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Political Culture: Genealogy of a Concept

Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy. By Robert H. Wiebe (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995) 321 pp. \$29.95

The Emerging Midwest: Upland Southerners and the Political Culture of the Old Northwest. By Nicole Etcheson (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1996) 205 pp. \$39.95

A cursory glance at new titles in U.S. political history may give the impression that "all the past is political culture," and that this intuitively sensible formula is "casually invoked" by writers casting about for theoretical support. Admittedly, some users have turned political culture into an elastic category. The *Encyclopedia of American Social History*, for example, expansively claims political culture for both the "new social history" and the "new political history." A recent survey of the Organization of American Historians finds that nine of the top ten "most influential" books can be considered "inquiries into the nature of American political culture," even though none of these classic works ever invoked the concept by name. Political culture might be an example of what Thompson called "a clumpish term, which by gathering so many activities and attributes into one common bundle may actually confuse or disguise discriminations that should be made between them." Absent a clear definition and intellectual genealogy, "political culture" threatens to obscure more than it reveals.¹

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1 Jean H. Baker, "And All the Past is Political Culture," *Reviews in American History*, XV (1987), 59-65; David Farber, "Political Culture and the Therapeutic Ideal," *Reviews in American History*, XXIII (1995), 681; Peter N. Stearns, "The Old Social History and the New," in Mary Kupiec Cayton, Elliot J. Gorn, and Peter W. Williams (eds.), *Encyclopedia of American Social History* (New York, 1993), I, 238; Robert Kelley, "Political Culture," in *ibid.*, III, 2269-2278; Thomas Bender, "'Venturesome and Cautious': American History in the 1990s," *Journal of American History*, LXXXI (1994), 995-996, referring to David Thelen, "The Practice of American History," *ibid.*, 953; Edward P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (New York, 1991), 13.

Despite this danger, historians should not turn their backs on political culture. Recent works like Etcheson's *Emerging Midwest* suggest that the concept possesses great analytical utility. Others like Wiebe's *Self-Rule*, however, underscore the need for more discipline in using it. Beyond casual invocation, historians of political culture would do well to acquaint themselves with the intellectual genealogy of the concept—not least because it teaches a rare lesson in how to make theoretical contributions to other disciplines. Political culture originated as an analytical tool for political scientists using quantitative-behavioralist methods, but historians have so enriched the concept with theories of cultural interpretation that now “one can see grounds for reborrowing by political scientists of the concept originally borrowed from them.” There is nothing new about historians pilfering ideas, but, in this instance, historians are not exporters of a precious theoretical commodity, gaining unaccustomed leverage in the interdisciplinary balance of trade. Furthermore, while political scientists have come to accept that historically derived “cultural beliefs,” not just systemic “variables,” affect political outcomes, historians have established that the intersection of politics and culture was a vital part of the American past.²

The concept of political culture evolved from centuries of generalizing about power's different faces in different places. Plato's “dispositions,” Montesquieu's “spirit of the laws,” Jean-Jacques Rousseau's “mores,” David Hume's “manners,” Alexis de Tocqueville's “habits of the heart,” Emile Durkheim's “collective consciousness,” and Max Weber's “authority systems” were all ancestors to the concept. Earlier in this century, American social scientists began asking how the unique “psychological coherence” or “modal personality” of a culture might affect its politics. Laswell's call for “extend[ing] the scope of political investigation to include the fundamental features of the cultural setting” helped loose a flood of so-called “national character” studies in the 1940s. These works placed whole countries on the couch, linking supposedly essential traits to the resolution of collective psycho-

2 Stephen Welch, *The Concept of Political Culture* (New York, 1993), 148; Lawrence C. Dodd and Calvin Jillson (eds.), *The Dynamics of American Politics: Approaches and Interpretations* (Boulder, 1994), 2. See also Michael Thompson, Richard Ellis, and Aaron Wildavsky, *Cultural Theory* (Boulder, 1991).

dramas. The resulting neo-Freudian interpretations of culture were imaginative and often frivolous, such as the theory of "diaperology" that ascribed Soviet foreign policy to Russian swaddling practices. At best, national character studies lapsed into hereditary determinism; at worst, they reified crude stereotypes. Political scientists concluded from this early misadventure that cultural theory must rely on "observations systematically made and recorded by trained social scientists" armed with the rigorously empirical methods of quantitative behavioralism.³

The modern-day concept of political culture was born amid Cold War efforts to distinguish the "Free World" from the rest of the world. In a landmark 1956 essay, Almond contrasted the "pragmatic" politics of Britain and the United States with the "simplism" of totalitarian states. This Manichean dichotomy appealed to postwar political scientists who hoped that comparative theory would help spread the blessings of American democracy and stem the tide of communism. But Almond's research agenda outlasted the Cold War: "Every political system is embedded in a particular pattern of orientations to political action. I have found it useful to refer to this as the *political culture*." With this single stroke, he offered a convenient catchphrase for such loosely conceptualized terms in comparative politics as *attitudes*, *values*, *ideology*, and *socialization*. It bore an obvious affinity to Weber's recently translated theory of Protestantism as the cultural engine of modernization. The problem for political scientists was how to

3 Harry Eckstein, "A Perspective on Comparative Politics, Past and Present," in *idem* and David E. Apter (eds.), *Comparative Politics: A Reader* (New York, 1963); Gabriel A. Almond, "The Intellectual History of the Civic Culture Concept," in *idem* and Sidney Verba (eds.), *The Civic Culture Revisited* (Boston, 1980); Glenda M. Patrick, "Political Culture," in Giovanni Sartori (ed.), *Social Science Concepts: A Systematic Analysis* (Beverly Hills, 1984); Abram Kardiner, *The Individual and His Society* (New York, 1939); Ralph Linton, *The Cultural Background of Personality* (New York, 1945); Harold D. Lasswell, *World Politics and Personal Insecurity* (New York, 1965; orig. pub. 1935), 158; Geoffrey Gorer, "National Character: Theory and Practice," in Margaret Mead and Rhoda Métraux (eds.), *The Study of Culture at a Distance* (Chicago, 1953); Mead, "National Character," in Alfred L. Kroeber (ed.), *Anthropology Today: An Encyclopedic Inventory* (Chicago, 1953); Mead, *And Keep Your Powder Dry: An Anthropologist Looks at America* (New York, 1942); Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Boston, 1946); Gorer, *The American People: A Study in National Character* (New York, 1948); *idem* and John Rickman, *The People of Great Russia* (London, 1949); Nathan Leites, "Psycho-Cultural Hypotheses About Political Acts," *World Politics*, I (1948), 102n; Alex Inkeles and Daniel J. Levinson, "National Character: The Study of Modal Personality and Sociocultural Systems," in Gardner Lindzey and Elliot Aronson (eds.), *The Handbook of Social Psychology* (Reading, Mass., 1969; 2d ed.), IV.

apply Almond's idea—how to identify, measure, and compare the “pattern of orientations” that characterized politics in different nations. The solution came from another field of postwar political science, namely, psephology, or the study of voting behavior.⁴

Psephologists at the time were busily using the sample-survey methods of opinion pollsters and market researchers to explore “how the voter makes up his mind.” Inspired by this work, regarded at the time as methodologically sophisticated, Almond teamed with Verba to survey thousands of citizens in five nations. In *The Civic Culture* (1963), Almond and Verba vowed to develop “a scientific theory of democracy” by “codify[ing] the operating characteristics of the democratic polity itself.” In practice, however, they simply measured “attitudes toward the political system” in various places and called the result political culture. The authors made startling discoveries—for example, that 85 percent of Americans expressed pride in their government, compared with 7 percent of Germans and 3 percent of Italians. But critics questioned the “psychologically reductionistic” use of poll data to sum up individual attitudes, given that culture was a group phenomenon, protesting that “political culture [was] the property of a collectivity.” “Individuals have beliefs, values, and attitudes, but they do not have cultures.” Evidently, there was a difference between answering questionnaires, which reflected diffuse opinions, and constituting a polity, which reflects historical evolution, intersubjective understanding, and collectively negotiated (and contested) meanings.⁵

4 Almond, “Comparative Political Systems,” *Journal of Politics*, XVIII (1956), 319–409; Terence Ball, “American Political Science in Its Postwar Political Context,” in James Farr and Raymond Seidelman (eds.), *Discipline and History: Political Science in the United States* (Ann Arbor, 1993); Almond, “Comparative Political Systems,” 96; Weber (trans. Talcott Parsons), *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, 1958). The term “political culture” appeared earlier in Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb, *Soviet Communism: A New Civilization?* (New York, 1936).

