CHAPTER 8

Culture, Rationality, and Violence

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At first glance, the brutal world of political violence may seem unrelated to the niceties of culture. Nonetheless, culture, conceived as the relationship between shared values and social relations, is a key to explaining the conditions under which individuals and groups will engage in violence and the types of violence that they will employ. Furthermore, although culture and rationality have long been seen as opposing explanations for political phenomena, cultural variables are particularly important for providing coherent rational choice explanations of many types of political behavior, including violent collective action.

In this chapter, we examine two types of rational choice explanations for the use of political violence. One type of explanation assumes that individuals are simply pursuing their material self-interest. We will argue that from such a point of view, numerous aspects of political violence seem paradoxical and irrational. Another type of explanation makes individuals' goals exogenous (i.e., external to the explanatory model), leaving them to be inferred from observed behavior or subject to ad hoc assumptions. But because such explanations cannot account for the nature of goals, they are difficult to use predictively. Cultural theory can help address this gap in rational choice explanation because it explicitly deals with how the goals of individuals are shaped by their culture and how culture is in turn shaped by the constraints of social viability. At the same time, it is quite compatible with the assumption that individuals act rationally to maximize these goals.

We will first address shortcomings in rational choice and nonrational choice explanations of political violence, concentrating in particular on the inability of existing theories to explain why antistate collective violence should occur at all. We will then present a rational choice interpretation of cultural theory, showing how cultural theory's basic assumptions can be incorporated directly into assumptions about individual preferences and beliefs. We will also present an analysis of
political violence based on this interpretation, showing how the theory can not only explain the existence of and conditions for violence but also cast light on characteristics of violence that might otherwise appear irrational. In this way, we hope not only to provide improved explanations for political violence but also to open a path to integrating rational choice with cultural explanations of political behavior.

THE "PARADOX" OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Any discussion of political violence should begin with an apparent paradox: Under almost all plausible circumstances, it seems irrational for materially oriented, self-interested individuals to engage in collective political violence. The main reason for this apparent irrationality lies not in any presumed inherent hatred of violence but in the so-called free-rider problem. If we assume rationality, there is no reason for individuals to participate in any type of violent activity unless the expected benefit (according to the individual’s preferences) from such an activity exceeds the costs. Since most rationalist theories of political action assume that individuals seek only to maximize their personal material welfare, this implies that there must be a material reward involved in political violence that more than compensates for the high risks. However, there seem to be very few cases of collective political violence when this is a reasonable assumption.

As a number of theorists have noted, the participation or nonparticipation in violence of a rank-and-file member of a political group can have only a small effect on the group’s probability of success. Furthermore, the member will rarely receive substantial “selective incentives” (personal, nonshared rewards) for participation; his main incentive will be the benefits that result from the advancement of the group as a whole. However, he will generally not be excluded from these benefits even if he has not contributed to their achievement. Hence, the paradox arises: It seems under most circumstances irrational for materialistic, self-interested individuals to participate in collective violent activity. Several rational choice explanations have been proposed to resolve this and related paradoxes of individual participation in high-risk collective action. An explanation put forward by Samuel Popkin to explain peasant rebellions emphasizes the role of political entrepreneurs who organize efforts either by providing selective incentives to those who participate or by convincing individuals that their contributions are crucial to the achievement of group goals. Another explanation, proposed by Michael Taylor, focuses on how the close monitoring that exists within peasant communities can ensure that contributors can be singled out and selectively rewarded.

Other authors focus on how an individual’s effect on a particular collectively desired outcome can be magnified by various aspects of the environment surrounding political groups. Dennis Chong focuses on “all-or-nothing public goods,” for example, shared goals that can be achieved only if virtually all the members of the group participate. Such goals increase the incentive for individual members to participate, since each member’s participation makes a significant difference in whether the goal is achieved and hence to their own personal benefits. Susanne Lohmann discusses the “signaling” effect of political action on the decisions of government leaders. She posits that government leaders will estimate individuals’ positions on a particular issue from their willingness to participate despite the costs that are associated with that participation. Because of this, the signaling effects of participation will increase with its cost, which in turn provides some compensatory benefits.

