Rational Choice and Culture: Clashing Perspectives or Complementary Modes of Analysis?

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Cultural and rational choice analyses have long been seen as antithetical approaches, based on diametrically opposed views of human nature and theory construction. The late 1960s and the 1970s featured a struggle between cultural/psychological and rational choice approaches for the "soul" of theory in political science, with the latter gradually gaining the upper hand during this period. The 1980s and early 1990s have been a period of relative ascendancy for rational choice in political science, but this ascendancy has been accompanied by a growing number of critical examinations of the approach (e.g., Etzioni 1988; Mansbridge 1990; Cook and Levi 1990; Lane 1991; Monroe 1991; Green and Shapiro 1994) as well as by a notable renaissance of work within the cultural approach (e.g., Pye and Pye 1985; Eckstein 1988; Chilton 1988, 1991; Pye 1988; Gibbs 1989; Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990; Inglehart 1990; Wilson 1992; Ellis 1993a; Putnam 1993; Diamond 1993; Abramson and Inglehart 1995).

It is unclear how this latest round of methodological conflict will end, whether with the permanent ascendancy of one approach, an endless back and forth between the two, or a theoretical synthesis that combines elements of both approaches. In this chapter I point the way to a possible reconciliation and synthesis of these two rival approaches. Conceptualizing culture as the basis for individual preferences (goals) and beliefs, I argue, allows cultural analysis to be
compatible with the assumption of rational behavior. Furthermore, integrating the rationality assumption into a cultural approach can generate explanations of political behavior that combine the general applicability of the rational choice approach with the sensitivity to local context of the political culture approach.

The chapter begins by providing a brief overview of contemporary debates in the social sciences over the relative usefulness of cultural and rational choice approaches. The next section points to a small but growing literature that implicitly or explicitly integrates culture and rationality in the explanation of political behavior, dividing this literature into analysis in which culture is seen as directly shaping the way individuals calculate the costs and benefits of different actions, and analysis in which culture plays an indirect role in coordinating mutual expectations among individuals about one another’s behavior. The final section discusses possible problems with too free a use of assumptions about culturally induced preferences and beliefs in rational choice explanations of specific behaviors, and describes ways in which such assumptions can be grounded in general theories that systematically account for culture across a wide range of environments, placing extended emphasis on grid-group cultural theory.

Culture Versus Rationality

Debates over culture and rationality in political science have revolved around opposing views of human nature and social science theory. The rational choice approach was originally imported to political science from microeconomics by a number of influential scholars, mostly economists (e.g., Arrow 1951; Downs 1957; Black 1958; Buchanan and Tullock 1962; Olson 1965; Riker 1962 is the most notable exception). In its conventional and by far most common form, rational choice theory takes a spare and unvarying view of human nature. The key assumption of rational choice is that people make choices that they expect will maximize their goals. Such an assumption, however, is nonfalsifiable without some specification of what these goals are and how these expectations are formed. In the conventional rational choice view, people are assumed to have preferences that are exclusively selfish and materialistic as well as beliefs that are based solely on direct observation and logical inference. Although structure (the environmental constraints surrounding people) is left unaccounted for, these assumptions make it fairly clear a priori what internal mechanisms are thought to drive human behavior. Hence they can be used in a deductive manner to generate determinate and therefore falsifiable predictions about behavior given a wide range of structural conditions.

The cultural approach spans a number of research areas. Many of the formative works in this approach are explicitly located within the political culture literature within political science (e.g., Almond 1956; Almond and Verba 1963, 1980; Pye and Verba 1965), but they also include closely related work in systems theory (e.g., Easton 1953, 1957, 1965; Almond 1960, 1965) and modernization theory (e.g., Lerner 1958, Inkeles and Smith 1974). Because it was originally influenced by then-current trends in sociology, this approach has often been referred to as the "sociological approach" (Barry 1970), though this label has become somewhat anachronistic. Unlike the rational choice approach, it takes for granted that an individual's behavior is not based on unvarying internal mechanisms, but rather is a result of specific attitudes that can vary from individual to individual, group to group, and society to society. Unlike the rational choice approach, it does not contain a single model of human behavior and does not contain a core set of assumptions that are shared by all theories and that can be used to generate falsifiable predictions.