5 Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign* (New York, 1944); Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee, *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign* (Chicago, 1954); Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes, *The American Voter* (New York, 1960); Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton, 1963), 12, 5, 13, 102. On the methodological context, see Campbell and George Katona, “The Sample Survey: A Technique for Social Science Research,” in Leon Festinger and Daniel Katz (eds.), *Research Methods in the Behavioral Sciences* (New York, 1953). Lowell Dittmer, “The Comparative Analysis of Political Culture,” *Amerikastudien*, XXVII (1982), 20; David J. Elkins and Richard E. B. Simeon, “A Cause in Search

Almond and Verba had completely omitted history and politics from their construction of political culture. They presumed that polls measure timeless cultural attributes; instead, they may simply record ephemeral opinions about a particular regime at a particular time. Almond and Verba seemed to imply that political culture never changed and never varied internally. Marxists objected that *The Civic Culture* ignored class and power relations, and many detractors raised the red flag of normative bias: Almond and Verba seemed to idealize the "moderate" civic culture of Anglo-American liberal democracy that other benighted countries lacked.⁶

The worst flaw in the original political culture concept was its chicken-egg conundrum of cause and effect: Did civic culture create democracy—or did democracy create civic culture? As an explanatory model, political culture seemed tautological; structure rather than culture could well account for democratic success, rendering the civic culture just another dependent variable. Potter had earlier suggested an alternative explanation that American democracy was rooted not in civic culture but in economic "abundance." Almond later showed signs of agreeing with him.⁷

Before long, Verba admitted to having written "a bold and incautious book." He redefined political culture as "beliefs, expressive symbols, and values" that required interpretation as well as measurement. He tried to be more specific about "what aspects

of Its Effect, or What Does Political Culture Explain?" *Comparative Politics*, XI (1979), 129. See also Louis J. Cantori, "Post-Behavioral Political Science and the Study of Comparative Politics," in *idem* and Andrew H. Zeigler, Jr. (eds.), *Comparative Politics in the Post-Behavioral Era* (Boulder, 1988); Mattei Dogan, "Use and Misuse of Statistics in Comparative Research," in *idem* and Ali Zazancigil (eds.), *Comparing Nations: Concepts, Strategies, Substance* (Oxford, 1994).

6 Carole Pateman, "Political Culture, Political Structure, and Political Change," *British Journal of Political Science*, I (1971), 291–305; Jerzy Wiatr, "The Civic Culture from a Marxist Sociological Perspective," in Almond and Verba (eds.), *Civic Culture Revisited*, 103–123; Ronald H. Chilcote, *Theories of Comparative Politics* (Boulder, 1994; 2d ed.), 183–186; Young C. Kim, "The Concept of Political Culture in Comparative Politics," *Journal of Politics*, XXVI (1964), 313–364; Edward Lehman, "On the Concept of Political Culture: A Theoretical Reassessment," *Social Forces*, L (1972), 361–370.

7 Pateman, "The Civic Culture: A Philosophical Critique," in Almond and Verba (eds.), *Civic Culture Revisited*, 57–102; Arend Lijphart, "The Structure of Inference," in *ibid.*, 37–56; Edward N. Muller and Mitchell A. Seligson, "Civic Culture and Democracy: The Question of Causal Relationships," *American Political Science Review*, LXXXVIII (1994), 635–652; David Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and American Character* (Chicago, 1954); Almond, "Capitalism and Democracy," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, XXIV (1991), 467–474.

of political culture are determinants of what phenomena," repositioning the concept as the "link between the events of politics and the behavior of individuals." Verba allowed for cultural changes that could shape or be shaped by politics, for class-specific versions of a culture, and for subcultures within a polity. In a volume dedicated to Almond, he offered his "broad and rather loose definition" to answer their critics, and Pye, his new collaborator, soon followed with a similarly inclusive definition that stretched political culture from "the collective history of a political system" to "the life histories of the members of that system," creating a link between "public events and private experiences." Thus, the political culture concept acquired its "kitchen sink" reputation, eliciting criticism that it described everything about politics "without explaining anything" and turned "abstract idealizations" into uncaused causes. Dissatisfied political scientists implored their colleagues to "stop using political culture as a handy residual variable to explain phenomena we cannot think of other ways to deal with."⁸

Political culture's wash-out left comparative politics in what Wiarda called "a state of crisis," woefully lacking "a single global and integrating theoretical framework." According to Laitin, "The systematic study of politics and culture [was] moribund."⁹

The underappreciated concept emerged again in another branch of the political-science family, the study of American government. Patterson suggested treating regions of the United States as mini-nations with distinct political cultures, and Elazar soon emerged as the leader of this project. For him, political

8 Verba, "On Revisiting The Civic Culture: A Personal Postscript," in Almond and *idem* (eds.), *Civic Culture Revisited*, 394; *idem*, "Comparative Political Culture," in Lucian W. Pye and *idem* (eds.), *Political Culture and Political Development* (Princeton, 1965), 513–518; Pye, "Political Culture," in David L. Sills (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1968), XII, 218; Louis Schneider, "Some Disgruntled and Controversial Comments on the Idea of Culture in the Social Sciences," *Social Science Quarterly*, LIII (1972), 378; Robert C. Tucker, "Culture, Political Culture, and Communist Society," *Political Science Quarterly*, LXXXVIII (1973), 179; Chilcote, *Theories of Comparative Politics*, 9; Ruth Lane, "Political Culture: Residual Category or General Theory?" *Comparative Political Studies*, XXV (1992), 364.

9 Howard J. Wiarda (ed.), *New Directions in Comparative Politics* (Boulder, 1985), xi–xii; David D. Laitin, *Hegemony and Culture: Politics and Religious Change Among the Yoruba* (Chicago, 1986), 171. See also Alasdair MacIntyre, "Is a Science of Comparative Politics Possible?" in Peter Laslett, Walter G. Runciman, and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (Oxford, 1972).

culture comprised the "habits, perspectives, and attitudes that exist to influence political life"; regional variations in political forms resulted directly from "differences in political culture among the states." Elazar theorized that the arrival and spread of Euro-American civilization across the United States from east to west left a residual pattern. He isolated and identified the "moralistic" culture of New England, the "individualistic" culture of the Mid-Atlantic region, and the "traditionalistic" culture of the South. These Ur-cultures migrated to the "continuing frontier" of the West, then to the cities, and finally to the suburbs. Elazar applied "cultural geology" to the sediments of human society that these migration streams left behind, devising intricate maps of each culture's national diffusion.¹⁰

Few political scientists found Elazar's "American mosaic" completely persuasive. Some rejected his triangular typology in favor of a continuum, but none could agree on which two cultures were polar opposites. Some disputed Elazar's terms because his categories entailed a type of belief (individualism), a manner of belief (traditionalism), and a source of belief (moralism), which made them incommensurable. Elazar devoted considerable effort to refine these cultural constructs, never backing down from what he considered "the soundness of [his] original thesis." Eventually, he inflated it into a grand theory of "the actual way in which the art of government is practiced" throughout the United States, even insisting that political culture, "an independent variable with a dynamic of its own," had caused the Civil War.¹¹

Stirred by such extravagant claims, swarms of doubting scholars tested Elazar's cultural constructs against such quantitative state-level variables as voter turnout, tax rates, per capita spending, quality of life, and poll data of all kinds. The results proved

10 Samuel C. Patterson, "The Political Cultures of the American States," *Journal of Politics*, XXX (1968), 187-209; Daniel J. Elazar, *American Federalism: A View From the States* (New York, 1972; 2d ed.), 85, 89, 93-127.