Although each of these explanations provides plausible reasons that participation in revolutionary activity might be higher in certain cases than predicted by conventional rational choice theories, each has serious shortcomings as a basis for explaining the levels and types of violence employed by different types of revolutionary groups. Those concerned with entrepreneurs and their effect on selective incentives are unclear about the process by which such “violence entrepreneurs” arise and about the basis for their ability to credibly supply selective incentives. Those explanations that focus on close-knit social communities cannot easily be extended to account for high-risk collective action outside those communities, nor can they account for the origin of such communities. Those concerned with all-or-nothing goods are less relevant to instigate violence than they are to nonviolent means of protest such as boycotts, since it is unlikely that the failure of one individual to engage in violence will have much of an impact. Those concerned with signaling effects likewise seem less relevant to violence than to peaceful demonstrations in democratic societies, since the additional incentives provided by signaling effects cannot plausibly compensate for the risks of violent activity.

As a possible antidote to the problems of conventional preference assumptions, some authors put forth explanations that allow for more inclusive preferences, asserting that individuals are seeking various social or expressive benefits from participation rather than simple material gain. The major effort in this direction is the sizable literature on frustration and aggression pioneered by authors such as Ted Gurr and James Davies. Although such theorists accept the notion that individuals are self-interested and materialistic, they also posit the existence of another source of motivation: frustration. According to these theorists, frustration will result from the failure to reach goals, and this frustration will tend to increase aggression independently of whether this aggression promotes material goals. There is no assumption in this literature, however, that individuals are irrational. Instead, the assumption is that while individuals are pursuing material goals, aggression has its own inherent utility in the presence of frustration. It is “inately satisfying.” Although this assumption is a possible explanation for how violence can occur despite the presence of free-riding incentives, it does not provide an endogenous theory for explaining the amount of utility that can be gained from
aggression given particular levels of frustration. Without such a theory, the exact point at which frustration turns into aggression is not specified.

Other theories of violence are even more inclusive, allowing utility to arise from social status and reputation, altruistic effects, and self-actualization. Clearly, each of these types of preferences can significantly affect the calculation of incentives in revolutionary activity. However, such theories do not provide methodologies to account for the origins of such preferences or to predict the variations in the nature and intensity of those preferences among different individuals. This in turn makes such theories difficult to use as a basis for predicting behavior.

These issues are important not only for rational choice theories but also for theories of political violence in general because virtually all of them implicitly either accept the assumption that actors are maximizing their material welfare or posit the goals of actors as exogenous. Much of current analysis of political violence in the literature on rebellion and revolution is "structural" in the sense that analysts attempt to predict the social and economic conditions under which political violence will occur. Such analysis places much of its emphasis on societies as a whole rather than on the incentives facing the actors within them.

Nonetheless, since violence is after all a type of action, each theory requires at least some model for predicting why political actors behave as they do, even if to claim that structural conditions give them little choice over their actions. Here, theories of political violence generally assume that antistate actors are pursuing their own material self-interest and are doing so in a more or less rational manner. Furthermore, actors are usually not individuals but revolutionary groups or classes that are treated as unitary entities. Such theories simply assume away the free-rider problem without explaining why members would be willing to always act in the collective interest of the group, a shortcoming that has not gone unnoticed by rational choice theorists.

Such theories assume that states, however, can pursue anything from material interest to development to rigid control over society. But the basis of these different goals is not specified; it remains exogenous. More recent explanations emphasize ideological preferences and beliefs as important explanatory variables in revolution, but systematic, deductive explanations of where such preferences and beliefs come from are lacking, hampering the use of such variables as a basis for prediction.

CULTURAL THEORY AND RATIONAL CHOICE

For prediction to be possible, what is needed is a theory that can account for the origin of individual preferences and beliefs, for the group structures that determine the conditions for revolutionary action, and for the form that such action will take. This is exactly what cultural theory can provide.

Cultural theory is more than simply a taxonomy, because each category has a wide range of implications for preferences and beliefs, as well as for action across a wide range of environments. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, cultural theory is completely compatible with the assumption of rationality. Each way of life leads to stable patterns of interactions only if there are certain distinctive shared values, attitudes, and cognitions among those who follow that way of life. Furthermore, the characteristics of each culture can be specified as a set of defining preferences and beliefs that are shared by members of the culture, and as the kinds of rational interactions these preferences and beliefs will engender.