An inability to generate falsifiable predictions deductively from core assumptions has generally been seen as the main weakness of the cultural approach vis-à-vis the rational choice approach. The cultural approach, say critics, is not a theory but simply a set of categories and concepts (Harsanyi 1969; Mitchell 1969; Barry 1970; Holt and Turner 1975; Rogowski 1978; Gray 1987). Even empirical findings about individual, group, or societal attitudes have no clear implications for behavior, they argue, since the cultural approach does not provide a way to predict how attitudes interact with structure to generate behavior (Mitchell 1969, Rogowski 1974, Bates 1990). While specific theories within the approach can and often do generate falsifiable predictions, the critics argue that these theories as a whole lack coherence and consistency because they do not share a common deductive base.

These commentaries contributed to the rise of the rational choice approach in political science and the relative decline of the cultural approach during the 1970s and 1980s. Of course a number of other factors may have contributed to this trend as well, most notably the widespread attraction among social scientists to rational choice's highly developed formal techniques and the refinement of these formal techniques, especially game theory, for use in analyzing political phenomena. Whatever the reasons, rational choice theory has been touted as the basis for a unified social science encompassing economic, political, and social phenomena (Becker 1976; Hirschleifer 1985; Coleman 1986; Friedman and Hechter 1990; Lalman, Oppenheimer, and Swistak 1993), and the phenomenon of "economic imperialism" has loomed large over many social science disciplines.

Nonetheless, the path to the top for rational choice has been far from smooth or free of obstacles. In fact, its growth in prominence has generated a rising chorus of criticisms that have been telling enough to be taken to heart even by some of the most steadfast proponents of the approach. These criticisms are directed at the core of rational choice theory, its assumptions about human nature. Not only are these assumptions viewed as much too narrow to be realistic, but they are also blamed for generating inaccurate or indeterminate predictions about behavior across a wide range of contexts.

Criticisms directed at the assumptions focus both on assumptions about preferences and beliefs. The idea of exclusively self-interested and materialistic humans does not square with the view that people have of themselves. Most people see themselves as driven by preferences that are often altruistic and self-
actualizing, preferences that are moreover dependent on the social context in which they are located (Sears and Funk 1990a, 1990b). Furthermore, the assumption that beliefs are based only on observation and logic also seems ludicrous in light of the heuristics, ideologies, and biases that are prevalent in human thought processes (Simon 1985, 1986; March 1978; Tversky and Kahneman 1986; Quattrone and Tversky 1988). Finally, it seems indisputable that people differ from one another in their preferences and in the way they form beliefs.

The typical rejoinder to this type of criticism has always been the argument that unrealistic simplifications are necessary for theory building and that the true test of a theory should be in the usefulness of its predictions (Friedman 1953). Many critics, however, have noted that rational choice theories often lead to indeterminate or inaccurate predictions. In many political choice contexts, it is difficult for conventional rational choice theories to predict how individuals will behave (Kingdon 1993; Douglas and Wildavsky 1982). The largest single class of such choice contexts are those that involve indefinitely repeated strategic interactions among individuals, in which the utility (extent of preference fulfillment) provided by each individual’s choice depends on the unobservable actions of the others. In most such interactions, an individual cannot calculate which among a large subset (or often the entire set) of available choices will bring the highest expected utility (Fudenberg and Maskin 1986). Such cases seem to encompass a large proportion of nontrivial political choices made by both elites and masses, and for these conventional rational choice theories can often do little more than predict that outcomes will be chaotic.4

Moreover, even when rational choice theory succeeds in making determinate predictions, these predictions have often proven to be inaccurate when set against empirical reality (Etzioni 1988, chap. 4; Mansbridge 1990, chap. 1; Lake 1991, chaps. 17 and 23). Most notable in political science have been various “paradoxes” concerning the seeming irrationality of large-scale collective action. In particular, they focus on two of the most common types of political behavior: voting in elections and participation in large-scale demonstrations or rebellions. Both of these behaviors occur on a regular basis, and indeed they are the central elements of contemporary mass politics. Yet rational choice theories have had a difficult time explaining why they occur at all. In both situations, it appears rational for individuals to remain inactive. Action has costs, a single individual will have only a minuscule effect on the expected political outcome, and the effect of the outcome on the individual will generally not depend on whether she or he participated.