11 Ira Sharkansky, "The Utility of Elazar's Political Culture: A Research Note," *Polity*, II (1969), 66-83; Frederick Wirt, "Does Control Follow the Dollar? Value Analysis, School Policy, and State-Local Linkages," *Publius*, X (1980), 69-88; Ellis, *American Political Cultures* (New York, 1993), 165-169; Elazar, "Afterword: Steps in the Study of American Political Culture," *Publius*, X (1980), 127; *idem*, *The American Mosaic: The Impact of Space, Time, and Culture on American Politics* (Boulder, 1994), 219, 12; *idem*, *Building Toward Civil War: Generational Rhythms in American Politics* (Lanham, Md., 1992), 193-197. See also *idem*, *Cities of the Prairie: The Metropolitan Frontier and American Politics* (New York, 1990).

inconclusive. "For every study that claims to have found Elazar's theory vindicated," one survey of this literature observed, "there is another that claims to find it of little use."¹²

After a much-heralded birth, the political culture concept had mutated into an awkward and unloved scion of political science. "Doubts about the approach no doubt arose from its too-quick popularity, its rapidly acquired faddishness," reasoned Eckstein, and a recent textbook stated, "Rarely has a concept been so frequently used and so often contended." Most users had to refashion the notion to suit themselves—either employing survey data to suggest changes in political culture between generations, thereby sidestepping questions of causality or attitudinal distribution, or whittling down the concept into a humble "heuristic device" merely to set boundaries for political outcomes. At best, culture influenced "preferences" by demarcating the range of conceivable alternatives without choosing among them. Too often, however, "political culture" served as an academic token or a bland cliché. For example, Elazar's friends and foes alike could hardly have disagreed that, in the name of political culture, "the political attitudes of U.S. citizens vary in important ways on the basis of where in the United States they live." With this sort of commonplace wisdom, political culture betrayed its early promise as the "scientific theory of democracy."¹³

After political scientists abandoned the political culture concept, historians gave it a new home. Political scientists had tried to

12 M. Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky, *Cultural Theory*, 242. See also John Kincaid, "Dimensions and Effects of America's Political Subcultures," *Journal of American Culture*, V (1982), 84–92; Jody L. Fitzpatrick and Rodney E. Hero, "Political Culture and Political Characteristics of the American States: A Consideration of Some Old and New Questions," *Western Political Quarterly*, XLI (1988), 145–153.

13 Eckstein, *Regarding Politics: Essays on Political Theory, Stability, and Change* (Berkeley, 1992), 286; Robert W. Jackman and Ross A. Miller, "A Renaissance of Political Culture?" *American Journal of Political Science*, XL (1996), 632–659; Mattei Dogan and Dominique Pelassy, *How to Compare Nations: Strategies in Comparative Politics* (Chatham, N.J., 1990; 2d ed.), 68; Samuel Barnes and Max Kaase, *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies* (Beverly Hills, 1979); Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Style Among Western Publics* (Princeton, 1977); *idem*, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society* (Princeton, 1990); Wildavsky, "Choosing Preferences by Constructing Institutions: A Cultural Theory of Preference Formation," *American Political Science Review*, LXXXI (1987), 3–21; Eckstein, "A Culturalist Theory of Political Change," *ibid.*, LXXXII (1988), 789–804; Robert S. Erikson, John P. McIver, and Gerald C. Wright, Jr., "State Political Culture and Public Opinion," *ibid.*, LXXXI, 813.

observe, dissect, classify, and quantify culture, but U.S. historians absorbed a more holistic view of it from postwar anthropologists. Beyond arts and literature, culture came to encompass the "complex whole" of social organization—spiritual belief, political institution, traditional practice, ethical value, psychological assumption, folkloric custom, popular entertainment, gender roles, material artifacts, and myriad other kaleidoscopic concerns. Indeed, anthropologists argued among themselves about the "conceptual slovenliness" that plagued their "inordinately swollen" construct. Most, however, accepted that the broader definition of culture was "a source of illumination, not a veil of obscurity." As Berkhofer pointed out, both the postwar American Studies movement and what later drew scorn as "consensus" history resulted from similar efforts to trace "manifestations of behavior" to cultural "ideas and values" in anthropological fashion.¹⁴

The temptation to quantify culture seduced relatively few historians, because their subjects, being for the most part dead, could not fill out questionnaires. Instead, historians immersed themselves in texts and applied (or misapplied) anthropological theory as best they could. Many became devotees of Geertz, whose ethnographic method of "thick description" sought to inscribe words and deeds with phenomenological and contextual meaning. Thick description entranced those who already believed with Skinner that "the explanation of human action must always include—and perhaps even take the form of—an attempt to recover and interpret the meanings of social actions from the point of view of the agents performing them." In a Weberian para-

14 Alfred L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952); Milton Singer, "The Concept of Culture," in Sills (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, III, 527–543; Roger M. Keesing, "Theories of Culture," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, III (1974), 73–97; Ward H. Goodenough, "Culture," in Levinson and Melvin Ember (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology* (New York, 1996), I, 291–297; Schneider, "Some Disgruntled and Controversial Comments," 377, 378; Robert A. Levine, "Properties of Culture: An Ethnographic View," in Richard A. Shweder and *idem* (eds.), *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion* (New York, 1984), 67. See also Sherry B. Ortner, "Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, XXVI (1984), 126–166, and the responses in *ibid.*, XXVIII (1986), 356–374. Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., "Clio and the Culture Concept: Some Impressions of a Changing Relationship in American Historiography," *Social Science Quarterly*, LIII (1972), 299. See also Richard E. Sykes, "American Studies and the Concept of Culture: A Theory and Method," *American Quarterly*, XV (1963), 253–270; Brian Attebery, "American Studies: A Not So Scientific Method," *American Quarterly*, XLVIII (1996), 316–343.

phrase, Geertz postulated that "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun," thus declaring that the study of *homo significans* required impressionistic interpretation, not scientific measurement. Focusing on the intersubjective aspects of public acts, thick description became a technique of *cultural semiotics*, or the contextual interpretation of cultural symbols. With it, historians would breathe new life into the political culture concept. Historiographical surveys of Geertz's influence tend to focus on European cultural historians, but his impact on American political historians was no less impressive.¹⁵