Finally, according to cultural theory's "impossibility theorem," the four grid-group variations reflect the only possible ways of organizing social life that can persist over time. This certainly does not mean that individuals are mentally incapable of other sorts of preferences and beliefs, but it does mean that without such preferences and beliefs, patterns of social interaction will be inherently unstable. Hence those preferences and beliefs that tend to persist over time are those that are capable of supporting viable social institutions.

Low-group cultures are characterized, among other things, by individual preferences that emphasize self-interest and personal welfare; high-group cultures are characterized by some sort of concern for the welfare of the bounded collectivity. High-grid cultures are characterized, among other things, by beliefs and preferences that make adherence to role-based rules of individual conduct utility-maximizing. These include either (1) beliefs that choices besides those prescribed by rules are unviable because of the high costs attached to them or (2) preferences (internalized norms) that value following the rules for their own sake. Low-grid cultures are characterized by beliefs and preferences that make such rules unnecessary for stable patterns of interaction.

The impossibility theorem implies that because only four constellations of individual preferences and beliefs can support stable social institutions, individuals interacting within a particular social institution will in the long run inevitably share one of the four. Hence, cultural theory's assumptions about the constraints on preference and belief rest upon a kind of functional argument, which in turn depends on a natural selection justification. Although some might argue that rationalist and functional analysis are opposed to each other, functional analysis has long been used to justify assumptions about preferences in conventional rational choice theories of behavior. In particular, it has long been argued that firms maximize profits, politicians maximize votes, and states maximize power because these actors who fail to develop such preferences will be "selected out" and cease to exist. Cultural theory applies such arguments to social institutions, positing that for institutions to survive, individuals within them must exhibit certain characteristic preferences and beliefs.

The notion of culturally defined beliefs, in particular, clashes with the assumption often found in rational choice theories that beliefs are derivable either from direct perception or from logical-statistical inferences from that perception—
what is generally referred to as "information." However, this conventional notion is not essential to the assumption of rational choice and lacks verisimilitude over a very wide range of human behavior. Indeed, in many, if not most, political contexts, beliefs based solely on information are insufficient for rendering rational judgments because they do not generate expectations about the relative utilities offered by each available alternative. 19

In those cases, decisions depend on cultural biases. These biases are preferences and beliefs of individuals that support and are based on a particular way of organizing life. Furthermore, they provide a sufficient basis for rational decision-making under a wide range of circumstances in which information and self-interested materialism are insufficient. Hence, far from saying that culture is the antithesis to rationality, cultural theory says the opposite: Culture is essential for rationality because in many, if not most, situations rational decisionmaking would be impossible without the existence of culturally based preferences and beliefs.

For instance, because fatalists follow a low-group way of life, those within this culture have no special incentives to interact within a bounded social group. Because they are high grid, however, their behavior is prescribed by role-determined rules. However, since there is no strong group to provide these rules, fatalists see their behavior as completely constrained by unvarying forces within their environment. Fatalists will feel so constrained only when they believe they have little or no ability to alter their environment.

Hence, fatalists believe that nature is unpredictable, a lottery where outcomes have little relationship to actions. Given this, there is no reason for them to invest resources and take risks, since they will have to bear the cost of such investments without affecting outcomes one iota. Furthermore, other individuals must be seen as unreliable and opportunistic to the point that any attempts at cooperative action will probably be met with a sucker's payoff because others will fail to cooperate in return. Hence the only rational behavior is to minimize the expenditure of resources and to act in a noncooperative manner no matter what the circumstances.

Fatalists are generally self-interested in their preferences. Even though it is possible that their preferences contain an element of concern for others, this has little effect on behavior because fatalists believe that there is little they can do to alter their environment—which implies that there is also little that they can do to improve others' welfare. Any resources expended in such an effort will just be lost, with no corresponding gain for the intended recipient.

Given these beliefs and preferences, the behavior of fatalists is rigidly dictated by their existing social and economic roles, and they follow unchanging routines that have provided for survival in those roles in the past. Fatalist peasants plant the same crops year after year in the same way regardless of what other opportunities are available, hoping to provide enough for themselves to subsist upon. Fatalist proletarians do the minimum amount of work necessary to retain their jobs, and they do not voluntarily comply with any attempt to alter their routines because they see such changes as plots to reduce their standard of living.

