

# ■ From Distant Object to Close Subject: The Concept of Culture in Political Science

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## ABSTRACT

The relationship between researchers and their objects of study has varied and continues to vary across time and disciplinary traditions. A key element in such variations is the degree of reflexivity involved in the process of knowledge production. To what extent are researchers aware of how they themselves produce knowledge? This question is discussed in the context of political science. It is suggested that the various forms the study of culture has taken in political science can serve as an indicator of different levels of reflexivity or modes of engagement. Three influential conceptualizations of “culture” in political science are presented as examples: political culture theory, civilizational theory, and constructivism. Toward the end, the case is made for a cosmopolitan engagement with culture and examples from political science of this type of engagement are introduced.

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Every concept originates through our equating what is unequal.  
Friedrich Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*

## Concepts

The above quote from Nietzsche continues with him stating that just as no leaf ever wholly equals another, the concept “leaf” itself is formed through an arbitrary abstraction from these individual differences, through forgetting the distinctions. The result is the idea that in nature there might be something besides the leaves which would be “leaf,” some sort of original form, in relation to which actually existing leaves seem like incorrect, unreliable, and unfaithful copies. If we replace the word “leaf” with the concept of “state” we immediately realize how Nietzsche’s reflections can be connected to political morphology (i.e. political science). The problem of the state as concept and the state as reality might be (and most frequently is) interpreted in terms of the relationship between theory and empirical data. Such an interpretation, however, is misleading, at least with regard to Nietzsche’s inquiry. Nietzsche instead points to the very condition of conceptualization and theorization: by naming something, we choose which differences we take into account and which we ignore. The concept “state” can thus be used for societies which are run like family business-

es, as well as for vast, not very integrated stretches of land like the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The same concept is used for countries as large and powerful as the United States and as tiny and marginal like Liechtenstein. Which differences do we ignore when we refer to all these societies and territories with the same concept? On which grounds do we stress one or another difference, for example when we differentiate between “sovereign” and “non-sovereign” nations?

The solution to the conceptual dilemma is not to invent a new concept for each thing, phenomenon, and imagination – even if this would be in line with an altogether consistent correspondence theory. Rather, Nietzsche’s observations require us to take seriously the process of knowledge production and conceptualization in general. Each field of study needs researchers who are committed to this exercise of taking conceptualization seriously. To what degree such researchers are marginalized in their field of study, however, varies between disciplines and academic departments. In this regard, it is not difficult to notice a difference between such social scientific fields as, say, economics and social anthropology. Whereas reflexive theories like hermeneutics and poststructuralism became mainstreamed in anthropology, they continue to be largely invisible in economics. In political science, the situation can be described as being closer to that of economics than that of anthropology. The relative lack of reflexivity in some academic quarters can be measured by how topics like culture, meaning, interpretation, and knowledge production are treated. These are the topics on which the reflexive movement turns. A rather stringent method of examining the level of self-reflection and self-critique in a social science is to consider how a topos like culture is being conceptualized. Roughly speaking, culture can be conceptualized in three ways: (1) distantly, that is, as an object to be explained; (2) paternalistically, that is, as an already known entity; and (3) cosmopolitanly, that is, as an unknown which holds the potential of widening one’s horizon and modes of understanding.<sup>1</sup> Cosmopolitan conceptualizations of culture entail the direct engagement with subjective meanings and world views. Just as cosmopolitanism in general, this kind of engagement exists in tension with rationalist research strategies and truth claims. Rather than to, for example, categorize populations and measure attitudes, cosmopolitan conceptualizations of culture are encounters and dialogues with a Someone. Cosmopolitan conceptualizations are engagements with a You, not with an It. At the end of my discussion, I will get back to the tripartite criterion of distant, paternalistic, and cosmopolitan conceptualizations of culture and try to determine whether conceptualizations in political science correspond to any or all of the three modes of understanding culture. I will also name a number of what I consider to be examples of cosmopolitan conceptualizations of culture in political science.

In order to abide by the theme of academic reflexivity, let me insert a brief note on my own engagements with political science. Professionally, I am an “anthropologist plus.” In my case, the plus stands for peace and conflict studies, a field I have been working in for the past few years. My engagement with political science, and in particular the field of international relations, however, precedes my work in peace and con-

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1 The three modes of conceptualizing culture are inspired by Martin Buber’s and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s distinctions between I-It and I-Thou relationships.

lict studies. The engagement with political science has been one of inquisitiveness and critical deliberation over the last decade or so. In several professional settings, I have worked (and still work) closely with political scientists. Some political scientists I consider good friends. Intellectually, my engagements with political science exhibit some of the features of anthropological fieldwork. As a semantic and social field, political science is not really different from any old tribe. There are the rituals, the dress codes, the speech patterns, the conceptualizations and world views, and so on. More than anything, it has been the latter, the conceptualizations and world views, that caught my attention and turned me into something of an ethnographer of political science (the fact that one is likely to find considerably more neckties and sophisticated jewellery among political scientists than among anthropologists, though telling, seems less important, at least in the current context). Ethnography is always written from somewhere, which means that the difference between the observer and the observed is intrinsic to the very genre of ethnography. At the same time, enough bridging of that difference is needed to be able to grasp others' concepts and world views. Long gone, however, are the days when anthropologists assumed the role of spokesperson for some tribe or people. Today, the notion of "critical engagement with" has largely replaced that of "giving voice to." While my observations would appear to be in line with the "critical engagement" (as well as, one can wish, the type of cosmopolitan engagement described above) approach, I can only hope that members of the tribe of political scientists do not feel misrepresented or mistreated by what is to follow.

In order to create a sense of how "culture" has been and is being conceptualized, I will begin by sketching a preliminary history of the culture concept. This is mostly meant to prepare the ground for further discussion. Thereafter, one separate section is devoted to each of the three more influential conceptualizations of "culture" in political science: political culture theory, civilizational theory, and constructivism.<sup>2</sup> In the concluding part, I correlate these political-scientific concepts of culture to the three modes of understanding "culture" mentioned above. Finally, I propose how to arrive at a more cosmopolitan concept of culture in political science and the social sciences in general, and also provide examples of such conceptualizations in contemporary political science.

