certainly is the case that the messages from different domains are not always fully consistent. Sometimes there is a difference in emphasis; at other times, there is an outright contradiction (e.g., peer groups and families don’t necessarily give adolescents the same messages). However, what is most important from a

¹⁹ Beatrice Whiting (1980) discusses the importance cross-culturally of the placement of individuals in particular contexts (e.g., girls take care of younger siblings more often than boys, and boys are more likely to take care of animals in all the cultures for which she has data). Her data also show that cultures vary in the settings they “make available” to individuals, and she distinguishes between behaviors seen as “mundane” and those domains that are “projective” and infused with great emotional significance.

cultural perspective are the beliefs, customs, rituals, behaviors, expectations, and motives that individuals internalize and that are widely shared among people in a culture even though they may also, at the same time, be highly contested. For example, Scott's (1985) study of a small rice-growing village in Malaysia shows how people can share meanings while at the same time competing over how specific elements are to be weighted and in what situations which cultural elements are most relevant. Culture is about what is believed in common and regularly reinforced; there is a reward for "getting it right" and a cost – which most people are willing to pay at times – for not doing so. Finally, it should be noted that cultural learning is not necessarily very conscious, occurring when individuals in institutional roles pass on culturally sanctioned beliefs and behaviors to others. Through these experiences, culture prepares people to make sense of – to interpret – the world and act "effectively" in it.

The power of culture – the ability to mobilize action in its name – requires explanation, for it is not always the case that people can or will exhibit solidarity around cultural identity just because a leader (or anyone else) asserts that there is an external threat. Cultural mobilization builds on fears and perceived threats consistent with internalized worldviews and regularly reinforced through high in-group interaction and emotional solidarity. Such worldviews are expressed in daily experiences as well as significant ceremonial and ritual events that effectively restate and renew support for a group's core values and the need for solidarity in the face of external foes (Kertzer 1988). In potentially threatening situations, the ability of a group to organize collective action, which can range from unified voting to political demonstrations and violent action, is tied to the plausibility of a specific worldview – although the view itself does not produce direct effects. Rather, these effects must be mediated through institutions (Laitin 1986, 1995). The resonance between the definition of a situation and group-based action is often not explicit, as Abner Cohen's (1969) analysis points out. Nonetheless, it is effective when group members act in unified ways in the face of perceived threats or to achieve collective goals.

Cultural Explanations Are "Just-So" Stories and Not Causal Accounts

A final criticism is that because the concept of culture itself is diffuse and cultural units are not clearly delimited, cultural explanations are not rigorous and not causal but simply produce "just-so" accounts. To begin to address this point, we should recognize that while not all cultural explanations aim to establish causality or employ its language, this is not always the case. As Fearon and Wendt (2003) point out in their essay on rationality and constructivism, there is a great variety in the epistemological preferences of constructivists, and there is similar variation among culturalists in terms of "whether knowledge claims about social life can be given any warrant other than the discursive power of the putative knower . . . and whether causal explanations are appropriate in social inquiry" (2003: 57). While some explanations, such as Petersen's (2002), are positivistic and causal in form, others, such as my own work on cultural expressions and

enactments, are less explicitly causal and emphasize the constitutive context that, in Fearon and Wendt's language, "seeks to establish conditions of possibility" more than causality as such (Ross 2007). Thus, while there is variation in cultural explanations, the kinds of questions selected for analysis and the predilections of particular researchers, not culture itself, determine the nature of the explanations that emerge.

CONCLUSION: LINKING CULTURE TO CHOICE AND INSTITUTIONS

Culture is a worldview that provides a shared account of action and its meaning and imparts social and political identities; it is manifest in a way of life transmitted (with changes and modifications) over time and is embodied in a community's institutions, values, and behavioral regularities. Politics occurs in a cultural context that links individual and collective identities, defines the boundaries between groups and organized actions within and between them, provides a framework for interpreting the actions and motives of others, and offers resources for political organization and mobilization. Cultural accounts of politics emphasize how, through shared intersubjective meanings, actors understand and act in their daily worlds. Beginning with context-dependent accounts – actors' worldviews – cultural analysis goes on to construct plausible interpretations of political life to explain individual and collective action.

I have argued for a "strong" view of culture and against the notion that it can be simply approached in terms of specific values that people in a community articulate. For one thing, the significance of the presence or absence of consensus on any single item is often unclear without an analysis of the context in which it is held. Culture as meaning and meaning-making is not at all incompatible with strong disagreement on particular attitudes, and I have argued that it is often those points of disagreement that are of real political significance and shed light on tough problems facing a society. No society is totally integrated or even in agreement on all important matters. As a result, a cultural analysis might utilize survey data to document the nature of divisions in a country, but it is good to go a good deal further, trying to make sense of why, how, and if specific values are important to people, the connections between value differences and political and personal identity, and the dynamics of bitterly contested political meanings and actions within a common cultural framework.