Because individuals, like fatalists, are low group, they have no special incentives to interact within a particular collectivity. However, because they are also low grid, their behavior does not follow role-based rules. Individualist behavior can lead to stable patterns of interaction only when preferences and beliefs promote decentralized institutions of cooperation, institutions that depend on negotiated exchange.

In order for such institutions to come about, individualists must have an essentially optimistic view of nature and of other individuals. At least where markets are initially being formed, information is usually insufficient for developing well-founded expectations about the return on any investment. Hence, for investments to be made, rational individualists must have a culturally determined predisposition to believe that many types of investments will provide a return that exceeds the costs involved.

A similar logic holds for cooperation. In most types of transactions, it is rational for a person to cooperate only if she expects her counterpart(s) to cooperate as well. However, as rational choice analysts often note, it is impossible to predict from information-based beliefs just how other people will act in most repeated transactions, even given the additional belief that other individuals are rational. Hence, for cooperation to occur, individualists must initially believe that other individuals can and will behave cooperatively under conditions of bargaining and bidding where both individuals' long-term payoffs for mutual cooperation exceed the payoffs for mutual noncooperation. They will themselves be willing to act cooperatively under such situations, barring any overt act of noncooperation on the part of others.

Individualists, like fatalists, generally are self-interested in their preferences. However, they also believe that self-interested actions in a system of open exchange maximize the welfare of all, hence they see no clash between self-interest and concern for others. They believe that any attempt at philanthropy or a redistribution of wealth has negative side effects that result in diminishment of welfare not only for those from whom resources are being taken but also for the intended beneficiaries. Hence, even when an individualist has altruistic preferences, it will be rational for her to act as if she is maximizing only her own welfare.

Because egalitarians are high group and low grid, they center their social interactions within a bounded group; yet their behavior is not prescribed by any role-based rules imposed by the group. Hence role definition, who should do what, is characteristically vague. Such patterns of social interactions can occur only if group members have shared preferences or beliefs that create special incentives for collective action with each other rather than with those outside of the group.

One way in which such incentives can be provided is through preferences that place an inherent positive value on the welfare of the group as a whole. A number of theorists have noted that such "other-regarding" preferences can have a major effect on the likelihood of cooperative collective action. 20 In particular, an inherent value placed on group welfare raises the relative benefits for cooperation vis-
à-vis free riding within the group, hence increasing the likelihood of collective action. Likewise, a negative inherent value placed on the welfare of those deemed outside group boundaries decreases the chances of collective action with those outsiders.

The other primary way in which incentives can be provided is through a set of shared preferences with regard to the nature of society, as well as through shared beliefs about how these preferences can be realized. These shared preferences can be used to define the group boundary, and group activity can be oriented primarily toward realizing them. However, use of shared preferences as the guarantor of unity puts a high price on the maintenance of group consensus. Any dissent can weaken the boundaries of a group by creating the possibility of intragroup conflict and may also lead members to look for allies outside the group. Because the egalitarian culture is low grid, there are no clear rules for resolving disagreements. Hence, even small disagreements about goals can lead to dissolution of group boundaries. This means that such groups must continuously stress the purity of their ideology and make devotion to the group the all-encompassing focus of their members' lives. Furthermore, the need for consensus makes alliances between the group and other groups very difficult because each compromise must be agreed to by all group members before consensus can occur.

Because of egalitarians' need for consensus, one preference shared by all egalitarian groups is a desire for the minimization of inequality (hence their name). Because of the low-grid nature of the group, inequality cannot be justified by formal role differentiation. Hence, any unusual accumulation of resources by a subset of group members creates differences between the goals of these members and those of other members. Such differences tend to weaken group boundaries, hence inequality must be avoided at all costs.

Because of the preference for equality, when egalitarian groups attempt to expand their boundaries to other parts of society, they often try to bring in those who have the most to gain from such goals, that is, those they perceive to be the least fortunate. However, unless the least fortunate are themselves egalitarians, attempts to integrate them will be unsuccessful. Fatalists do not believe that they can gain from joining a group; hierarchists are content with the group that they belong to. Individualists may join as long as they perceive that personal gains can be made from doing so, but they will leave as soon as the group's goals diverge from their own.