On the surface, cultural semiotics seemed incompatible with history because it ignored the origin and evolution of cultural symbols. As Biersack put it, in cultural semiotics, "Meaning is described, never derived." European historians inclined toward Foucault's style of locating symbols (or "representations") in history rather than Geertz's penchant for ahistorical description. But many political historians in the United States embraced cultural semiotics in the 1970s because it promised to liberate them from the theoretical legacies of materialism, behavioralism, and idealism, which had paralyzed the study of ideology. For decades, materialist historians had treated ideology as a rationalization of material interest or an outright obfuscation; behavioralists had treated it as idiosyncratic, hopelessly subjective, and irrelevant; and idealists had treated it as disembodied "thought" with a life of its own, at least until the "linguistic turn" enshrined a less transcendental view of abstract discourse. Many political historians agreed with Hartz that the materialist-idealist schism distorted ideology's role in history by rendering ideas either epiphenomenal or overly deterministic. Many also agreed with such linguistic philosophers as

15 Some anthropologists take a dim view of these efforts; some historians concur. See the symposium, "History and Anthropology: A Dialogue," *Historical Methods*, XIX (1986), 119-128; Jean-Christophe Agnew, "History and Anthropology: Scenes from a Marriage," *Yale Journal of Criticism*, III (1990), 29-50; Nicholas B. Dirks, "Is Vice Versa? Historical Anthropologies and Anthropological Histories," in Terrence J. McDonald (ed.), *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor, 1996), 17-51; Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973), esp. 3-30; Skinner (ed.), *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences* (New York, 1985), 6. See also Kenneth A. Rice, *Geertz and Culture* (Ann Arbor, 1980); Nigel Rapport, "Thick Description," in Levinson and Ember (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*, IV, 1311-1313. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 5. See also Ronald G. Walters, "Signs of the Times: Clifford Geertz and Historians," *Social Research*, XLVII (1980), 537-556; Lynn Hunt, "History Beyond Social Theory," in David Carroll (ed.), *The States of "Theory": History, Art, and Critical Discourse* (New York, 1990).

Austin that behavioralism either ignored the possibility of "doing things with words" or oversimplified human behavior by dismissing intentionality.¹⁶

Geertz deftly fused ideas, interests, and behavior by treating ideology as a socially constructed "cultural system." Ideology, in his view, affected how people perceived and acted on their material interests; it also shaped political ideas with unspoken assumptions that guided behavior. Geertz stressed that ideology was the overall context of "events, behaviors, institutions, or processes," rather than the cause (as idealists assumed) or the effect (as materialists and behavioralists assumed) of social phenomena—including politics. The cultural context of politics encompassed perception of interest, intention for behavior, and assumption behind idea. It inscribed the words and deeds of participants with culturally symbolic meanings that analysts endeavored to decipher. Of course, historians had to keep in mind "that symbols convey multiple meanings and that meaning is construed in different ways by different people," as Darnton cautioned aspiring Geertzians. But the discovery of cultural semiotics helped American historians cultivate a renewed appreciation for the symbolic forms of politics—discourse and practice, voting and speaking, campaigning and governing. Political words and deeds became symbolic texts susceptible to interpretation for meanings intended by communicators, constructed by audiences, and (though Geertz was weak on this point) contested by subaltern groups.¹⁷

16 Aletta Biersack, "Local Knowledge, Local History: Geertz and Beyond," in Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, 1989), 80. See also Karen Lystra, "Clifford Geertz and the Concept of Culture," *Prospects*, VIII (1983), 31–47; Eric Kline Silverman, "Clifford Geertz: Towards a More 'Thick' Understanding?" in Christopher Tilley (ed.), *Reading Material Culture: Structuralism, Hermeneutics and Post-Structuralism* (Oxford, 1990), 143–145; Peter Clarke, "Ideas and Interests," in Theodore K. Rabb and Robert I. Rotberg (eds.), *The New History: The 1980s and Beyond* (Princeton, 1982); Myron J. Aronoff, "Ideology and Interest: The Dialectics of Politics," *Political Anthropology*, I (1980), 1–29; John E. Toews, "Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience," *American Historical Review*, XCII (1987), 879–907; Louis Hartz, "The Problem of Political Ideas," in Roland Young (ed.), *Approaches to the Study of Politics* (Evanston, 1958); John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962); John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969); Skinner, "On Performing and Explaining Linguistic Actions," *Philosophical Quarterly*, XXI (1971), 1–21.

17 Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 193–229, 14; Robert Darnton, *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections on Cultural History* (New York, 1990), 330. See also M. Margaret Conway, "The Political Context of Political Behavior," *Journal of Politics*, LI (1989), 3–10.

Cultural semiotics allowed historians to describe political ideology without transmuting it into idealist "thought," exaggerating it into "hegemony," or reducing it to "false consciousness." When assessed symbolically, politics became as much a part of culture as gender or religion—social constructions that historians routinely subjected to symbolic interpretations. This approach appealed to political historians who recognized that elitist biographies were passé, but whom its successor, the "new political history," failed to satisfy. As confirmed behavioralists, the new political historians downplayed "rhetoric" as deceptive, meaningless, and anecdotal. Instead, they correlated voting and census data to build determinist models of political action based on "ethnocultural" loyalty. These historians stripped objective behavior from subjective context, treating voters in poll booths like laboratory rats in mazes; with a wave of the slide rule, they dismissed ideology as irrelevant to "how democracy works." Cultural semiotics attracted instead those historians of politics who agreed that old-fashioned approaches merely skimmed the surface, but who rejected both the old Marxian-materialist and the new ethnocultural-behavioralist alternatives. Surely there was more to politics than class conflict and correlation coefficients. Armed with Geertz's expansive definition of ideology, which shifted historical attention to the symbolic content of campaign rallies, platform oratory, and political tracts, historians could redeem political culture while doing useful work.¹⁸

"One of the things that everyone knows but no one can quite think how to demonstrate," Geertz pondered, "is that a country's politics reflect the design of its culture." With Geertz's help, historians cut this Gordian knot by replacing the "behavioral orthodoxy" of political science with the classic anthropological

18 Allan G. Bogue, "United States: The 'New' Political History," in Walter Laqueur and George L. Mosse (eds.), *The New History* (New York, 1967). See also Bogue, *Clio and the Bitch Goddess: Quantification in American Political History* (Beverly Hills, 1983). Richard Jensen, "How Democracy Works: The Linkage Between Micro and Macro Political History," *Journal of Social History*, XVI (1983), 31. See also J. Morgan Kousser, "The Revivalism of Narrative: A Response to Recent Criticisms of Quantitative History," *Social Science History*, VIII (1984), 133–149; Bogue, "Systematic Revisionism and a Generation of Ferment in American History," *Journal of Contemporary History*, XXI (1986), 135–162; *idem*, "The Quest for Numeracy: Data and Methods in American Political History," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XXI (1990), 89–116.

theory of culture as unarticulated consciousness—what Kluckhohn, in 1943, had called “covert culture,” which operates through “unstated premises” rather than measurable attitudes. Kluckhohn defined culture as the collection of “premises and categories whose influence is greater, rather than less, because they are seldom put into words.”¹⁹

Tracking down the unspoken assumptions of past politics was not a new quest. As early as the 1940s, long before the discovery of cultural semiotics, ambitious U.S. historians were forging grand syntheses of ideology into cultural systems. For their pains, many of these writers were branded as “consensus” celebrators, even though their intent was not always celebratory. Others showed sensitivity to political symbols in the ideology of colonial Virginians, early national politicians, the followers of Andrew Jackson, and the founders of the Republican party. These early works anticipated the political culture synthesis, but the watershed in historical application of the political culture concept was the discovery of republicanism as the ideology that shaped colonial American perceptions of British rule in the imperial crisis of the eighteenth century.²⁰

For generations, historians had argued about the validity, and even the sincerity, of complaints against British rule leading up to the Revolution. It seemed incongruous that a tax increase could have provoked a general rebellion against king and country. The reinterpretation of revolutionary discourse in light of republican symbols and meanings helped historians to see George III’s “long

19 Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 311; Kluckhohn, “Covert Culture and Administrative Problems,” *American Anthropologist*, XLV (1943), 218; *idem*, *Mirror for Man: The Relation of Anthropology to Modern Life* (New York, 1949), 35. See also Kluckhohn and William H. Kelly, “The Concept of Culture,” in Ralph Linton (ed.), *The Science of Man in the World Crisis* (New York, 1945); LeVine, “Properties of Culture,” 76–77.

