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Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science

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This essay makes a case for an anthropological conceptualization of culture as “semiotic practices” and demonstrates how it adds value to political analyses. “Semiotic practices” refers to the processes of meaning-making in which agents’ practices (e.g., their work habits, self-policing strategies, and leisure patterns) interact with their language and other symbolic systems. This version of culture can be employed on two levels. First, it refers to what symbols do—how symbols are inscribed in practices that operate to produce observable political effects. Second, “culture” is an abstract theoretical category, a lens that focuses on meaning, rather than on, say, prices or votes. By thinking of meaning construction in terms that emphasize intelligibility, as opposed to deep-seated psychological orientations, a practice-oriented approach avoids unacknowledged ambiguities that have bedeviled scholarly thinking and generated incommensurable understandings of what culture is. Through a brief exploration of two concerns central to political science—compliance and ethnic identity-formation—this paper ends by showing how culture as semiotic practices can be applied as a causal variable.

In epistemologies ranging from literary studies to rational choice theory, issues broadly construed as “cultural” have been animating academic debates, encouraging interdisciplinary exchanges, and inspiring battles over the methods, evidence, and goals of scholarly research.¹ In this essay, I offer a critical analysis of the problems involved in current usages of the term in political science, make the case for a conceptualization of culture as semiotic practices, and show why it has value for, and how it might be employed by, political scientists.

In political science, the concept of culture used to be associated primarily with the literature on political culture that emerged in the context of postwar political sociology, with its interest in policy initiatives intended to reproduce the conditions of Western democratization abroad (Somers 1995, 114). Derived from Max Weber’s ([1905] 1958) classic analysis of the “elective affinity” between the Protestant ethic and the rise of capitalism

in the West, these studies attempted to show how cultural attitudes and beliefs either hindered or enabled “progress” (Banfield 1958; McClelland 1961, 1963; Pye 1965). Conceived in terms of an alleged set of residual values and norms—what Sherry Ortner (1997, 8–9) has aptly characterized as “a deeply sedimented essence attaching to, or inhering in particular groups”—this notion of culture was prominent in the sociology of Talcott Parsons (1949, 1951, 1965) in modernization theory, and in the American cultural anthropology of Franz Boas (1986, 1911), Margaret Mead, and Ruth Benedict ([1934] 1989), as well as in the behaviorist revolution of the 1950s and 1960s. In political science, it was Gabriel Almond’s (1956) seminal essay, along with his subsequent collaboration with Sidney Verba (1963), that produced one of the most influential understandings of political culture in terms of “orientations toward the political system,” whereby some populations had civic “cultures” and others did not.² Samuel Huntington’s 1993 article in *Foreign Affairs*, “The Clash of Civilizations?” and his subsequent book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996) mark perhaps the most prominent and polemical recent example of this kind of political culturalism in political science.

Political culture accounts, with their tendencies toward cultural essentialism, have rightly come in for criticism by many political scientists. Rejecting such views as either fundamentally tautological or empirically invalid, some critics have opted for one or another strictly “materialist” approach, objecting to the consideration of cultural variables in any form (see, e.g., Hirschman 1984, Jackman and Miller 1996, and Tilly, 1975, 603–21).³ The ascendancy of methodological individualism

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¹ Kroeber and Kluckhohn’s (1952) historical overview of the changing meanings of the word “culture” in German, French, and English estimated that there were over 160 definitions in use in the 1950s (Brownstein 1995, 313; Steinmetz 1999, 5). Raymond Williams (1983, 90) limited his analysis to four main ordinary and academic uses, but he also observed that culture was “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (Sewell 1999, 39; Steinmetz 1999, 5).

² This summary of the political culture school admittedly simplifies a complex group of approaches. In political science, the “classic” study was Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba’s (1963) *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. See also Pye 1965, 512–60. For one of the most recent influential books in this genre, see Putnam, Leonard, and Nanetti 1993. For an insightful extension of Putnam’s concept of “social capital,” see Boix and Posner 1996.

³ Middle East studies is one field in which the concept has been especially charged. I have in mind scholars such as Lisa Anderson, Kiren Aziz Chaudhry, and Michael Hudson, all of whom use “culture” to

and rational choice theory in the mid-1980s also led practitioners to argue that the analysis of group values or customs such as those associated with the term culture was irrelevant to political inquiry (Przeworski 1985). Politics concerned material interests and the relative success or failure of the individuals articulating them. Symbolic displays and rhetorical practices were epiphenomenal.