Hierarchists, like egalitarians, are high group. Hence they also center their social interactions within the boundaries of clearly defined collectivities. And like egalitarians' interactions, theirs are promoted by preferences that place an inherent positive value on the welfare of the group as a whole, as well as by preferences that place a negative value on the welfare of those outside the group.

However, because they are high grid, hierarchists also maintain their group unity through rigidly prescribed rules that can be attached to formally designated roles of unequal status and power. Such rules specify how members should act in their relationships with other members, depending on their respective designated ranks, as well as the appropriate division of resources and benefits. The rules are confined to within-group interactions and minimize the amount of within-group conflict. Furthermore, since they do not extend outside of group boundaries, they inhibit cooperation with outsiders.

In order for rule adherence to be rational, however, the rules must be internalized, that is, supported by individual preferences and beliefs. Internalization can include preferences that place an inherent value on fulfilling one's designated duty within the group, as well as beliefs that the existing system of roles maximizes both individual and group welfare. Usually, the rules that are internalized are not only those that directly prescribe behaviors for each role but also metarules that endow the occupants of certain leadership roles with the right to set further rules. When hierarchy is defined in this manner, compromise and gradual modification of group structure are possible as long as those who have authority are willing to accept such changes.

CULTURE AND VIOLENCE

Of course, providing a functional, evolutionary argument for the distinctive preferences and beliefs of each culture does not demonstrate that the resulting categories have useful explanatory power. This can only come from applying them to real-world analytical issues. In this section, we apply the categories and their implications to the question of political violence. We discuss the use of violence by each culture, both as state and antistate actors (the sole exception being fatalists, who never take control of the state). As is shown, the "paradox of participation" is hardly the only anomaly that results from materialistic, self-interested assumptions about the preferences of revolutionaries. In fact, there are numerous aspects of strategy followed by revolutionary groups that cannot be made sense of and in fact appear irrational without the aid of cultural theory.

Adherents of each culture are capable of violent action, but the circumstances that foster such action and the nature of the violence employed differs from culture to culture. Furthermore, the particular circumstances and characteristics of violence can be shown to follow logically from the defining preferences and beliefs just identified.

Fatalists

Fatalists do not believe in revolution. The idea that major changes in the governing structure will have any substantial effect on their condition or that of the people around them contradicts their basic beliefs that they have no power to control their environment. The more things change, the more things stay the same. Any involvement in risky activity is out of the question; there are no benefits to compensate for the inevitable costs. Therefore, fatalists try their best to avoid the beckonings of revolutionary entrepreneurs.
This does not mean that fatalists are incapable of violence. However, the type of violence they engage in is personal and the intention is defensive. Fatalists believe that other people are untrustworthy, hence they must under certain conditions be stopped with violence before they can do any damage. In a society lacking strong restraints on the use of violence, this attitude can lead to a tendency to strike before being struck, that is, to anarchic violence.

This fatalistic attitude can explain why violence in fatalistic cultures (the American urban underclass and Southern Italian peasants are two classic examples) is often inwardly directed, directed toward one’s own people, rather than toward the state or outside population, which may in fact be blamed for the fatalist’s plight. Without the aid of cultural theory, one might be tempted to call such behavior irrational and anomalous. However, it can be seen as rational in light of the fatalist’s belief system, in which no one is trustworthy and everyone is out for himself. This belief is rational in equilibrium because it is self-fulfilling: If one believes this of others, then one will rationally behave in an untrustworthy way toward them, which in turn makes it rational for them to behave similarly in return. This in turn means that violence is not aimed on the basis of who is to blame but on the basis of proximity and frequent interaction.

Because they believe that cooperation with others is self-defeating, fatalists are not capable of the large-scale collective action necessary to gain state power. Hence, the question of what sort of violence fatalists demonstrate when they control the state is moot; such control never occurs.

Individualists

The competitive individualist does believe that changes in the governing structure are possible and that such changes can have a major effect on her personal welfare. However, two major factors inhibit her participation in collective political violence. The first is the nature of her preferences. Because she is part of a lower-caste culture, her preferences are primarily self-regarding; hence she is unlikely to place much emphasis on self-sacrifice for others in her decision on whether to participate in organized high-risk activity. As noted in the earlier discussion, it is thus unlikely that the perceived benefits of participating in political violence will exceed the perceived costs.