20 Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York, 1948); Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York, 1955); Seymour Martin Lipset, *The First New Nation: The United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (New York, 1963); Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans* (New York, 1958–73), 3v; Charles S. Sydnor, *American Revolutionaries in the Making: Political Practices in Washington’s Virginia* (New York, 1962); Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975); Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System: The Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1780–1840* (Berkeley, 1969); John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age* (New York, 1955); Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (Stanford, 1957); Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York, 1970).

train of abuses" from the patriots' perspective as a monstrous conspiracy against liberty and a harbinger of corruption. Bailyn and his students drew on cultural semiotics to stress that revolutionary leaders and a great many followers perceived British policy as "a deliberate assault launched surreptitiously by plotters against liberty." Through the republican lens, American rebels "saw behind the actions of the English ministry . . . not merely misgovernment . . . but a deliberate design to destroy the constitutional safeguards of liberty, which only concerted resistance—violent resistance if necessary—could effectively oppose." Intellectual historians also helped articulate republicanism to recapture the meaning of symbol-laden words like *tyranny*, *corruption*, *liberty*, and *virtue* in their original setting and to reinterpret the Revolution from the revolutionaries' point of view.²¹

Predictably, materialist historians denounced the republicanism thesis as "ideological determinism." Failing to appreciate the subtlety of political culture as a perceptual context and a semiological system, not a cause, these critics mistook republicanism for a "consensus" theory that attributed the Revolution to the writings of "Great White Men." Undaunted, Bailyn's students kept spreading the gospel of political culture, urging colleagues to recognize that public expressions of political ideas "meant something very real to both the writers and their readers," and that revolutionary rhetoric deserved renewed attention for evidence of forgotten meanings. Bailyn himself nominated Geertz as a potential mediator for political historians divided between materialism, behavioralism, and idealism. "Formal discourse becomes politically powerful when it becomes ideology," he asserted—that is, when

21 Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), 95; *idem*, "The Central Themes of the American Revolution: An Interpretation," in Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson (eds.), *Essays on the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1973), 12. See also Robert E. Shalhope, "Toward a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in American Historiography," *William and Mary Quarterly*, XXIV (1972), 49–80; *idem*, "Republicanism and Early American Historiography," *ibid.*, XXXIX (1982), 334–356; Lance Banning, "The Republican Interpretation: Retrospect and Prospect," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, CII (1992), 153–180; Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961); John Greville Agard Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975); Isaac Kramnick, *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America* (Ithaca, 1990); Richard K. Mathews (ed.), *Virtue, Corruption and Self-Interest: Political Values in the Eighteenth Century* (Bethlehem, 1994).

it "shapes what is otherwise instinctive and directs it to attainable goals; when it clarifies, symbolizes, and elevates to structured consciousness the mingled urges that stir within us." Wood, Bailyn's student, likewise echoed Geertz in affirming that the "meanings" people gave to their political actions were "never epiphenomenal" and that "all human behavior can only be understood and explained, indeed can only exist, in terms of the meanings it has."²²

Republicanism advanced the cause of political culture with historians, but family quarrels about the relationships between republicanism, liberalism, and labor radicalism still had to be settled. Accusatory footnotes abounded, as historians sought to prove the predominance of increasingly abstract viewpoints. Taylor complained that the republicanism debate seemed to "describe categories that were, at best, dimly apprehended by people in the past," a sadly ironic outcome for political culture's historiographical debut, given that the concept was supposed to reinfuse past perspectives into the study of past politics.²³

If nothing else, the debate proved that historians, unlike political scientists, would not demand scientific rigor from their adopted concept. Historians refrained from flinging statistics at each other. Despite its flaws and controversies, the republicanism thesis successfully grafted cultural semiotics onto American political history. As Silbey put it, at least historians of republicanism tried to describe "things that link a people together politically, their shared values, memories, and perspectives" within a holistic framework, and Rogers, in an otherwise critical review, cited

22 Staughton Lynd, "Tories and Neo-Whigs," *Reviews in American History*, I (1973), 204; Jesse Lemisch, "The American Revolution Bicentennial and the Papers of Great White Men," *AHA Newsletter* 9 (November 1971), 7-21. For an overview of the "Great White Men" critique, see Ruth H. Bloch, "Radical Whigs Revisited: Reflections upon Bernard Bailyn's *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*," *Intellectual History Newsletter* 15 (1993), 14-22. Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, ix; *idem*, "Central Themes," 11; Gordon S. Wood, "Intellectual History and the Social Sciences," in Higham and Conkin (eds.), *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, 32. See also Wood, "The Creative Imagination of Bernard Bailyn," in James A. Henretta, Michael Kammen, and Stanley N. Katz (eds.), *The Transformation of Early American History* (New York, 1991).

23 Alan Taylor, "Imperative Categories," *Reviews in American History*, XIX (1991), 352. For the barest outlines of these republicanism debates, see Lance Banning, "Jeffersonian Ideology Revisited: Liberal and Classical Ideas in the New American Republic," *William and Mary Quarterly*, XLIII (1986), 3-19; Joyce Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, 1992); Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia, 1990), 106-119.

republicanism's "investment of language and culture with coherence and social power."²⁴

Answering the "consensus" canard, political culture historians began to refocus the concept from the nation to specific groups. Holt and Greenberg described the advent of the Civil War from the perspective of Northern and Southern politicians—both sides viewing themselves as defenders of republican virtue. Howe analyzed the partisan political culture of antebellum Whigs, declaring à la Geertz that "the mood, metaphors, values, and style of Whig political attitudes mattered." Howe profiled prominent politicians, not because they were "Great White Men," but because they were useful informants who "would reveal the fullest development and elaboration of Whig culture." Baker conferred comparable attention on Democrats in the antebellum North, drawing upon anthropological theory to describe partisan "tribal rites." Like Howe, Baker relied on prominent "informants," but her methodological breakthrough was to treat "voting as a symbolic demonstration," the American equivalent of Geertz's famous Balinese cockfight that is, the essential ritual of a culture. At a time when other political historians poured over election returns and census manuscripts, Baker set her sights on "metaphorical language and political iconography," asking "what voting meant in a collective sense," rather than piling up more decontextualized statistics.²⁵

Soon a great many U.S. historians adopted the political culture concept as their own. Reviewers found the approach "stunning in its originality," for it "include[d] everyone who participated in politics," turning historians into mass mind readers. Political culture captured "popular beliefs and expectations that gave meaning to the political process and guided the conduct of

24 Joel H. Silbey, "Conclusion," in Lloyd E. Ambrosius (ed.), *A Crisis of Republicanism: American Politics in the Civil War Era* (Lincoln, 1990), 129; Daniel T. Rogers, "Republicanism: the Career of a Concept," *Journal of American History*, LXXIX (1992), 37. For a more sympathetic review of republicanism, see James T. Kloppenberg, "Republicanism in American History and Historiography," *Tocqueville Review*, XIII (1992), 119–136.