Integrating Culture and Rationality in Explanation
These shortcomings have led many rational choice theorists to defend a weaker, “thinner” version of the approach. This version maintains the assumption that individuals maximize the expected utility of their choices, but it abandons the assumption that preferences are solely selfish and materialistic and/or that beliefs are based solely on observation and logical inference. Altruism and expressive preferences are possible, and heuristics and ideology are admitted into belief formation. Preferences and the processing of information into beliefs may differ among individuals and within an individual over time and can be the result of social processes. Although this frees the rational choice approach from reliance on certain implausible assumptions, it also leaves a hole in its deductive foundations: What accounts for preferences and beliefs, and how are they to be determined in each particular context? Without some specification of preferences and beliefs, thin rational choice theories lose the ability to generate predictions.

Stripped of its “thicker” and empirically questionable assumptions that preferences are selfish and materialistic and that beliefs are derived from observation of empirical reality, rational choice becomes a theory that links preferences and beliefs to behavior without specifying the content of those preferences and beliefs. Given this, it then becomes imperative that the preferences and beliefs be accounted for, particularly the way in which they vary among individuals or within an individual over time. Such variations in individual preferences and beliefs correspond fairly closely to culture as it has been conceptualized by social scientists working within the political culture approach. Culture has usually been seen as a social-psychological variable (Almond 1990, 144–145) comprising an individual’s attitudes, which in turn have been formed through social interaction. Furthermore, these attitudes have traditionally been divided into their motivational and cognitive components, that is, preferences and beliefs, along with an evaluative component that translates them into choices between actions (Parsons and Shils 1951, 10–11). Hence, implicitly if not explicitly, the move by rational choice theorists toward a thinner view of rationality has been a move toward bringing culture back into the picture. This in turn means that culture is no longer viewed as the antithesis of rational choice but rather as essential to rational choice analysis of real-world political behavior (North 1981, 1990; Wildavsky 1987a; Kreps 1990; Bates 1990; Almond 1990; Frejjohn 1991; Lane 1992; Johnson 1993).

Along these lines, a small but rapidly growing number of theories integrate culture and rational choice into explanations of political behavior. These theories can be divided into two categories, depending on the effect that culture is seen to have in determining the behavior of rational individuals. The first category focuses broadly on the way culture affects the expected utility of different choices via its role in shaping preferences and causal beliefs. The second focuses more specifically on how culture can coordinate expectations among individuals in situations of strategic interaction, allowing each individual to anticipate how others will act and hence to choose their own optimal action.

Culture and Expected Utility
One of the first prominent theories to apply rational choice theory outside of economics was also notable in assuming a role for culture in preference formation. In
The Economics of Discrimination, Becker (1957) assumes that certain individuals have a "taste for discrimination," a kind of preference for avoiding contact with members of other races. Work along this line has been continued by a number of others (Johnson 1965, 1967; Sowell 1975; Klitzgaard 1976; Schelling 1978, chap. 4; Seers 1983). Each of these authors uses discriminatory preferences to explain situations in which rational individuals willingly sacrifice material benefits in order to avoid contact with undesired others, and then explores the effects of different environmental contexts on the extent or form of discriminatory behavior.

Another general type of preference related to culture is altruism, whose general effect on rational choice has been investigated by a number of authors (Phelps 1975; Collard 1978; Boulding 1981; Margolis 1982; Moe 1980, chap. 5; Hardin 1982, chap. 7; Taylor 1987, chap. 5). Altruism, in rational choice terms, is the extent to which an individual incorporates the welfare of another individual or group of individuals into his or her own utility. Cooperative behavior, including large-scale collective action, is generally more likely among rational individuals who have developed altruism toward one another than among those who have not. Likewise, conflict is generally more likely among rational individuals who have developed "negative altruism" toward one another—that is, negatively value one another's welfare. Hence, assuming positive or negative altruism within particular groups of individuals seems to bring the predictions of rational choice theory more in line with reality by allowing collective action or conflict sometimes to occur even when it is not in the personal material interest of the participants.