A few words on why I focus on just three usages of the culture concept in political science. Apart from their having had some influence on mainstream debates in political science (see footnote 2), the examples of political culture theory, civilizational theory, and constructivism are not picked randomly. It is in these three theoretical approaches that we find a conceptualization of culture that grants culture the analytical status of chief cause behind events, structures, and actions. While other schools of

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2 By "influential" I mean the following: influence can be defined by two criteria; on the one hand, to what extent an approach generates scholarly debate in a particular field of study (the more of debate it generates, the more influential it is); and, on the other, whether or not it is being mainstreamed in the process of generating debate (the more it is becoming part of the paradigmatic mainstream in a particular field of study, the more influential it is). This is obviously a working definition. If one considers the ongoing debate about the validity of describing the theoretical history of International Relations in terms of three (or four) major, classical debates, the precariousness of such a definition suggests itself.

thought in political science – the English school is an example that comes to mind – may take heed of cultural aspects in their theoretical models, culture is not considered the most, or even a, central factor. The same can be said about poststructuralist, post-colonialist, and feminist approaches in political science. Not only have they failed to dislodge mainstream conceptualizations of politics, they also, more often than not, take power, rather than culture, to be the basic explanatory variable. In Gramscian and Foucauldian approaches we may, for instance, find a great deal of culture-speak, but the underlying structure of hegemony, governmentality, discourse, power-knowledge, and so forth, is one of power hierarchies. (In an eighteenth-century-style pamphlet, anthropologist Marshall Sahlins composed this couplet with regard to Michel Foucault: “Power, power, everywhere and how the signs do shrink/Power, power everywhere and nothing else to think”; Sahlins 1993a:20.)<sup>3</sup> This, it seems, makes for a poor concept of culture. Culture, however, is a polysemous concept with a rich history, to which we now turn.

### The concept of culture

A commonplace when discussing the concept of culture is to refer to Kroeber and Kluckhohn’s (1952) estimation that some 156 definitions of the word were in use in the 1950s and to Raymond Williams’ (1983) suggestion that culture is “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.” These two references are usually deployed to convey the complexity of the culture concept. Less frequently we are told what kind of definitions Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Williams identified, and how these definitions have shaped, and continue to shape, the usages of the concept. Considering the currency and political force of the culture concept, it may indeed be worth to rehearse, at least in broad outline, the conceptual history of this particular topos.

The English word “culture” is rooted in the Latin verb *colere*, to inhabit, to dwell, to care for, to grow (in the sense of “cultivate”).<sup>4</sup> The derived words *cultus* and *cultura* refer only to the latter two meanings of the verb “colere.” The Greek were well aware of what today would be labeled “cultural differences,” for example when they distinguished Hellenes from barbarians. Yet, they had no word for culture in the modern or anthropological sense. The Greek concept of *paideía*, which sometimes has served as an equivalent of culture, ought rather be translated as education, refinement. In Latin, expressions like *cultura* and *cultus* (as in *cultura agri* and *cultus agrorum*) were used as metaphors for the cultivation of human qualities. In Greek, at times, the opposite metaphorization was employed, so that one could speak of the *paideía* (“education”) of plants. In both cases, the notion of cultivation was being metaphorically transferred between the realms of agriculture and human refinement, which gave the concept of culture its specific meaning. When Seneca and Cicero write about *cultus animi*, that is, the cultivation of the (human) spirit, they make use of this metaphorical rela-

3 For critiques of power functionalism, see, apart from Sahlins 1993a, e.g., Spencer 1997.

4 The history of the culture concept in Latin, Greek, and German is explored in Fisch 1978. My own recounting of this history is indebted to this source.

tionship. (Similar transferences appear in expressions like *cultus philosophiae*, *cultus litterarum*, *cultus iustitiae*, and so forth, which became common in late antiquity.)

The association between the concept of culture and the notion of cultivation in a figurative sense exists in other languages as well. Hindi knows two words, *sudhara* och *sabhyata*, both of which connote the concept of culture in the sense of cultivating the human character (the expression “Indian culture” or “Indian civilization,” *bharatīya sabhyata* of course, has these days become a political slogan for Hindu fundamentalists). Both words, *sudhāra* and *sabhyatā*, contain references to improvement and refinement. We have here something of a functional equivalent to the Greek concept of *paideía*. In Chinese, someone who had an excellent command of the language and who mastered the art of writing was called *wén huà ren*, a “cultured” person. In Japanese, the corresponding expression was *bunkajin*. Subsequently, both words came to mean “intellectual” – which, since the 1960s, is not necessarily a positively charged word in either China or Japan (or, for that matter, anywhere else). The word for cul-

*paideía* παιδεία; *sudhāra* सुधर; *sabhyatā* सभयता; *bhāratīya sabhyatā* भारतीय सभयता;  
*wén huà ren* 文化人; *bunkajin* 文化人; *wén huà* 文化; *bunka* 文化;  
*mizeraburu* ミゼラブル; *bigguban* ビッグバン; *karuchaa* カルチャ;  
*karuchaashokku* カルチャショック; *gairai-go* 外来語

ture, in Chinese *wén huà*, in Japanese *bunka*, is rooted in concepts that have to do with language and writing. Thus, there existed in China and Japan the idea that he or she who educates him- or herself becomes a cultivated human being. Contemporary Japanese exhibits a great variety of Japanized, transvocalized English words and expressions – everything from *mizeraburu* “miserable,” to *bigguban*, “new economy,” the term referring to the structural reform of the financial system or “big bang.” Similarly, the English word “culture” has entered the Japanese language as *karuchaa*, as in *karuchaashokku*, “culture shock.” Whether or not to use this kind of loan word (*gairai-go*) is a matter of style and context, and thus itself a matter of cultural meanings.

There exists, however, no continuity between the antique concept of culture and the modern use of the same concept (which does not mean that family resemblances are entirely missing). In medieval Latin, we find only two usages of the culture concept: one, in the form of “cultus”, that becomes increasingly charged with the meaning of “(religious) ritual”, and which therefore probably should be translated as “veneration”; and another, “cultura”, that refers back to the original meaning of agriculture, tillage, and cultivation. It is not before the twelfth century’s scientific renaissance, and then only rarely, that we again come across the metaphorical use of the culture concept. At the same time, the Latin words *cultus* and *cultura* are being absorbed into the European vernaculars, in which they undergo the same semantic transformations as in Latin.