25 Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York, 1978); Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Masters and Statesmen: The Political Culture of American Slavery* (Baltimore, 1985); Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago, 1979), 1–2, 4; Baker, *Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of Northern Democrats in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, 1983), 11–12, 262–263. On the Balinese cockfight, see Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 412–453.

politics and government." With this concept, historians could recover the "manners," "intellectual atmosphere," and "perceptions" of past political figures, though temporal change did not enter into their analyses until Watson chose the transition from the first to the second party system to link economic development to shifts in antebellum political culture. In the process, he demonstrated that the retrieval of submerged patterns of belief need not entail any presumptions of immutability. Formisano examined the same transition more thoroughly, describing how genteel "electioneering" gave way to rough-and-tumble "campaigning" in Massachusetts. He unearthed "the taken-for-granted" of political discourse by combining sources about "community life" with statistical analysis—but without inferring ideas from behavior.²⁶

In the 1990s, Ethington's account of San Francisco's shift from "republican liberalism" to "pluralist liberalism" and Bond's tracking of white Mississippi's "social ethic" have added sophisticated diachronic analysis to political culture history. In this spirit, Wiebe's *Self-Rule* offers a sweeping narrative of the transition from active, high-turnout democracy in the nineteenth-century United States to passive, low-turnout democracy in the twentieth century. Women and non-whites were proscribed from politics, Wiebe freely admits, but for the white-male masses, the nineteenth century was a democratic golden age of "self-determination" when "people ruled themselves" both individually and collectively.²⁷

This edenic era ended with the urban-industrial transformation that brought "centralization and hierarchy." In the early twentieth century, a new "national class" of reformers, businessmen, and intellectuals wielded scientific expertise to isolate po-

26 Holt, "Political Culture and Political Legitimacy," *Reviews in American History*, XI (1983), 527; Richard L. McCormick, *The Party Period and Public Policy: American Politics from the Age of Jackson to the Progressive Era* (New York, 1986), 116; Sean Wilentz, "Whigs and Bankers," *Reviews in American History*, VIII (1980), 349; Harry L. Watson, *Jacksonian Politics and Community Conflict: The Emergence of the Second American Party System in Cumberland County, North Carolina* (Baton Rouge, 1981); *idem*, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York, 1990); Ronald P. Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s-1840s* (New York, 1983), 22, 20. See also *idem*, "Deferential-Participant Politics: The Early Republic's Political Culture, 1789-1840," *American Political Science Review*, LXVIII (1974), 473-487.

27 Philip J. Ethington, *The Public City: The Political Construction of Urban Life in San Francisco, 1850-1900* (New York, 1994); Bradley G. Bond, *Political Culture in the Nineteenth-Century South, 1830-1900* (Baton Rouge, 1995); Wiebe, *Self-Rule*, 9, 39.

litical power from the masses. Wiebe charges the progressive movement with the crime of "atomizing the electorate"—forcing voters to abandon partisan identities in order to cast their ballots as "an individualized private act." No longer did elections function as fraternal celebrations of shared identity. After 1920, faced with the necessity of "absorbing increasing amounts of information on a multiplying array of issues," fewer and fewer Americans straggled to the polls, and voter turnout fell from over 80 percent in the 1880s to barely 50 percent a century later.²⁸

Wiebe tells a familiar story with two new twists. First, whereas some historians argue that the "decline of popular politics" was an unintended consequence of reform, Wiebe is less charitable. "If most progressives did not set out to keep the poor from the polls," he writes with scorn, "they had little invested in bringing them there." Elitist reformers "tolerated lower-class exclusion" if they did not actively seek it. In this respect, *Self-Rule* is a sequel to Wiebe's acclaimed classic, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920*, because it extends to the present his saga of centralized bureaucracy displacing popular self-government. In both works, however, Wiebe seems to romanticize blind party loyalty, bossism, and corrupt political machines because they, at least, yielded high turnouts. He might have devoted more attention to the difference between genuine "self-rule" and its illusion under boss rule, or to the democratic potential of the rational, non-partisan, issue-oriented politics that progressives hoped to create. But Wiebe doubts that voters need to know much about issues: "Even if we accept the implausible proposition that a determinate body of knowledge lies out there to be learned," he writes, "why should citizens be obliged to sit there and learn it?" Given this attitude, it is not surprising that Wiebe finds nineteenth-century elections, which Henry George called "glittering displays of partisanship," more compelling than the bland information-overload of modern campaigns.²⁹

28 Wiebe, *ibid.*, 253, 136–137, 176–177, *et passim*.

29 Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865–1928* (New York, 1986); James Wright, *The Progressive Yankees: Republican Reformers in New Hampshire, 1906–1916* (Hanover, 1987); John F. Reynolds, *Testing Democracy: Electoral Behavior and Progressive Reform in New Jersey, 1880–1920* (Chapel Hill, 1988); Wiebe, *Self-Rule*, 164, 261; *idem*, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York, 1967); Henry George, "Money in Elections," *North American Review*, CXXXVI (March 1883), 209.

The second new twist to Wiebe's "cultural history of American democracy" is his pointed invocation of "culture." Sounding like a comparative politics scholar in the Almond-Verba tradition, Wiebe defines democracy as "invariably popular self-government and variably something else—something culturally specific that has adhered to it." Sounding like a Geertzian ethnographer, he wants to explore "the webbing of values and relations" spun within American democracy. Seemingly a culturalist, not a behavioralist, Wiebe declares that "my study is situated at the intersection between beliefs and actions," steering between "a systematic history of ideas on one side and a detailed history of political behavior on the other." Yet, except for brief forays into exposing sundry political theorists as closeted anti-democrats, Wiebe does not engage the rhetorical conventions, unspoken assumptions, and significant symbols of past politics as would a true student of cultural semiotics. Although *Self-Rule* is a powerfully argued brief for democratic revitalization, its invocation of political culture terminology seems gratuitous. Despite claims to the contrary, Wiebe's real concern is behavioralist, not culturalist: voter turnout, not the meanings and discourse of politics, is for him the measure of democracy. "At some point on a curve of declining turnouts," he writes, "the system no longer functions." Indeed, he dismisses Almond and Verba's theory of political culture precisely because it ignores issues of voting behavior and turnout.³⁰

Other historians combining chronological narratives with cultural comparisons have applied the political culture concept to symbols and ideology rather than to functions and behaviors. This approach seems to hold the most promise for scholarly exploration of political culture. Two decades ago, Kelley helped point the way by retracing the transmigration of social groups between the Jeffersonian/Democratic and Whig/Republican party coalitions. Freeman later offered a more ideologically oriented comparison of the styles, traditions, and worldviews of the two major parties. More recently, Baker, Sklar, and McCurry have produced major studies of women's political culture in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States, emphasizing that the franchise was not a necessary precondition to public political participation and comparing the gendered assumptions that men and women

30 Wiebe, *Self-Rule*, 9–10, 257, 220.

brought to the political arena. These authors imply that the modern welfare state gradually replaced the older laissez-faire state at least partly because male political culture lost its monopoly on formal power. Now that historians have placed political elites in context alongside diverse masses of cultural contestants, no longer can political culture history be said to dwell exclusively on "Great White Men."³¹

Whether inspired by Elazar's work in political science, or by Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, American historians have also begun to connect migration patterns with geographical variations in political culture. Etcheson's *Emerging Midwest* compares the ideologies of southern and northern migrants in antebellum Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Following the trend toward integration of both comparative and diachronic analysis, Etcheson discusses how the events leading to the Civil War sundered state-level polities already divided between two regnant political cultures. Shared ideologies of republicanism, partisanism, and "westernness" could not withstand the resurgence of sectional loyalties in the 1850s. Like Bond, who reconstructed the meaning of "liberty" and "virtue" for white Mississippians, and Greenberg, who likened the interpretation of political culture to "a work of translation," Etcheson shows a keen sensitivity to language, closely reading the key terms "private interest" and "public good" in context. She adds that historians need not dwell on whether political rhetoric was ever sincere, because, in any case, its users were "aware of public sensibilities and community values." In a democracy, since successful candidates "win office by appealing