A related type of preference is the desire for approval from particular others. Like positive altruism, the desire for approval may motivate cooperative behavior in cases in which purely materialistic preferences may not. Social pressures may form a kind of "selective incentive" (Olson 1965) that groups can use to elicit cooperative behavior from members when material incentives are lacking. A number of authors have investigated how social approval preferences can be invoked to explain the aforementioned "paradoxical" political behaviors of voting (Silver 1973; Ullaner 1989a, 1989b) and participation in demonstrations and rebellions (Chong 1991, chap. 3; Opp 1986; 1989, chap. 5) and to investigate the dynamics of such behaviors.

A final type of culture-related preference that may have an effect on political behavior is an acquired intrinsic pleasure or displeasure associated with a particular kind of activity, generally referred to as an "expressive preference." Existing investigations have focused on the effects of a particular group of individuals' associating positive fulfillment with a particular type of collective action. Again, studies in political science have focused primarily on the two paradoxes of voting (Fiorina 1976; Brennan and Lomansky 1985, 1987, 1993; Glazer 1987) and participation in demonstrations and rebellions (Tullock 1971; Silver 1974; Chong 1991, chap. 4), investigating the role of expressive preferences in generating higher levels of participation than would otherwise occur.

Although the introduction of cultural factors into rational choice in political science has centered primarily on preferences, a number of investigations have been made on culturally influenced beliefs and their effects on decisions. One large body of research that investigates this phenomenon among elites is the so-called ideas or epistemic communities literature, which is largely consistent with the thin rational choice approach yet seeks to show through historical analysis how ideologies shared within certain social groups have had effects on policy formation (e.g., Hall 1989; Goldstein and Koehane 1993). The literature relating to the paradoxes of voting and collective action, in contrast, has focused on one particular type of belief: the impact that one's actions have on political outcomes. These writings have generally sought to demonstrate that individuals engaging in collective action may often believe (because of socialization, propaganda, or other factors) that their participation has a greater impact on outcomes than is true in reality (Barzel and Silberberg 1973; Opp 1986; 1989, chap. 8).

All of these preferences and beliefs are cultural in the sense that they tend to vary in type and magnitude across different groups of individuals and can be acquired or lost over time. Furthermore, given that certain types of preferences and beliefs are seen to promote cooperative outcomes and general welfare, it has been argued that it may be in the interest of parents or governments to "invest" in the socialization of individuals into the appropriate culture (Coleman 1987, 1990; Akerlof 1983), and hence that the inculturation of culture itself may be a rational decision.

Clearly preferences and beliefs are interrelated in the determination of expected utility and can often have substitutable or reinforcing effects on behavior. For instance, the belief that one's own welfare is positively related to another person's can have an effect on action equivalent to positive altruism toward that other person. In the latter case, action on behalf of the other person is based on an intrinsic preference, whereas in the former case, a particular belief causes an individual to act as though he or she had such a preference. Likewise, an inflated belief in one's personal importance in contributing toward a political outcome can under certain circumstances make one act as though one valued that outcome more.

Culture and Coordination

The direct effect of culturally induced preferences and beliefs on expected utility is only one way in which such preferences and beliefs can affect action. A more subtle but nonetheless important effect takes place under conditions in which expected utility is no longer a sufficient guide to rational behavior because it cannot be calculated for all alternatives. One common circumstance in which such uncertainty often arises is when individuals interact strategically, that is, when the outcome of a particular action for each individual depends on the actions of others, and when individuals must choose their actions without knowing in advance what the others' actions will be. In such cases, any commonly held belief or preference that points to one set of mutually rational actions over others can facilitate the coordination of action and hence determine equilibrium outcomes. Knowing the nature of such beliefs or preferences can thus allow a theorist to predict actions and outcomes.
Such coordinating beliefs or preferences have been referred to as focal points in the sense that they focus attention on a particular set of mutually rational actions (Schelling 1960). In order for such a belief or preference to determine behavior, it must be commonly held by the various individuals involved, and this commonality must be mutually recognized by each such individual. The latter requirement distinguishes such a preference and belief from those that directly affect calculations of expected utility. This commonality can be seen as cultural in the sense that it will usually arise among a group of individuals who have shared common experiences that have generated similarities in outlooks.