What today would be termed “cultural differences” were discussed in terms of customs, language, laws, and so on, in the Middle Ages and in early modernity. Semantic equivalents of the modern culture concept were not in common use. Someone like Regino of Prüm (dead in 915) considered the differences between various peoples to

be differences in descent, customs, language, and laws ("diversae nationes populorum inter se discrepant genere, moribus, lingua, legibus"). Cultural differences were interpreted and debated during the European colonization of the New World in quite similar terms. One way of denoting different groups of people was to use the concepts of *gens* and *natio*, what today might be called "ethnicity". What now are considered cultural traits could be ascribed to different peoples in terms of collective identity.

Only with the rise of modern historical consciousness did culture – or, as it was frequently called in a number of European languages, civilization – become the kind of noun we readily recognize from contemporary debates about cultural differences. It was the notion of civilizational progress that gave rise to the modern concept of culture. The metaphor of individual human cultivation was transferred to the context of historical development, which, before such a transfer could take place, had to be dissociated from its purely theological connotations. This movement occurred in the eighteenth century. Its beginnings are closely associated with the name of Johann Gottfried von Herder, in whose *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784–1791) we find the first systematic application of the concept of culture in the sense of what subsequently would be considered "national cultures". Culture is now something which a certain people "has" and by which the same people is characterized. As was common in Herder's days, cultural differences in general, and the distinct historical developments of various cultures and peoples in particular, were thought to be caused by climatic variations across the globe. At the same time, Herder pointed out that cultural differences continued to exist because of the power of tradition. Indeed, the semantic nexus of culture, tradition, customs, habits, and so on, would eventually become quite commonsensical. The identification of particular cultures would draw its substance from this semantic nexus.

From Herder it is not far to early anthropological speculations about the evolution of human cultures. The evolutionary view of culture is contained, in a nutshell, in the title of one of Lewis Henry Morgan's works: *Ancient Society, or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization* (1877). These were taken to be the evolutionary stages through which human culture had moved. The fact that, despite evolution, so to speak, differences between cultures still existed, was explained as the contemporaneity of, on the one hand, civilization and, on the other, the relicts of savagery and barbarism. As in subsequent paradigms, such as modernization theory, non-Western cultures were considered left-overs or remains from earlier stages of evolution.

With the arrival of systematic ethnographic study of various cultures, the notion of non-Western cultures as mere relicts was abandoned. To this contributed the disenchantment with the image of Western civilization's supremacy that followed upon World War I. The taken-for-granted idea of Europe's cultural superiority met with fairly widespread skepticism. This allowed for romantic notions about "simple cultures" and more "authentic" ways of life to become popular. The discipline of anthropology, which had just been institutionalized and professionalized, turned on the key concepts of "cultures" (in the plural) and "societies", both of which were considered to be highly integrated, functional structures. At the same time, a number of re-

nowned anthropologists contributed deliberately to the kind of cultural critique that fed off the romanticization of exotic cultures (Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* is one of many examples).

It is this concept of culture, or, rather, cultures (plural), which has spread far beyond anthropology. "Cultures" is probably one of the most political concepts in common use at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As will become evident further down, this culture concept of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century anthropology has been resuscitated in political science. Another development that connects political-science conceptualizations of culture with early anthropology is the advance of political culture theory during the 1950s.

### Political culture theory

The first theorists of political culture in political science borrowed their analytical framework from the same source, namely Talcott Parsons, as anthropologists like Clifford Geertz. Like Geertz and his colleagues, they also reacted against the sort of national character studies that had been produced by anthropologists like Mead (1942), Ruth Benedict (1946), and Geoffrey Gorer (1948, 1955; Gorer and Rickman 1949). Unlike Geertz, however, they nevertheless adopted a perspective very similar to that of the anthropological culture and personality school from which had originated the national character studies.<sup>5</sup> The similarity in perspective has to do with assumptions about the continuity between individual behavior and cultural patterns and between the micro- and macro-levels of analysis. Before discussing these assumptions we may want to remember where political culture theory came from and where it was headed.

The canon of political science usually registers Gabriel Almond as the pioneer of political culture theory. When Almond wrote about "Comparative Political Systems" (1956), he distinguished between four types of political systems: the Anglo-American, the preindustrial, the totalitarian, and the continental European. Of these, he depicted the Anglo-American as the norm, in comparison to which he found all the others wanting – which was entirely in line with the atmosphere of modernization thinking and Cold War ideologizing that, at the time, dominated public culture in the United States. Only Americans, and possibly the British, understood politics correctly as a market place of sorts, in which the goal was to arrive at compromises. Subsequently, Almond, together with Sydney Verba, published the landmark, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (1963), in which the authors, on the one hand, tried to make plausible the Schumpeterian thesis that democracy works best when elites compete for votes among a largely lethargic populace, and, on the other, that political evolution has produced a number of distinct mixtures of traditional and modern political cultures. As in Almond's first publication on the topic of political cultures, the United States and Britain are portrayed as the most developed and balanced political culture in a sample of five democracies.

5 Actually, a number of political scientists subsequently embraced the anthropological culture and personality tradition.