31 Kelley, "Ideology and Political Culture from Jefferson to Nixon," *American Historical Review*, LXXXII (1970), 531-562; Jo Freeman, "The Political Culture of the Democratic and Republican Parties," *Political Science Quarterly*, CI (1986), 327-356; Paula Baker, *The Moral Frameworks of Public Life: Gender, Politics, and the State in Rural New York, 1870-1930* (New York, 1991); Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work: The Rise of Women's Political Culture, 1830-1900* (New Haven, 1995); Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York, 1995). See also Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920," *American Historical Review*, LXXXIX (1984), 620-647. For other comparative approaches, see Kelley, *Battling the Inland Sea: American Political Culture, Public Policy, and the Sacramento Valley, 1850-1986* (Berkeley, 1989); John D. Buenker, "Sovereign Individuals and Organic Networks: Political Cultures in Conflict During the Progressive Era," *American Quarterly*, XL (1988), 187-204; Sklar, "Two Political Cultures in the Progressive Era: The National Consumers' League and the American Association for Labor Legislation," in Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and *idem* (eds.), *U.S. History as Women's History* (Chapel Hill, 1995).

to assumptions shared with the electorate," historians can "depend on politicians to be articulate voices of the political culture," regardless of ulterior motives. With these words, Howe and Baker's pioneering reliance on prominent informants in the study of political culture now stands vindicated.³²

These impressive new contributions to American historiography bring political culture to fruition. Yet, not every historian is satisfied. For example, Lotchin allows that "political culture seems to be about ideas," but he objects that the concept "fails to link specific political outcomes to specific attitudes," fretting that "without outcomes we cannot fully understand politics."³³

Perhaps the problem is that American historians are offering ever-thicker descriptions of politics by invoking the term, "political culture," without adequate definition or focus. Sometimes it seems to denote not political symbols in context but minute procedural dissections of nominations, campaigns, patronage, and officeholding. Other times, it seems to encompass "common assumptions" about everything from "the legitimacy of the political process in general" to "the role of government in particular." Eager proponents have used the concept to investigate diverse matters, ranging from antebellum literary metaphors and the origins of New Deal liberalism to abolitionist fairs and George Washington's personality cult. Like political scientists before them, incautious historians are somewhat in danger of turning political culture into an indiscriminate uncaused cause once again.³⁴

32 On migration and political culture, see also Aaron Spencer Fogleman, *Hopeful Journeys: German Immigration, Settlement, and Political Culture in Colonial America, 1717-1775* (Philadelphia, 1996). Bond, *Political Culture in the Nineteenth-Century South*, 81-114; Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery* (Princeton, 1996), xi; Etcheson, *Emerging Midwest*, xiii. Greenberg and Etcheson acknowledge a debt to Geertz's theory of cultural semiotics: See Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery*, 147-148n, and Etcheson, *Emerging Midwest*, 145n. On language and political culture, see also Andrew R. L. Cayton, "'Language Gives Way to Feelings': Rhetoric, Republicanism, and Religion in Jeffersonian Ohio," in Jeffrey P. Brown and *idem* (eds.), *The Pursuit of Public Power: Political Culture in Ohio, 1787-1861* (Kent, 1994).

33 Roger W. Lotchin, "The Political Culture of the Metropolitan-Military Complex," *Social Science History*, XVI (1992), 278-279; *idem*, book review, *Journal of American History*, LXXXII (1995), 1213. See also Paul Goodman, "Putting Some Class Back into Political History: 'The Transformation of Political Culture' and the Crisis in American Political History," *Reviews in American History*, XII (1984), 80-88.

34 Philip R. VanderMeer, *The Hoosier Politician: Officeholding and Political Culture in Indiana, 1896-1920* (Urbana, 1985); Patrick F. Palermo, "The Rules of the Game: Local Republican Political Culture," *Historian*, LXVII (1985), 479-496; Taylor, "'The Art of Hook & Snare':

Certain of political culture's early champions have recanted. "The need for conceptual clarity is not mere semantics," wrote Formisano, and Baker complained that, too often, "political culture serves as gloss." The concept appears least promising to those whose explanatory frameworks privilege class conflict and objective conditions over ideology and subjective beliefs. Historians who prefer "political economy" to political culture, and who are more likely to invoke Antonio Gramsci than Geertz when they write about ideology, often accuse political culture historians of constructing static, univocal models, although they do not necessarily hesitate to construct their own in the name of "hegemony."³⁵

The concept has failed to bring about a paradigm shift because it has not been able to subsume the conflicts between materialism, behavioralism, and idealism. Nonetheless, political culture's anticipation of the burgeoning "public sphere" literature, in its focus on publicly negotiated meanings, suggests its continued relevance. Public-sphere participants couch their arguments in symbols that are amenable to interpretation by historians who would have their Habermas with a grain of Geertz. Political culture also has a place in the larger movement toward cultural history that Kelley describes as a "phenomenological critique" of behavioralism.³⁶

Political Culture in Upstate New York During the 1790s," *Journal of American History*, LXXIX (1993), 1371-1396; George C. Rable, *The Confederate Republic: A Revolution Against Politics* (Chapel Hill, 1994), 3; Anne Norton, *Alternative Americas: A Reading of Antebellum Political Culture* (Chicago, 1986); Richard Schneirov, "Political Cultures and the Role of the State in Labor's Republic: The View from Chicago, 1848-1877," *Labor History*, XXXII (1991), 376-400; Lee Chambers-Schiller, "'A Good Work Among the People': The Political Culture of the Boston Antislavery Fair," in Jean Yellin, Jean Fagan, and John C. Van Horne (eds.), *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca, 1994); Simon P. Newman, "Principles or Men? George Washington and the Political Culture of National Leadership, 1776-1801," *Journal of the Early Republic*, XII (1994), 477-507.

35 Formisano, "Ideology and Political Culture," *American Historical Review*, LXXXII (1977), 568; Baker, "And All the Past is Political Culture," 60; John P. Diggins, "The Misuses of Gramsci," *Journal of American History*, LXXV (1988), 141-145; Peter Burke, "Popular Culture Reconsidered," *Storia della Storiografia*, XVII (1990), 43-44; James Scott, "False-Consciousness, or Laying It on Thick," in Richard M. Merelman (ed.), *Language, Symbolism, and Politics* (Boulder, 1992).

36 Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992); Donald R. Kelley, "The Old Cultural History," *History of the Human Sciences*, IX (1996), 117. See also David Chaney, *The Cultural Turn: Scene-Setting Essays on Contemporary Culture History* (London, 1994). For an example of public-sphere history that resembles political culture history, see Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public: From Banners to Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore, 1990).