Examples of such cultural coordination have been cited by economists to explain the ability of traders to engage in risky exchanges in the absence of a reliable contract system (Landa 1978, 1994; Greif 1992, 1994). Similar arguments have been applied to account for outcomes in the political arena by a number of authors. John Persson (1991) has discussed how mutual knowledge was a prerequisite for order in the English social tradition that gave precedence to higher classes, even if such traditions were not internalized, allowed individuals to coordinate who would run for office under conditions in which all sides sought to avoid a direct contest between candidates. Looking at more recent history, Geoffrey Garrett and Barry Weingast (1993) have discussed how the Cassis de Dijon decision of the European Court of Justice, though lacking legal binding power, set a precedent that allowed negotiators for the Single European Act of 1987 to converge their positions around the principle of mutual recognition. More broadly, Russell Hardin (1995, chap. 2) has argued that knowledge of culturally embedded practices allows ethnic groups to coordinate their actions in a way that encourages particularistic collective action.

In general, it should be noted that although the primary emphasis of theoretical investigations has been on the role of focal points in promoting cooperative outcomes, they can under different circumstances promote noncooperative, suboptimal outcomes as well. For instance, George Akerlof (1976) focuses on how high-caste individuals may continue to follow discriminatory practices, even if they do not have discriminatory tastes and these practices lead to collectively inefficient outcomes, because the practices are rational as long as other high-caste individuals are expected to follow them as well. A similar argument can be found in Gerry Mackie's work (1996) on foot binding and infibulation, where he argues that the end of such practices depends on a large number of individuals' simultaneously "defecting" from mutually reinforcing patterns of behavior. In both cases, cultural knowledge of harmful traditions is seen to perpetuate these traditions by coordinating people's expectations about what others will do, and change occurs only when some external shock to the system upsets such expectations.

General Theories of Culture

The theories described in the preceding sections show that cultural analysis can be complementary to the thin rational choice approach. Bringing culture into play allows analysis in which preferences and beliefs are seen to affect behavior in a way that goes beyond the traditional emphases on egoism and logic and hence expands the explanatory range of rational choice theories. Likewise, rational choice assumptions about utility maximization provide a general way of determining how particular cultural preferences and beliefs interact with structure to determine action, and hence facilitate the generation of predictions.

There remains a problem, however. Despite the fruitfulness of this avenue of research, theories that combine culture with rational action face the accusation that specifications of culture amount to no more than post hoc manipulations of variables in order to explain outcomes that would otherwise seem paradoxical. The lack of clear restrictions on the kinds of preference and belief assumptions that can be inserted into a thin rational choice theory makes this accusation relevant. Conceivably, a theorist could observe a certain type of political behavior, then determine what types of beliefs fit the behavior, label these preferences and beliefs the culture of the individuals involved, and then use this culture to explain the behavior. What is to prevent such surreptitious tautology?

One way of doing so is through a general theory that places limits on the varieties of cultures that can exist and clearly specifies the content of possible cultures. One effort to create such a general theory of culture is grid-group cultural theory pioneered by anthropologist Mary Douglas and adapted to political science by a number of authors (e.g., Wildavsky 1987a; Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990; Coyle and Ellis 1994).

Grid-group cultural theory divides individuals into four major cultural types: individualist, fatalist, hierarchist, and egalitarian. Each of the categories has clear implications for the types of preferences and beliefs that are held by people within them. The theory does more than simply to classify, because it posits that these four types are the only ones that can support viable social institutions, and hence it infers that adaptation pressures will cause virtually all individuals to belong to one of the categories. Furthermore, it assumes that each individual will remain within a single category across the entire range of his or her actions.