Three features stand out in the Almond-Verba concept of political culture: first, it is tightly modeled on what Talcott Parsons called social structure, which Parsons (1964:230) considered to be “a system of patterned relationships of actors in their capacity as playing roles relative to one another”, second, its empirical foundation consists of nothing more than superficially conducted opinion polls; third, it was developed in the context of a very well-funded U.S. Social Science Research Council project amidst Cold War campaigns to demonstrate the inferiority of Communism. The reliance on Parsons meant that Almond and Verba’s political culture concept referred to systems rather than to processes or cases. Early on, Stein Rokkan, in his 1964 review of *The Civic Culture*, questioned the treatment of political cultures as homogeneous systems in which there are direct links between individual and nation. This echoes the critique that was directed at the culture and personality school and its notion of “modal personality”, which was defined as a certain personality structure that occurs most frequently within a society. To be sure, there were differences between Almond and Verba, on the one hand, and the culture and personality school, on the other. Whereas Ralph Linton, Cora DuBois, and others who developed the idea of modal personalities, made their argument in terms of deep personality structures, Almond and Verba rejected psychoanalytically informed theories.<sup>6</sup> Joining up, as they did, with the behaviorist movement, they thought it more scientifically prudent to study values and orientations as overtly articulated opinions. On the other hand, a closer look at the Almond-Verba political culture concept reveals that it has a similar function as that of the modal personality concept. It too is supposed to mediate between the macro-level of nationally defined culture and the micro-level of individual action.<sup>7</sup>

Little surprise then that Rokkan (1964:677) in his review asked why Almond and Verba, in their study, had not at least allowed for such internal differences as could be attributed to region, class, creed, and political affiliation. As Carole Pateman (1971) pointed out, this flaw may not at all have been coincidental since it served the end of idealizing Anglo-American political culture with its purportedly perfect mix of active citizens (the minority) and parochial apolitical sleepwalkers (the majority).

A more severe criticism concerned the basic assumption contained in the Almond-Verba political culture concept, namely that political culture caused a certain form of government, such as democracy, to evolve. Why, asked the critics, should it not be the other way around? Could democracy not have caused civic culture?<sup>8</sup> This criti-

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6 Among the classics of psychological anthropology, one can mention Kardiner and Linton 1939, Linton 1945, DuBois 1960, and Hsu 1961.

7 One could also elaborate further on the differences and similarities between psychological anthropology (a synonym for the culture and personality school), on the one hand, and Almond and Verba’s link to political psychology and cultural psychology, on the other. There is, for instance, more continuity than discontinuity between the Office of Strategic Services’ psychological profiling of Adolf Hitler and anthropologists’ studies of national character. It can be argued that the Almond-Verba concept of political culture has the same underpinnings as these psychological approaches in that all of them aim at identifying traits. Both psychological anthropology and political culture theory thus belong to the genre of trait psychology. The continued importance of trait-psychological assumptions can be gleaned from the fact that, decades of critiques of trait psychology notwithstanding, few American presidents or secretaries of state have met with chiefs of state without first having been provided with a psychological profile of their counterpart.



cism gets to the core of the matter. It challenges the idea that culture is something more than mere ideology or a reflection of material circumstances. Neither Almond and Verba nor others who had made political culture theory their own, were able to counter this critique convincingly. The reason is quite patent. Political culture theory lacked the sort of profound conceptualization of culture that took into consideration key epistemological and ontological issues. First and foremost of such issues is the question of how culture, as an analytical category, is connected to action, events, and institutions. Only if this fundamental problem of the relationship between word and world is addressed in earnest, can one hope to award to culture the kind of central analytical importance which political culture theory attempted to do.

Political culture theory, while no flash in the pan, nevertheless had a rather short career in political science. The concept of political culture spread rapidly, generating considerable debate in political science over a short period of time, whereupon interest in it declined fairly quickly – at least among political scientists. “The systematic study of politics and culture [was] moribund”, writes David Laitin (1986:171). Robert Putnam (1976:103), with considerably more pathos, complained that “values and beliefs [were] discarded from political analysis as froth on the mouth of madmen or froth on the waves of history.”

This may not be an entirely accurate description. While the concept of political culture was waning in political science, it was waxing in neighboring disciplines, such as political history. American historians like Bernard Bailyn, author of *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967) and *The Origin of American Politics* (1968), Daniel Walker Howe, who wrote *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (1979), and Jean Baker, author of *Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of Northern Democrats in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (1983), seized the concept of political culture and turned it into an instrument for semiotic analysis. Bailyn and his students referred explicitly to Geertz and his contention that cultures need to be understood from the inside and that only thick descriptions of cultural systems can count as valid representations of local knowledge. The concept of thick description, Geertz borrowed from Gilbert Ryle, whose illustration of what such a description entails he also uses. To quote directly from Ryle (1971):

Two boys fairly swiftly contract the eyelids of their right eyes. In the first boy this is only an involuntary twitch; but the other is winking conspiratorially to an accomplice. At the lowest or the thinnest level of description the two contractions of the eyelids may be exactly alike. From a cinematograph-film of the two faces there might be no telling which contraction, if either, was a wink, or which, if either, were a mere twitch. Yet there remains the immense but unphotographable difference between a twitch and a wink. For to wink is to try to signal to someone in particular, without the cognisance of others, a definite message according to an already understood code.

It is this “immense but unphotographable difference” that constitutes cultural meaning, which, in its various local renditions, we can understand only if we learn “the

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8 See, for instance, Muller and Seligson (1994) for a formulation of this criticism.

code” – or, rather, the system of codes and symbols that, according to Geertz, is culture. Being able to understand another culture is like “grasping a proverb, catching an allusion, or seeing a joke” (Geertz 1974). To become culturally competent is to understand how other people make sense of the world, which is not the same as conducting an opinion poll.

Despite their both having roots in Parsonian sociology, a profound distinction separates the Almond-Verba concept of political culture from the Geertzian culture concept. Moving from Almond and Verba to Geertz is a move from methodological individualism to methodological holism. According to Geertz, culture is made up of public and shared symbols. That is, culture consists of meanings that are not private but public (a statement that resonates with Ludwig Wittgenstein’s dictum that there is no private language). Culture is social and therefore intelligible, and vice versa. The concept of political culture that was drafted by historians of American politics closely followed the Geertzian theory of culture.

Eventually, political culture theory made a comeback in political science (of course, there will always be those who argue that it never went away – but see Laitin’s and Putnam’s comments above). Most notably, the second generation of political culture theorists picked up where Almond and Verba had left off. In particular, they breathed fresh life into such cultural variables as social trust and civic community, which Almond and Verba already had operationalized. At the same time, they have managed to pump up political culture theory to world-historical and civilizational dimensions.