Political culture, as construed in both political science and history, underscores "the importance of values, feelings, and beliefs in the explanation of political behavior." Just as the concept drew political scientists like Rosenbaum into "the underlying psychological forces that shape much of civic life," it drew historians like Howe into the "political psychology" of past politics. Verba went looking not for "what is happening in the world of politics, but [for] what people believe about those happenings," and he recruited historians as well as political scientists in his quest. No longer must political scientists assume that "culture does not exist or is not important"; nor must political historians conjure up "ethnocultures" from mute statistics of behavior. The charge that the political culture concept tends toward imprecision is not without merit. Yet, despite its analytical expansiveness, the concept represents a valuable check on the assumption that political scientists and historians are "objective" observers.³⁷

One controversial trait has haunted the concept since its political-science origins. "The study of political culture," observed Dittmer, "has since its beginnings been in the vanguard of the behavioral revolution in political science." Once Almond and Verba introduced statistical tables into political culture studies, everyone followed suit. Ironically, Almond ended up renouncing the "behavioral revolution," and Verba warned that a ballot was "a rather blunt instrument" for reconstructing a voter's mentality. But most of their followers continued reducing politics to quantifiable variables. It remained for interpretivist historians to go where behaviorists in both disciplines feared to tread, combining cultural semiotics with textual sources.³⁸

37 Almond, "The Study of Political Culture," in *idem* (ed.), *A Discipline Divided: Schools and Sects in Political Science* (Newbury Park, Calif., 1990), 143; Walter A. Rosenbaum, *Political Culture* (New York, 1975), 4; Howe, "The Evangelical Movement and Political Culture in the North during the Second Party System," *Journal of American History*, LXXVII (1991), 1236; Verba, "Comparative Political Culture," 516; William Bostock, "The Cultural Explanation of Politics," *Political Science*, XXV (1973), 43; Pye, "Culture and Political Science: Problems in the Evaluation of the Concept of Political Culture," *Social Science Quarterly*, LIII (1972), 285-296. Culture was such an alien concept in political science that Verba apologized for using the word at all. See Verba, "Comparative Political Culture," 513n.

38 Dittmer, "Political Culture and Political Symbolism: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis," *World Politics*, XXIX (1977), 553. See also Farr, "Remembering the Revolution: Behavioralism in American Political Science," in *idem*, John S. Dryzek, and Stephen T. Leonard (eds.), *Political Science in History: Research Programs and Political Traditions* (New York, 1995). For a radical critique of behavioralism, see Timothy W. Luke, "Political Science and the Discourses

Gradually the news filtered back to political scientists that historians had done well by political culture. Adams excitedly informed his colleagues that "the non-scientific practitioners of interpretation have something to say to political scientists about the task of understanding the place and production of meaning in politics." He pleaded for cultural semiotics in the study of political culture: "Political meaning is born not just in what individual subjects consciously think and value politically, but in cultural and intersubjective symbols, in collective meanings inscribed in the symbolic texts of political practices themselves." Though no fan of Geertz, Merelman agreed that "if political scientists are to continue to talk about 'political culture' . . . they should attend to contemporary anthropology."³⁹

In the 1990s, political scientists, like historians, have begun to look beyond quantitative behavioralism to cultural semiotics. Brint urges his colleagues to seek "meaning" in politics revealed not by polls but by "the social and discursive practices of a culture." They should learn "the cultural grammar or narrative of a polity—the internal coherence of its social, cultural, and discursive practices." Elkins echoes historians by defining political culture as "a framework for action rather than a set of specific actions or beliefs. It consists of largely unspoken assumptions about the world so 'taken for granted' most of the time that they have become 'second nature.'" Learning "cultural grammar" and "unspoken assumptions" requires textual interpretation informed by anthropological theory rather than sample surveys or correlation coefficients.⁴⁰

Some political scientists prefer Mary Douglas to Geertz as their anthropologist of choice, but their interpretations of political

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of Power: Developing a Genealogy of the Political Culture Concept," *History of Political Thought*, X (1989), 125–149. Almond and Stephen Genco, "Clouds, Clocks, and the Study of Politics," in Almond (ed.), *A Discipline Divided*, 32–65; Verba and Norman H. Nie, *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality* (New York, 1972), 106. See also Pye, "Political Culture Revisited," *Political Psychology*, XII (1991), 487–508.

³⁹ William Adams, "Politics and the Archaeology of Meaning," *Western Political Quarterly*, XXXIX (1986), 549, 562; Merelman, "On Culture and Politics in America: A Perspective from Structural Anthropology," *British Journal of Political Science*, XIX (1989), 470. See also *idem*, *Making Something of Ourselves: On Culture and Politics in the United States* (Berkeley, 1984).

⁴⁰ Michael Brint, *A Genealogy of Political Culture* (Boulder, 1991), 117; David J. Elkins, *Manipulation and Consent: How Voters and Leaders Manage Complexity* (Vancouver, 1993), 123. See also Joseph V. Femia, "Political Culture," in William Outhwaite and Tom Bottomore (eds.), *The Blackwell Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Social Thought* (Oxford, 1993), 475–477.

action are couched in language that participants would have difficulty understanding. Other political scientists follow historians in adopting Geertz's less structuralist approach precisely because of its intelligibility. From this camp, Laitin counsels that "historical (contextual) analysis," combined with a "richer notion of culture, one built upon the Geertzian framework," is the key to political culture research.⁴¹

A recent survey of the field by Welch, a British political scientist, notes approvingly that "political culture as used and developed within American historiography has begun to fulfill some of the promise of a phenomenological approach." Welch appreciates historians because "a researcher investigating the past with the tool of political culture is much less constrained than one investigating it with a view to justifying this or that theory of comparative politics." The problem, he realizes, is that "the empirical bounty offered by the attitude survey has encouraged behavioral political scientists to imagine they have the fullest conception of political culture, and has distracted them from the more fertile modes of inquiry to which historians have perforce been led." Welch admires how American historians escaped "the necessity of choosing between interests and culture as explanations, instead using political culture to transcend that dichotomy." No longer need students of politics argue about the relative weight of ideas, interests, and behavior; political culture is the context of politics itself—the structure of meaning through which political participants develop ideas, perceive interests, and act on both. Political culture, as applied by historians, provides "a means of connecting the analyst's thick description with the self-understandings of the participants," and this connection is what comparative politics has always lacked.⁴²

41 Laitin, "The Civic Culture at 30," *American Political Science Review*, LXXXIX (1995), 171–173. For Douglas followers, see M. Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky, *Cultural Theory*; Ellis, *American Political Cultures*; and Dennis J. Coyle and Ellis, *Politics, Policy, and Culture* (Boulder, 1994). For Geertz followers, see Dittmer, "Political Culture and Political Symbolism"; Adams, "Politics and the Archaeology of Meaning"; and Paul Nesbitt-Larking, "Methodological Notes on the Study of Political Culture," *Political Psychology*, XIII (1992), 79–92.

42 Welch, *The Concept of Political Culture*, 13, 148, 157–158. See also Richard W. Wilson, *Compliance Ideologies: Rethinking Political Culture* (New York, 1992); David Brian Robertson, "Politics and the Past: History, Behavioralism, and the Return to Institutionalism in American Political Science," in Eric H. Monkkonen (ed.), *Engaging the Past: The Uses of History Across the Social Sciences* (Durham, 1994).

When political culture was still in its conceptual infancy within political science, Hitchner argued that it should be nourished with historical analysis, not survey data. Political culture offered great analytical potential, but if the "methodological inclination" to rely solely on supposedly "scientific" data persisted, "we are headed for some trouble." Hitchner wanted his colleagues to become historians of the political cultures that they studied. He believed that "to discard the ever important dimension of history is truly to cut us adrift from reality. There is a wisdom in our past to which we must always listen." Historians, not political scientists, turned out to be the better listeners. Indeed, many political scientists using the political culture concept still rely on poll data, but, among historians, cultural (or "public sphere") approaches are gradually supplanting quantitative behavioralism. "We have not begun to understand our political history sufficiently," Levine recently admonished, "because we too frequently artificially separated it from the larger cultural context of which it was a part." Perhaps that artificial separation has ended. "Historiographically," acknowledges Silbey, a prominent behavioralist, "we live in an age of political culture."⁴³

43 Dell G. Hitchner, "Political Science and Political Culture," *Western Political Quarterly*, XXI (1968), 552; Lawrence W. Levine, *The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History* (New York, 1994), 12; Silbey, "Conclusion," 129.