Cultural analysis can enhance our understanding of politics in a number of domains. McAdam et al. (this volume) describe important cultural contributions in the field of contentious politics and offer a model of how structural, interest, and cultural perspectives can complement each other in explaining politics. Seeing social movements as both carriers and makers of meaning, they suggest, enriches older, more developed structural and resource mobilization perspectives. Cultural analyses emphasize the framing of action, and increase our understanding of the definition of political opportunities and the repertoires of action that are found in different settings (Hafez 2007). Attending to narrative structuring and symbolic politics expands our capacity to explain collective

action in terms of changing preferences, changing identities, and changing responses to resources (Brysk 1995: 567).

Attention to culture would certainly address one of the most widely cited weaknesses of rational choice theory: its inattention to context-specific interests and cross-cultural differences in how interests are conceptualized and articulated (Levi, this volume). More broadly, political economy might be an area that would benefit from more explicit attention to cultural questions. For example, political economists have long documented differences in resource distribution across countries. While a certain amount of lip service is paid to “cultural differences” in these cases, a more profound analysis would inquire into cultural conceptions of social justice, linked fate, and perhaps the relationship between the individual and the collectivity that might help explain the low- (or high-) inequality cases. Similarly, there are probably important cultural factors involved in explaining cross-national differences in the locus of decision making and control over the economy. Where economic theory would emphasize efficiency, it may be that culture is much more salient in determining not only how a country comes down on such questions but also how it organizes the implementation of economic and political programs.

Cultural and rationalist accounts are not necessarily directly at odds, and there are a number of ways in which the two can complement each other (Fearon and Laitin 2000). Bates, de Figueiredo, and Weingast (1998) advocate examining expressive culture and emotions to reveal important political strategies key actors adopt. In making this argument, they recognize the role that historically significant narratives and fears can play in developing and selecting strategic options. In this way, cultural analysis can illuminate how interests and incentives are defined and framed for participants rather than having to assume that they are homogeneous across people and groups, as some do (also see Levi, this volume), and a more fine-grained analysis of interest dynamics that culturalists might provide could better ground game-theoretic analyses illuminating how signaling and bargaining work in specific contexts. For culturalists, this linkage could lead to a richer understanding of worldviews with regard to how they affect perceived choices and actors’ analysis of their strategic options. In addition, although culturalists can often identify key interests for specific groups or individuals, their analyses often are limited by their explanations of when and how actors pursue them. As a result, a more sophisticated cultural understanding of strategic choice-making would perhaps better account for when action takes place and when it does not. In sum, because actions do not speak for themselves, rationalist accounts might be more useful when actions are ascribed contextually defined meanings (Bates, de Figueiredo, and Weingast 1998: 620, 628), and cultural accounts of contestation among competing narratives might be better if they included a richer understanding of how actors understood strategic options.

Political institutions are another obvious candidate for more culturally oriented research, although such studies are certainly not totally absent. Many students of American legislatures, for example, have found culture particularly helpful in explaining their internal operation (Matthews 1962; Muir 1982). The

“folkways” of the U.S. Senate that Matthews identifies to explain its functioning in the 1950s are specific norms affecting any individual senator’s behavior but are also a system that cannot be understood simply in terms of its individual elements or the degree to which any senator thinks a particular norm is appropriate. Similarly, as Crozier (1964) demonstrated so effectively, culture can shape the behavior of both public and private bureaucracies, and his cultural model sharply contrasts with explanations derived from a more universal, rational-actor, bureaucratic routinization model.

Culturalists often proceed on the assumption that political institutions reflect a region’s culture while failing to examine this hypothesis very critically. While surely culture can shape institutional practices, there are other interesting possibilities as well that might connect the two: Institutional autonomy can produce an independent effect on culture and cultural expectations; institutional practices can alter cultural values and expectations; institutional arrangements can exacerbate or inhibit cultural differences and identities (e.g., federalism or regionalism or group-based resource allocation). When culture becomes institutionalized, it is more likely to remain significant over time, but we still need to better understand why and how this occurs in some contexts but not others (Berman 2001: 237–240). At the same time, cultural analysis could enhance our understanding of when specific institutional arrangements and practices are accepted and when they may prove to be problematic, as Eckstein and his cohorts have done in their analyses of post-Soviet democratization (Eckstein et al. 1998).

In conclusion, I have argued throughout this chapter that culture shapes a good deal of political behavior, defining what people fight and care about, how they pursue it, and what they achieve. Culture frames the rules that can guide political action even in the absence of strong institutions to enforce them, and it is crucial in defining the parties’ competing interests and divergent interpretations of what is at stake. Understanding actors’ interpretations and the shared narratives groups recount offers a powerful tool for examining political contestation that can provide comparativists with important insights into why politics takes the form that it does in specific contexts at particular points in time. The strong view of culture as shared meanings, meaning-making, and identity, while not rejecting the idea that there are important generalizations about politics that comparativists can and should draw, cautions us to be wary of those that pay little attention to contexts, perceptions, and meanings.