## Civilizational theory

Four names stand out in the renaissance of political culture theory, Samuel Huntington, Ronald Inglehart, Robert Putnam, and David Laitin. Of these, two, Huntington and Inglehart, have worked hardest at converting the concept of political culture into one of clashes between civilizations. Since his landmark publication, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (1992), Putnam has turned his attention to the political culture of the United States. Laitin, who started out by studying political culture in Africa and now focuses on Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, tries to combine rational choice theory with political culture theory. This can be said to have resulted in two things: on the one hand, Laitin’s instrumentalization of Geertz’ culture concept demonstrates the shortcomings of Geertz’s model; on the other, it reduces culture to preferences and choices (involving such things as equilibrium selections and tipping games).<sup>9</sup> Both Geertz’ model and the game-theoretical interpretation of the culture concept start from a common assumption: cultural values and beliefs are shared equally among the members of a cultural community. If they were not, the problem arises what exactly constitutes a culture or cultural system, and, in the case of Laitin, what precisely it is people choose between.

Be that as it may, Putnam and Laitin have contributed only marginally to the blowing-up of political culture theory to the size of civilizational theory. This has been accomplished mainly by Inglehart and Huntington. Inglehart’s pet project is the so-

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9 For a brief outline of Laitin’s position, see Laitin 1997.

called World Values Survey, which grew out of the European Values Survey that was published for the first time in 1981. The 1995-1998 World Values Survey questionnaire contains questions like, “If someone said that individuals should have the chance to enjoy complete sexual freedom without being restricted, would you tend to agree or disagree?” and “How important is God in your life? Please use this scale to indicate – 10 means very important and 1 means not at all important.” Aside from the absurdity of such questions – one can wonder what “complete sexual freedom” means in any circumstance? And what could I possibly have meant if I had answered the second question with, say, “3” or “6”? – Inglehart’s quantifications of cultural values has led him to draw conclusions about civilizational conflicts. Inglehart identifies clashes between civilizations with regard to a number of cultural values: the societal role of religious authorities, political attitudes, and, most importantly, according to Inglehart, gender equality and sexual liberation (which is why the question about “complete sexual freedom” is far from marginal in this context).

Now, Inglehart’s surveys, of course, are altogether outshone by Huntington’s clash-of-civilizations thesis in the realm of public and scholarly debate. When Inglehart subsequently criticizes Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations* (1996), he does not question the existence of discrete cultural entities called civilizations, or whether cultural differences matter in geopolitical perspective. What Inglehart claims is instead that Huntington’s focus on core political values leads him astray. The most consequential cultural differences have to do with gender equality and sexual liberation, not with what people think about representative democracy, argues Inglehart (Norris and Inglehart 2002). Quips Inglehart: “The cultural gulf separating Islam from the West involves Eros far more than Demos” (Norris and Inglehart 2002:236).

It could be argued that Inglehart misrepresents Huntington’s civilizational theory. Working backward from Huntington’s conclusions about strengthening Western civilization as to be able to withstand the onslaught of the modern-day Huns (that is, the Muslim and Confucian civilizations which Huntington identifies as the West’s major enemies), one arrives at the same assortment of core values with which Inglehart operates. Huntington, like Inglehart, believes that civilizations are path-dependent, pertinacious constellations that are organized around core values. To quote Huntington (1993:25):

Civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition and, most importantly, religion. The people of different civilizations have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views of the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy. These differences are the product of centuries. They will not soon disappear.

What Inglehart has called the “sexual clash of civilizations” (Inglehart and Norris 2003:65) would seem to be part and parcel of this definition of civilizational differences.

Furthermore, just like Inglehart, and wholly in the spirit of modernization theory, Huntington (1993:22) holds that “major differences in political and economic devel-

opment among civilizations are clearly rooted in their different cultures.” The congruences between the civilizational theories of Inglehart and Huntington thus far outweigh whatever differences there may exist between them. That the one has come into being with the aid of copious and, one can guess, costly surveys and the other on the basis of armchair speculations about what divides one culture from the other seems to speak more to the dubious design of the World Values Survey questionnaires than to Huntington being in a state of satori. The most significant difference between the civilizational theories of Inglehart and Huntington derives from the latter’s greater awareness of the need for mediating concepts that connect values and geopolitics. While Inglehart offers little in the way of a schema that makes us understand how durable cultural values can produce civilizational conflicts, Huntington makes use of the notions of contrastive identity and “kin-country syndrome”. It is because “[w]e know who we are only when we know who we are not and often only when we know whom we are against” (Huntington 1996:21), and because people rally behind “their” civilization, that cultural values have geopolitical ramifications, according to Huntington.

It stands to reason that Huntington would be criticized on the same grounds as Almond and Verba. Why does he not at least consider such internal differences as could be attributed to region, gender, class, and political affiliation? The question is whether breaking up civilizations into smaller units solves the problem of treating populations, religions, territories, and cultures as if they were homogeneous. It is one thing to decry patterns of cultural differences, be they related to differences in cultural competence (which includes what commonsensically is referred to as “cultivation”, *Bildung*, *culture*, 教養 [*kyōyō*]), and so on; and which Pierre Bourdieu misleadingly called “cultural capital”), or in historical context, or in conditions and circumstances of living. It is a whole other thing to believe that one can divide culture into neat lots, Westerners to the left, Muslims to the right. If one goes even further, as does Huntington, and draws a thick black line across a map to indicate the border between Western Christianity, on one side, and Orthodox Christianity and Islam, on the other (Huntington 1993:30), one is guilty of committing simplification to the point of deception.

With Huntington, civilizational theory has moved (far) beyond political culture theory’s methodological individualism. If political culture theory homes in on the relationship between the individual and his or her environment (or structure of opportunities), Huntington’s civilizational theory only acknowledges what in Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky’s grid-group culture theory is termed “hierarchist” sociality. That is, social actors are not only highly, or even entirely, integrated in a sociocultural system, they also abide completely by all societal rules and share all cultural values. In comparison with Huntington’s one-dimensional human, Douglas and Wildavsky’s ideal-typical individuals at least come with four or five alternative cultural characteristics. According to the grid-group schema, people and their social environments can be classified along two dimensions of sociality: one of regulation or prescription (“grid”); the other of incorporation into a bounded group (“group”).<sup>10</sup>

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10 Douglas 1982:190-192.

Grid-group analysis can be mentioned as yet another cultural theory in political science, although its immediate impact on mainstream debates in political science have been rather limited. Indirectly, however, grid-group thinking has been part of most conceptualizations of culture in political science ever since the first wave of political culture theory. Today, the grid-group complex is discussed in terms of norms and identity – two keywords in International Relations constructivism.