The preferences and beliefs associated with each category, though they generate biases that influence behavior, do not cause people to act in an irrational manner. Instead, they influence the choices resulting from people's rational decisionmaking and even allow people to make rational decisions under circumstances in which they otherwise suffer from uncertainty. Rather than arguing for the mutual exclusiveness of culture and rationality, users of grid-group cultural theory argue that cultural biases provide the raw material for rational action in many cases (Chai and Wildavsky forthcoming).

The exact way in which cultural biases affect rationality can be ascertained by briefly examining each of the cultural categories in turn. Fatalists tend to be self-oriented and lacking in altruism. Moreover, they have an extremely pessimistic view of nature, expecting that attempts to improve their lot will result in failure. Reinforcing these beliefs is a deep risk aversion and a strong tendency to discount
future rewards. They have an equally pessimistic view of human nature, expecting others to act in an opportunistic and noncooperative way in all cases in which it is not clearly against the others' interest to do so. Because of such expectations, they will not act cooperatively in situations in which the optimality of such cooperation depends on the cooperation of others. In general, they will avoid risks and pursue behaviors that free them from having to depend on others for their own success.

Individualists have a far more optimistic view of nature, expecting the environment to be bountiful and well-providing. They tend to be risk seekers and have long time horizons. Furthermore, though they are not altruistic, they have optimistic beliefs about mutual cooperation under decentralized institutions that promote bidding and bargaining and where cooperation is not clearly a suboptimal strategy. Hence they will seek to create such institutions whenever possible.

Egalitarians, unlike fatalists and individualists, are group oriented and have other-regarding, altruistic preferences. Hence they are likely to cooperate within the groups in which such altruism is shared. However, they prefer distributive outcomes in which all members of a group receive equal shares in all collectively obtained goods. Furthermore, they dislike collective decision mechanisms that allow some individuals to exercise more control over a particular outcome than others. This can only lead to cooperative equilibria if group members desire the same goods and there is some mechanism that allows them to reach a consensus on the means by which to pursue them. This means that egalitarian groups can tolerate only small differences in preferences and beliefs in order to remain stable, and hence they will tend to splinter rather than tolerate heterogeneity.

Hierarchists, like egalitarians, have positive altruism toward fellow group members. However, they are not averse to outcomes in which shares in collectively obtained goods are unequal, and they accept collective decision mechanisms that assign certain members permanent authority over particular classes of outcomes. Hierarchical groups can thus cooperate under a wider range of circumstances than egalitarian groups, but they can only do so as long as their collective decision mechanisms remain effective in obtaining the goods that they seek. When this is no longer the case, hierarchical groups, like egalitarian ones, will tend to splinter.

Of course, grid-group theory is not the only general theory that divides individuals or groups into coherent cultural types and uses the characteristics of these cultures to explain political behavior. Other recent theories of this sort include Daniel Elazar's (1984) division of American cultures into traditional, moralistic, and individualistic types and Alan Fiske's (1991) division of social relationships into four types: communal sharing, authority ranking, equality matching, and market pricing. Another group of related theories draws from nineteenth-century sociological theories of tradition and modernity, linking each possible culture to a different stage in a broader process of development. Prominent theories of this sort in political science include Stephen Chilton's (1988, 1991) division of possible cultures into six successive "ways of relating" and Richard Wilson's analysis of cultures as "compliance ideologies" linked to four different stages of societal development. These theories, like grid-group cultural theory, are more than simple categorizations, because each specifies limits on the types of cultures that are viable and posits that individuals and/or groups will act largely in accordance with a single culture across the entire range of their interactions. The development-oriented cultural theories, in addition, specify sets of structural conditions under which each type of culture will predominate over the others.

None of these theories purports to explain all individual-level variations in preferences and beliefs. Individuals within the same culture may exhibit differences in preferences and beliefs, as long as those differences do not contradict the central cultural biases shared by adherents of that culture. Because these theories do not claim to predict each and every significant aspect of culture or to describe all the processes by which culture is generated, they can to a certain extent be complementary with alternative theories of culture.