Second, individualists in general tend to prefer exiting from an oppressive society to changing it. Unlike complex hierarchies, competitive markets are transportable from one local context to another and can be created anew from disparate elements. Furthermore, individualists do not have any special preferences or beliefs that tie them to a particular group of individuals. Both these factors decrease the costs of exiting a particular society and provide individualists with a viable alternative to staying and attempting at great risk to battle a hostile state. As long as such alternatives exist, individualists will view migration to a foreign land or frontier as an opportunity rather than as a punishment.

Culture, Rationality, and Violence

This can explain the seemingly paradoxical fact that some of the most entrepreneurial and economically resourceful cultures within a society are often quite passive politically in the face of state oppression, as with the cases of the Jews in Eastern Europe, the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, the Indians in East Africa, and the Japanese-Americans in California. Each of these cultures gained economic success despite low initial economic standing and a less-than-hospitable political climate. Yet when faced with various forms of political persecution, they generally failed to rise up in active resistance, unlike other minority peoples with seemingly fewer resources.

This behavior would seem irrational in light of theories that emphasize uniform goals among political actors, in which case the probability of resistance would be proportionate to the probability of success, which is in turn proportionate to actor resources. However, it would not be irrational in light of cultural theory, which attributes this passivity not to the individualists’ lack of resources but to their self-regarding preferences, which make collective antistate violence irrational. Instead, individualists usually attempt to bargain with the state to minimize its interference in the market and in their personal lives, and, when this is not possible, search for some way of moving elsewhere.

Nonetheless, individualists are capable of violent resistance when there are institutions that allow them to provide selective incentives to cooperators and hence to eliminate free-rider problems. These institutions have often been created for other purposes than the facilitation of collective violence, but they may be capable of being transferred to that purpose. Perhaps the most famous example of such resistance among individualists is the American Revolution: Existing state governments had the institutional wherewithal to raise armies, pay soldiers, and punish those who refused to cooperate. In this case, it was clearly important that the revolutionary forces had control over a territory in which they could communicate with one another and strike agreements.

When in power, individualists are in most cases hesitant to use violent coercion against members of the population, since this interferes with the competitive market mechanism. A state composed of individualists is relatively indifferent, however, to the economic harm caused by the market to those who lack the resources to succeed in it. Individualists generally have self-regarding preferences, hence they feel no personal need to rescue someone who has fallen by the wayside. Furthermore, they believe any attempt to rescue such a person will eventually cause him even greater harm by destroying his incentives to compete.

Hierarchists and Egalitarians

The two cultures most likely to foster collective political violence are the hierarchical and the egalitarian. Both are high-group cultures that provide the level of solidarity necessary to engender self-sacrificing revolutionary action. Members feel closely tied to their groups, and this is reflected in strong other-regarding
preferences with regard to the welfare of other group members. The usual risks of violent political activity will hence be counteracted by the fact that members can “appropriate” a higher proportion of their contribution to a collective goal than would self-interested individuals because hierarchists and egalitarians care about their entire group’s welfare as well as their own. Thus incentives to free ride are reduced. Such preferences, moreover, do not extend toward those outside of the group. In situations of conflict, they can lead to behavior that is both self-sacrificing for the sake of one’s own group and quite destructive toward those outside the group. Thus strong solidarity with others, although it may in one sense be the root of benevolence, is also the main facilitator of collective violence.

Hierarchists. Hierarchical revolutionary groups can take two major forms. When the state itself is hierarchical, certain hierarchists within society may still rebel against it because it fails to allocate sufficiently rewarding roles to the members of their group. Because they believe in the optimality of a hierarchical system, such revolutionaries aim not at creating an entirely new system of government but at changing the division of roles among members of society. Because of this, such movements are generally nationalist movements of racial, ethnic, or religious minorities who perceive themselves as oppressed. In this case, violence is directed at the usurpers who have taken illegitimate control over the system, and some care is taken not to damage those parts of the system that can be appropriated once authority has been transferred into rightful hands.