## Constructivism

By now, constructivism can be considered one of three dominating paradigms in International Relations (IR). (The other two are neorealism and neoliberalism.) IR, for all intents and purposes, must be regarded as a subdiscipline of political science. As opposed to another subdiscipline of political science, to wit comparative politics, IR has been about the development of theories that by and large disregard ideological and domestic differences between states, and that therefore could be viewed as systemic, structural, and universal. The institutionalization of IR began in 1919 with the establishment of the first department of international politics and the Woodrow Wilson chair of international politics at the University College of Wales in Aberystwyth. The purpose was to study the international system and to contribute to the development of the League of Nations in order to prevent another global war. Today, this type of international studies would probably be referred to as peace and conflict studies. The fourth Woodrow Wilson professor and head of the department, Edward Hallett Carr, would be the one to introduce to IR the notion of international anarchy, that is, the view that world politics is a self-help system in which each nation must fend for itself, which in reality often may entail agreeing to compromises rather than going to war.

What Carr objected to most strongly was the, at the time rather widespread, idea that the First World War had been caused by the involved parties failing to understand one another. He found this idea to be idealist and utopian. Despite Carr's critique and his growing influence in IR theory, the investigation of how misunderstandings can lead to large-scale conflicts continued in the field of study that since the late 1950s is called peace and conflict studies. Contrary to the most widely spread IR paradigm, which was (and continues to be) derived from Carr's "realism", peace and conflict studies adopted a processual perspective on communication and learning. Rather than buying into the image of an international anarchy, researchers like Lewis Fry Richardson, Kenneth Boulding, and Johan Galtung, writing as they did in the system-theoretical genre of the time, tried to show that international anarchy and conflict can be unlearned. In 1992, Alexander Wendt's article "Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics" was published in the journal *International Organization* (Wendt 1992a). It quickly became a classical text of IR scholarship. In it, Wendt does not question the basic tenet that the international system of states is anarchical. He, however, does dispute the neorealist and neoliberal explanation that this, due to the absence of a world state, somehow is a natural state of affairs. He argues:

A world in which identities and interests are learned and sustained by intersubjectively grounded practice, by what states think and do, is one in which “anarchy is what states make of it.” States may have made that system a competitive, self-help one in the past, but by the same token they might “unmake” those dynamics in the future. (Wendt 1982b:183)

In this quote, which well captures Wendt’s position, he would seem to do little more than echo the received wisdom of peace and conflict studies.<sup>11</sup> Compared to early peace and conflict studies, IR constructivism, however, is less informed by behaviorism and cybernetics than by contemporary sociology. Processes of learning (and unlearning) need no longer be defined in terms of feedback loops. Instead, they are expressed with reference to, and in the terminology of, Anthony Giddens’ theory of structuration. Both Wendt and Nicholas Onuf, who can be credited with having authored the original publication in IR constructivism (Onuf 1989), depart from Giddens, only that Onuf is more preoccupied with the role of language in structuration. Another difference between Wendt and Onuf is that the latter is closer to postmodernism in realizing that a theory of structuration necessarily also has implications for the process of knowledge production in the discipline of IR itself. Onuf asserts that there is no foundation for IR theory, and thus for constructivism, outside of the ongoing process of construction.<sup>12</sup>

Through Wendt and Onuf – and others, such as Friedrich Kratochwil, John Ruggie, and Martha Finnemore – the quintuple constellation of (1) interaction, (2) norms, (3) interests, (4) institutionalization, and (5) identity has become fixed as the epistemological basis of IR constructivism. The connection between these five analytical items can be summarized as follows: interaction creates (the need for) norms and identities; norms determine how interests are defined; a relatively stable set of identities and interests can be called an institution; institutionalization creates the effect of norms, interests, and identities appearing to be natural. Where, then, does change enter this analytical constellation? To answer this question, constructivists have referred to Joseph Nye’s distinction between simple and complex learning processes. To quote from Nye (1987:380):

Simple learning uses new information merely to adapt the means, without altering any deeper goals in the ends-means chain. The actor simply uses a different instrument to attain the same goal. Complex learning, by contrast, involves recognition of conflicts among means and goals in causally complicated situations, and leads to new priorities and trade-offs.<sup>13</sup>

11 Stefano Guzzini (2003) remarks on the analogies between peace and conflict studies and IR constructivism.

12 On the relationship between constructivism and poststructuralism/postmodernism: as mentioned in the beginning, the most important criterion for including in, or excluding from, my discussion various conceptualizations of culture in political science has been what analytical status is ascribed to culture. Approaches that, in analysis, turn culture into a function or effect of power have therefore not been included. This explanation may or may not satisfy the reader who, in the presentation of IR constructivism, misses names like Richard Ashley, R.B.J. Walker, James Der Derian, and Cynthia Weber. Other discussions are available, however. For a thorough critique of constructivism from a postmodern point of view, see, for example, Zehfuss 2002. For a work that treats “conventional and radical constructivism” together, see, for instance, Fierke and Jørgensen 2001; in particular the introduction by the editors.

Change, in IR constructivism, comes from actors redefining their goals and/or identities in accordance with available cultural norms. It is at this point that we can discern the crucial distinction between constructivism and the so-called neo-neo paradigm in IR.<sup>14</sup> The analysis of how actors define their goals and identities is what separates rationalism from constructivism. In one case – that of rationalism – identities are interpreted as individual preferences, and goals are taken to correspond to preferences. To this is commonly added that “man’s natural proclivity is to pursue his own interests” (Brennan and Buchanan 1985:ix). Actions “are valued and chosen not for themselves, but as more or less efficient means to a further end” (Elster 1989:22). The outcome of action is what matters. Actors will make choices between courses of action depending on how they judge outcomes. Norms, rules, and institutions enter the picture only as possible constraints to available choices.

Constructivists, on the other hand, may hold that actors will make decisions based on what to them seems most appropriate in relation to prevailing rules and norms. The logic of appropriateness, rather than the logic of consequentiality (to speak with March and Olsen 1989:160ff), is what seems to drive actors to make certain choices.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, actors are able to learn new norms and to redefine situations. And so on.