The main alternative to these types of cultural theories is endogenous theories of preference and belief formation. These theories, rather than specifying the universe of possible cultural types, describe the dynamic process by which individuals acquire particular preferences and beliefs over time. In economics, the most prominent such theories have been the theories that describe how past levels of consumption for certain goods can increase or decrease an individual's relative preferences for these goods (Slovovsky 1976; Stigler and Becker 1977; Becker and Murphy 1988). Such theories can be used to examine cultural phenomena such as the development of tastes for food, art, and music. In sociology a number of theories have focused on the ways in which preferences (Homans 1961; Blau 1964; Emerson 1987) and beliefs (Friedkin and Johnsen 1990; Carley 1991) are acquired through reinforcement in repeated bilateral interactions between individuals. Applied within the context of social networks that shape such interactions, these theories may be used to examine the ways in which particular preferences and beliefs diffuse within a group or society. One theory of preference and belief formation that has found a wide variety of applications in the social sciences is psychological dissonance theory, which is based on the idea that individuals adjust preferences and beliefs in order to maintain a specific perception of themselves or of their past actions (some of the most prominent applications outside of psychology are Hirschman 1965; Akerlof and Dickens 1982; Elster 1989, chap. 1; 1993). Elsewhere I have argued that, appropriately specified, a dissonance theory of preference and belief formation can be used to explain a wide range of cultural phenomena (Chai forthcoming).

As this plurality of theories makes clear, there will in the foreseeable future be no single dominant general theory of culture for predicting the preferences and beliefs that inform rational action. It is impossible in this limited space to evaluate each theory individually, but all view culture in a way that is compatible with the assumption of rationality yet provide a richer and more nuanced view of human preferences and beliefs than is supplied in the conventional rational choice approach. Each also specifies what sorts of preferences and beliefs are possible, and
thus, combined with the rationality assumption, they can generate a theory that takes cultural differences into account in predicting action while retaining some of the deterministic a priori nature of the conventional rational choice approach.

Ultimately the integration of culture and rational choice will have proved worthwhile only when a general integrative theory is shown to provide determinate and accurate explanations both for phenomena that the conventional theories have been able to explain as well as for phenomena that have generated anomalies. The debate between cultural theorists and rational choice theorists has shown that there are major explanatory gaps in both approaches that need to be filled. While there is no guarantee that a general integrative theory can fill all of those gaps, the explanatory success of midrange integrative theories (such as those on voting and collective action) in addressing aspects of political behavior that would otherwise seem paradoxical indicates the promise that exists in developing and refining a general theory. Likewise, the recent renaissance in theories of culture has provided sets of assumptions upon which such a general theory can be based. A growing consensus about the weaknesses of the existing approaches along with the availability of plausible alternatives comprise two necessary conditions for a paradigm shift. What is now needed is efforts to develop and refine the alternatives into practical tools that can be used to examine the full range of human phenomena.

Notes

1. A related development is appropriation of the "new institutionalism," which has been adapted from theoretical work in sociology. See March and Olsen 1989; Powell and DiMaggio 1991.

2. The debate over culture versus rationality in political science is only part of a larger debate over diametrically opposed views of human nature and methodology that has taken place within all the social science disciplines. See Swedberg 1990 for a short history.

3. An even stronger version of these assumptions assumes that individuals are also able to observe or infer all relevant facts about their environment.

4. An alternative is to argue that an institutional deus ex machina provides the means through which individuals can predict the actions of others, but such an argument is plausible only in a limited number of cases.

5. This distinction has been referred to as one between "immanent" and "instrumental" preferences. See Hechter 1993.

6. The exception may be when recognition of a particular focal point is based on certain characteristics of the interaction itself, though even in this case some prior common knowledge is required so that individuals know which characteristics are the relevant ones to look for. For a discussion of the distinction between "endogenous" and "exogenous" expectations, see Harssanyi and Selten 1988, chapter 10.

7. The other major alternative is to specify a general methodology that allows reliable measurement of preferences and beliefs across a wide range of contexts. For discussion, see Chai forthcoming, chapter 2.