When the state is individualistic, hierarchical revolutionaries seek to change the system completely because they believe that hierarchy is a necessary condition for an optimal allocation of rewards. Such revolutionaries are often seen as atavistic or traditionalist because they often hark back to an earlier, hierarchical form of government. In these cases, violence may be directed both at the occupiers of power and at the economic structures that buttress the competitive market system the revolutionaries are opposed to. It is again important not to see such violence as irrational despite the economic loss that may be involved if and when the revolution is successful. The hierarchist’s preferences and beliefs place a high value on a social system with well-defined roles and authority, even at some cost to short-run economic self-interest.

Because hierarchists all share a belief in the optimality of hierarchical institutions, violence within hierarchical groups is caused primarily by clashing beliefs and preferences within the group about the optimal assignment of roles, about the rules attached to those roles, and about which roles provide the authority to set rules. Hence hierarchical organizations are most likely to split on factional lines over disputes about the aspirative criteria for role differentiation within the organization or, at the very top, about the personalities or families who are to control the organization. Such disputes are particularly likely to arise in cell-structured organizations, which have few cross-linkages between cells at the same level of hierarchy and where each faction can form a viable organization of its own.

Hierarchists in power generally aim violence against those they view as deviants, that is, those who are not willing to accept and perform according to their designated roles. Again, because hierarchists believe that a stable hierarchy provides an optimal allocation of rewards, they view those who oppose the hierarchy as a threat to both group and personal welfare (because of their other-regarding preferences, both types of welfare will be valued). Deviants include not only those who engage in political violence but those who are simply recalcitrant or act in a nonprescribed manner. Because of this, hierarchists are much more likely than individualists to resort to coercion as a means of governing.

Egalitarians. The most radical revolutionaries generally are found among egalitarians. Because existing states are usually predominantly hierarchical or individualist, egalitarians aim for major changes in the governing structure of society. Their violence is directed against all manifestations of authority and power, whether political, economic, or social. Because egalitarians have preferences that value the reduction of inequality for its own sake, it may be rational for them to engage in “leveling” violence even when it does not improve the personal welfare of any individual.

Because egalitarians seek such drastic transformation of the existing state structure, their doctrines are viewed by other cultures as millennial, and such groups are most likely to be viewed by others as crazy or cultlike. These include Western urban guerrilla groups such as the Red Brigades, Direct Action, and the Baader-Meinhoff Gang as well as Third World revolutionaries like the Khmer Rouge or the Sendero Luminoso.

Because the egalitarian system of authority is particularly ill-suited for military action, egalitarian groups face special internal problems of control. Because they have no internalized role-based rules of authority that can resolve disagreements over the means to reach commonly desired goals, such disagreements are the main source of intragroup violence. In various ways, problems of control further increase the levels of violence displayed by egalitarian revolutionary groups. First, egalitarian groups often use initiation as a way of both proving and promoting the commitment of new members to the group and its ideology. Often the most effective way of doing this is by violent activity, which greatly increases the costs of returning to normal society and makes a new member completely dependent on the group. Second, because even small amounts of internal dissent can wreck the group’s ability to function, it is rational for group members to expel or eliminate dissidents who cannot be brought quickly back into line. Because of this, egalitarian groups tend to be particularly harsh on perceived turncoats among their own members. Prominent examples include the Japanese Red Army and the Philippine New People’s Army.

Furthermore, because consensus is essential to continued existence, egalitarian groups are particularly incapable of compromising with opponents or of forming alliances with other revolutionary groups. Even the smallest dilution in purity can remove the glue that makes such groups viable entities. Because the existence of
competing egalitarian groups creates a constant threat of defection and dilution of ideological parity, fellow egalitarian revolutionary groups will be regarded as even greater enemies than the state itself. All this internecine battling and inability to compromise explains in large part why egalitarian groups very rarely achieve power. It also explains why, in the few cases where they have—the Khmer Rouge and the Gang of Four faction of the Chinese Communist Party being the only prominent examples—they have not persisted for long and have often turned against the society that they have set out to transform. But as has been emphasized throughout this chapter, none of this should be seen as irrational—it is part and parcel of the imperatives created by an egalitarian’s defining preferences.

CONCLUSION

As the previous analysis shows, cultural theory allows us to ascertain basic preferences and beliefs of individuals from four major cultural types and does so in a way that allows us to predict behavior in a variety of situations. With regard to political violence, it allows us to predict from a few simple assumptions both the conditions under which rational individuals will employ violence and the form that violence will take.