Because of its close affinity with Giddens’ theory of structuration, it is possible to review and revise IR constructivism by way of rethinking Giddens. In particular, scrutinizing Giddens’ central proposition that he has solved the agent-structure problem with his structuration theory seems worthwhile in the light of IR constructivism’s reliance on the conceptualization of norms, identities, and interests. Quintessential to such a revision is to investigate how culture is conceptualized in Giddens’ – and, by extension, in IR constructivism’s – theoretical edifice. Asking where and how culture enters Giddens’ theory, in principle, equals asking where and how the same concept enters IR constructivism.<sup>16</sup> Connected to the problem of culture in structuration theory is IR constructivism’s often criticized state-centric, top-down analysis of world politics. To designate states as the principal or even sole actors in world politics has been, and still is, common in IR. This has been reproached over and again, not least from within IR.<sup>17</sup> The critique of state-centrism has most frequently come from those who study globalization and who would like to relabel IR, Global or Globaliza-

13 Nye has borrowed the distinction between simple and complex learning processes from Argyris and Schon (1978), who use the expressions “single-loop” and “double-loop” learning for the same distinction.

14 That is, neo-realism and neo-liberalism – hence “neo-neo.”

15 March and Olsen (1989:160ff) differentiate between two logics of decision-making, the logic of consequentiality and the logic of appropriateness. With the logic of consequentiality, “human behavior is driven by preferences and expectations about consequences. Behavior is willful, reflecting an attempt to make outcomes fulfill subjective desires, to the extent possible” (ibid:160). With the logic of appropriateness, decision-making “involves what the situation is, what role is being fulfilled, and what the obligations of that role in that situation are” (ibid).

16 That the concept of culture indeed does enter IR constructivism can be gleaned, for example, from the title of an anthology entitled, *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (1996), edited by Peter Katzenstein.

17 See, for example, Held and McGrew 1998; Macmillan and Linklater 1995; Rosenau 1990; Rosenau and Czempiel 1992; Shaw 1994.

tion Studies, and the object of study, world politics (instead of international relations).

In the next and final section, I will discuss whether a revision of Giddens' structuration theory, and IR constructivism's account of culture, can be combined with a research approach that goes beyond state-centrism. In conclusion, I will assess the four conceptualizations of culture in political science under discussion: political culture theory, civilizational theory, IR constructivism, and a revised concept of culture that is not limited by a narrow focus on top-down, state-centric, and rationalist structures.

### **Culture: from distant object to close subject**

Giddens advanced a theory of structuration to solve the agent-structure problem. Giddens – just like Bourdieu with his structuralist constructivism – tried to demonstrate the mutual constitution of agents and structures. As William Sewell (1992) has pointed out, however, in one vital respect, structuration theory is both inconsistent and incomplete. In order to unite agency and structure in the single figure of structuration, it is vague on what exactly is the substance of the agency-structure connection. Giddens (1984:377) does tell that structure “exists only as memory traces, the organic basis of human knowledgeability, and as instantiated in action.” But what are memory traces and human knowledgeability if not culture? And how is structure being instantiated in action?

The clues Giddens provides point into the direction of the *langue-parole* dichotomy. Ferdinand de Saussure's *langue-parole* opposition, as well as Louis Hjelmslev's schema-usage and Noam Chomsky's competence-performance constellations, differentiate between, on the one hand, language and, on the other, speech. What structuration theory claims is that language only exists as speech. Just like language, the structure that structures is only virtual, says Giddens. If cultural schemas only exist as instantiated by action, in what terms do people decipher and interpret other people's “memory traces and human knowledgeability”? In other words, is there room for culture outside of practice?

The answer could be yes, if we were to follow Paul Ricoeur in contending that actions and events can be considered as texts. In his seminal essay, “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text” (1971), Ricoeur suggests that the interpretive and explanatory work that is being performed in the ordinary course of life, in which people try to make sense of what other people say and do, is not all that different from the kind of interpretation and explanation conducted by readers of texts. If we concede Max Weber's point about human action always being perceived as somehow meaningful, actions will inevitably be subjected to interpretation and explanation. What is being interpreted and explained, however, is not action or practice in itself (whatever that may be), but its meaning. Meanings, on the other hand, are objectifications, inscriptions, fixations, and so on. It is these inscriptions of action, practice, and events which we can refer to as culture.

Another way of making the same point is to paraphrase, and adapting to the current context, Sewell's (1992) revision of structuration theory. What is lacking in this theory, and what I think is lacking in much of IR constructivism as well, is an expla-



nation for how culture can change from within. To accommodate the potential for change in a model of culture, the culture concept needs to be honed. First of all, culture cannot be likened to a homogeneous structure or system. Actors have access to alternative cultural codes and can be expected to engage in code switching. In the same vein, actors are likely to interpret and explain actions and events differently. Various cultural schemas which exist simultaneously may contradict one another. Not all actors will detect such contradictions. They may mix alternative codes freely. Cultural distinctions, however, may gain force in times of crisis (see Swidler 1986). Secondly, cultural meanings can be applied to novel or unfamiliar situations and contexts, which, in turn, can produce unforeseen consequences. To quote Sahlins (1993b:16): “the world is under no obligation to conform to the logic by which some people conceive it.” History (practice) always puts categories at risk.

From this we can conclude that the human acts of interpretation and explanation introduce change into culture. It is in this sense that change comes from within culture. Political scientist Lisa Wedeen (2002:722) makes a similar point when she calls attention to the fact that “a common conceptual system (intelligibility) is not the same as a shared episteme (“common knowledge”).” In her study of political rhetorics and performances in Syria (Wedeen 1999), she investigates the puzzle of why the Syrian regime expended a considerable portion of scarce material resources on the cult of the country’s president Hafiz al-Asad – despite the fact that nobody, including those who created the official rhetoric, believed its claims.<sup>18</sup> Wedeen calls this type of political culture an “as if” politics. She suggests that “as if” politics make sense because they actually work. Citizens self-consciously submit to authority, their own disbelief in this authority’s rhetoric notwithstanding. Ironic distance and disbelief are part of a larger pattern of political compliance.

Wedeen’s analysis of “as if” politics can serve as an illustration of how to hone the concept of culture in political science. Culture, in the shape of semiotic practices and intelligibility, has “real” political consequences. It can either sustain a regime, as in the case of Syria, or cause radical, world-historical upheavals, as in the case of the end of the Cold War. The latter case is portrayed excellently by Robert Herman (1996) in his discussion of how Soviet (*novoye mishleniye*, “New Thinking”) emerged and turned the tide of history. As Herman reports, the members of three social science institutes of the Soviet Academy of Sciences – IMEMO (World Economy and International Relations), ISKAN (USA and Canada), and IEMSS (Economics of the World Socialist System) – figured prominently in this development. “Propelled by a vision of the USSR as a democratic and peaceable member of the international community and touting ‘values common to all mankind,’ these ‘idealists’ sought to eliminate the underlying causes of East-West conflict” (Herman 1996:275). Herman also makes clear that “even after the selection of Gorbachev – known more as a talented technocrat than as an ardent reformer – the country was not fated to travel the New Thinking road” (ibid:278). Alternative scenarios existed all along; and as the events of 19 August, 1991 (the date of the coup against Gorbachev) demonstrated, there were those who never agreed on the definition of the problem or the solutions offered. Even

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18 What John Austin (1975:132 and 134) may have called “infelicities” or “misfires”

Gorbachev's own thinking developed significantly during his six years in power (ibid:287). Not only did New Thinking evolve over time, its outcome was not given. Both members of the social science institutes and decision-makers like Gorbachev and Shevardnadze have attested to the importance of dialogues with Western social scientists and policy experts for the development of New Thinking (ibid:285 n 45).

One way of conceiving of the end of the Cold War is thus as a case of cultural code switching, or, in the language of peace and conflict research, of learning. Another way of interpreting New Thinking is as an instance of what Sewell (1992:17), with reference to Bourdieu, calls "the transposability of schemas". That is, schemas "can be applied to a wide and not fully predictable range of cases outside the context in which they are initially learned" (ibid). Transposing cultural concepts of universal human rights, social democracy, and global community to a context in which class struggle, communism, and systemic conflict had been paradigmatic brought with it the end of one particular global scenario. In sociology, one often hears that if Japan did not exist as a case that falsifies many assumptions about the causes of modernization one would have had to invent it. The end of the Cold War serves a similar function in political science. Conventional approaches, from rational choice theory to systemic and functionalist theories, fall short of providing a consistent explanation for the dramatic changes in Soviet foreign and domestic policies. Culture and learning approaches, on the other hand, can explain historical shifts and normative revolutions. All is not bad with the conceptualization of culture in political science.

Going back to the beginning, we can note that the concept of political culture suffered from a number of decisive shortcomings. On the one hand, the entire theoretical edifice had been erected on the shakiest of epistemological and ontological foundations. The combination of methodological individualism and methodological nationalism made for incongruities between levels of analysis and clouded the very definition of what the object of study ought to be. Moreover, political culture theory, from Almond to Inglehart, has been an ethnocentric project, apparently without being awake to it. "Cultures" were treated as external objects. They were being measured, not understood.

Inglehart and his colleagues bridge the divide between the political culture tradition and civilizational theory (cynics might construe this maneuver as the world values team riding on the coat-tails of Huntington). Like political culture theory, civilizational theory, made famous by Huntington, avails itself of values and orientations as the theoretical underpinnings. This, however, merely functions as the presupposition or pre-judgement of the theoretical model. The gist of the theory is that huge civilizational blocs collide with one another and that, in world-historical perspective, the collisions may be of the most violent kind. Lacking even in the sort of survey data that Inglehart uses to legitimate his theses, Huntington must rely on prejudices, impressions, and scattered literary comments to classify different civilizations. Cultures are defined as imperfect and defective in relation to the culture Huntington and Inglehart identify themselves with. They are wanting when it comes to religion, political culture, sexual liberation, or all of the above. Culture is conceptualized paternalistically ("we know what is best for you"). Neither engagement with, nor understanding of, non-Western cultural processes enters the analysis.

Constructivism in IR is not burdened by the failures of political culture theory and civilizational theory. First and foremost, this has to do with IR having a different object of study. Instead of researching cultural differences, IR has searched for general rules that guide the behavior of states in relation to one another. The idea of an anarchical international system became a commonplace in IR. Constructivism introduced the notion that “anarchy is what states make of it”. International norms, malleable state identities, and norm-guided definitions of national interest are at the core of the conceptualization of culture in IR constructivism. Culture is considered not in terms of methodological individualism or methodological nationalism, but from the vantage point of methodological holism. This has prepared the ground for a more cosmopolitan approach to culture in political science, as global norms and learning processes begin to replace images of the world as a jigsaw puzzle of cultures.

By emanating from structuration theory, constructivism suffers from some of the same problems as Giddens’ theory. In particular, the concept of culture remains underdeveloped. As long as the dialectics of agency and structure is blanketed in fog, it is difficult to accept structuration theory’s claim to have dissolved the agent-structure dichotomy. Ultimately, agency and structure stay separate.

Political scientists like Peter Mandaville, Iver Neumann, Matthew Evangelista, Michael Barnett, Lisa Wedeen (to name just a few), have actively engaged with this problem in various manners. Some of them have deserted the top-down external view of cultural processes for ethnographic research on bottom-up processes. Others have used their first-hand knowledge about top-down politics to provide cultural analyses of events and situations (see, for instance, Barnett’s (2002) eyewitness account and sophisticated analysis of the United Nations’ inaction during the Rwanda genocide). A cosmopolitan conceptualization of culture has occurred in this intellectual environment. Culture is being studied as an unknown which holds the potential of widening one’s horizon and ways of understanding. The mode of research is one of engagement: Mandaville’s (2001) with global islam; Wedeen’s (1999) with Syrian politics; Evangelista’s (1999) with the global peace movement’s role in ending the Cold War; and so on. Of paramount importance in this cosmopolitan turn is the direct engagement with subjective meanings, that is, with other people’s world views. Conceptualizing culture as enabling change, even world-historical change, may, in a best case scenario, contribute to the development of political science. As there is no last word in science, we can look forward with excitement to where such a development can take us.

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