In predicting the conditions for violence, cultural theory resolves the paradox of participation in collective violence in a more satisfactory way than do existing rational choice explanations. For individualists, cultural theorists accept the hypothesis that collective violence can occur only under conditions where institutions and entrepreneurs provide selective incentives for those who participate. However, it does not rely on the questionable assumption that individuals will be able to calculate precisely the risks involved in participation, instead asserting that culturally biased beliefs will determine the perceived efficacy of institutional solutions. Hence, rather, despite their similarity to individualists in preferences, will not cooperate even if entrepreneurs offer systems of collective incentives because they do not believe that such systems can ever work.

Members of hierarchical and egalitarian cultures will sometimes be willing to engage in violent collective action even when selective incentives do not make up for the potential costs. Because of their strong-group nature and resulting valuation of group welfare for its own sake, the chance to benefit their group or to harm those outside will compensate for the personal risks involved.

Furthermore, cultural theory also provides a clear explanation for empirical phenomena that cannot be explained by other models, including behavior that appears irrational from the point of view of conventional rational choice assumptions about goals and actions. Fatalists will often direct their violence against one another rather than at those outsiders whom they blame most for their plight. This is because their mistrust of everyone creates conflict with those whom they come in contact with most frequently, not necessarily those who have the most control over their condition. Individualists will often be more passive in the face of perse-

cution than those with far fewer resources because they lack the other-regarding preferences that can eliminate free riding without selective incentives. Rebellion hierarchists will generally direct their violence against the occupiers of authority, but not at the institutions that can be appropriated for their own use if they succeed. Egalitarians have a tendency to direct violence at all manifestations of institutionalized power because of their desire to remake the state in their own image. They will also direct violence at members of their own group who depart even slightly from the required consensus that is necessary for their group to be viable.

Hence, far from subverting rationality, cultural theory provides an invaluable resource for rational choice theorizing, enabling rational choice to explain phenomena that have fallen beyond the reach of its conventional assumptions about preferences and beliefs. By specifying and limiting the viable constellations of preference and belief, cultural theory can account for action in cases where conventional assumptions would lead to either indeterminate or inaccurate predictions. In short, just as humans need culture in order to make sense of the world, rational choice needs culture in order to make sense of human behavior.

NOTES

1. The definitive discussion of this is Brian Barry, Sociologists, Economists and Democracy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
8. See Susanne Lohmann, “A Signaling Model of Informative and Manipulative Political Action,” American Political Science Review 87 (June 1993), 319–333. In order to be adopted to revolutionary violence, that is, violence that seeks to overthrow the state, the assumptions might be modified so that those being signaled are possible supporters of the revolutionaries rather than a responsive state.
9. On the latter point, see Elster, Political Psychology, 18.


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**CHAPTER 9**

**Cultural Theory and the Problem of Moral Relativism**

Charles Lockhart and Gregg Franzwa

What are we to make of cross-cultural differences in morality? Cultural anthropologists and postmodernists generally expect such differences but are reluctant to label the morality of one culture as better than another. From such relativistic perspectives, moralities are not better or worse, just different. Other scholars, frequently philosophers, follow an objectivist orientation toward morality. That is, they argue that objective moral standards exist and that the practices of some cultures approximate these standards more closely than do the practices of others and are accordingly morally superior. The issue between these camps has attracted much attention in recent years, but this controversy is more complex than popular recent contributions suggest, involving, for instance, at least two distinct levels of inquiry.

On the first, the empirical-normative level, cultural relativists such as Ruth Benedict, familiar with empirical differences among the practices labeled “moral” by distinct cultures, become moral relativists by denying the legitimacy of cross-cultural moral judgments. These scholars are joined in moral relativism at a second, metaethical level by philosophers who argue that our metaphysical, epistemological, or logical capacities are inadequate for deriving objective moral standards. The latter relativists differ in why they think that objective standards do not exist, but they are united in their belief that first-level empirical and normative claims are inadequate for formulating definitive answers to second-level questions (such as What, if anything, is the meaning of good?) that form the focus of their interests.

Moral objectivists argue that adequate metaphysical, epistemological, and logical grounds do exist for sustaining objective moral standards (i.e., moral assertions are capable of being true). However, they disagree as to what these bases and standards are (and thus on how we assign truth-value to moral assertions).