Although individual rational choice theorists have often been at pains to reject culturalist arguments as tautological, untestable, or beside the point, faced with explaining postcommunist upheavals, ethnic violence, “identity” politics, religious “fundamentalism,” and the ongoing problems of democratic transitions, others have resorted to culture as a “fallback” position, a way of accounting for divergent and often disappointing political outcomes (Kuper 1999, 10). By claiming that “cultures” have “peculiarities” that explain the failure of those nation-states to democratize, or by asserting that political conflict is the outcome of “irreducible cultural differences” (Bates et al. 1998; Greif 1994, 912–50; Rogowski 1997, 14), these theorists have responded to genuine explanatory needs by reviving an outmoded and unhelpful understanding of the concept. A concept of culture defined from the perspective of political science, but informed by the debates in critical anthropology, would require changes in the ways the term is applied and in how political phenomena are analyzed and explained.⁴

The purpose of this essay is to show how a critical understanding of culture as practices of meaning-making facilitates insights about politics, enabling political scientists to produce sophisticated causal arguments and to treat forms of evidence that, while manifestly political, most political science approaches tend to overlook. Studying meaning-production entails analyzing the relations between agents’ practices (e.g., their work habits, gendered norms, self-policing strategies, and leisure patterns) and systems of signification (language and other symbolic systems) (Sewell 1999; see also Ortner 1997). The words “semiotic practices” are shorthand for this approach. This conceptualization operates on two levels. First, culture as semiotic practices

mean identifiable essences or sedimented values inhering in particular groups. Chaudhry (1994), in particular, tends to confuse Samuel Huntington’s invocations of the term with any interest in “culture” or cultural studies. See also Anderson 1995, 77–92, and Hudson 1995, 61–76.

⁴ Two political scientists who do follow debates in critical anthropology and consider everyday practices and systems of signification in their work are James C. Scott (1985, 1990) and Timothy Mitchell (1988). To my knowledge, neither has theorized culture explicitly, however, nor have they focused on the conceptual conundrums posed by the term. A recent book attempting to bring anthropologists working on the “culturally specific” into conversation with rational choice theorists in political science was designed to debate the nature and importance of comparison. Although the encounter may have enabled participants to share “a sense that the world’s complexity demands some respect,” the engagement did not (nor was it intended to) produce clear understandings of what “culture” means (Bowen and Petersen 1999, 2). Indeed anthropologists associated with the project unwittingly reproduced some of the confusions I identify in Part One. For debates about the culture concept in anthropology and elsewhere, see Bonnell and Hunt 1999, Clifford 1988, Clifford and Marcus 1986, Fabian 1983, Gupta and Ferguson 1997.

refers to what language and symbols *do*—how they are inscribed in concrete actions and how they operate to produce observable political effects. In this sense, culture can be used as a causal or explanatory variable. At the same time, insofar as semiotic practices are also the effects of institutional arrangements, of structures of domination, and of strategic interests, activities of meaning-making can also be studied as effects or dependent variables. Second, culture as semiotic practices is also a lens. It offers a view of political phenomena by focusing attention on how and why actors invest them with meaning. While every activity has a semiotic component, the point here is not to assert that politics must be examined from a semiotic-practical point of view. Whether one does or does not explore processes of meaning-making will be determined by the particular research problem one confronts. At issue are approaches to political phenomena that do seek to encompass cultural considerations. Unlike current invocations of culture in political science, in an empirically grounded, practice-oriented approach to culture, meanings are understood to exist inside historical processes, which themselves are always enmeshed in changing relations of power (Asad 1993, 43).

A practice-oriented cultural approach can help us explain how political identifications are established; how rhetoric and symbols not only exemplify but also can produce political compliance; why some political ideologies, policies, and self-policing strategies work better than others; what terms such as “democracy” (Schaffer, 1998) and “religion” mean to political actors who invoke or consume them and how these perceptions might affect political outcomes; and why particular material and status interests are taken for granted, are viewed as valuable, or become available idioms for dissemination and collective action. By paying attention to the ways in which certain meanings become authoritative while others do not, political scientists can use this practice-oriented concept of culture to help explain why recognizable events or empirical regularities occur. At a minimum, studying culture by identifying relevant semiotic practices has added value to the extent that it allows for nuanced, valid understandings of politics that are capable of undermining previous beliefs and affecting our prior assumptions about the world.⁵

This article is divided into two parts. In Part One, I examine the shared problems and epistemological disagreements that have hobbled debates about culture among political scientists of various orientations. Without overlooking what may be irreconcilable differences, I suggest possibilities for fruitful collaboration. In Part Two, I begin by discussing what practices

⁵ By “valid” I mean—as Bowen and Petersen (1999, 12) write—“the degree to which the account of something picks up processes, ideas, or relationships that are indeed there in the world. Insisting on ‘validity’ does not imply a correspondence theory of truth (that a true description maps one-to-one onto the world), but only that some descriptions are better than others, and that the kinds of things anthropologists do when in the field—checking with many people, listening in on discussions, and living through events—are particularly good ways to arrive at a good description.” I would argue that good descriptions help to ensure accurate explanations of political life.

of meaning-making are and how we should go about studying them. I propose an account of meaning based on intelligibility and then examine concrete methodological strategies for how a version of culture as semiotic practices might be applied as an explanatory or independent variable in political analyses. Through a brief exploration of two concerns central to current research about politics—compliance and ethnic identity-formation—I show how culture can operate as a causal variable, as well as a corrective to prevailing assumptions about political life.

PART ONE: “CULTURE” IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

Culture Concepts

Declaring the onset of “a new phase in global history,” Samuel Huntington defines “the fundamental sources of conflict” in the current world, not as economic or ideological in nature, but as “cultural.” For Huntington, each civilization has a primordial cultural identity, so that the “major differences in political and economic development among civilizations are clearly rooted in their different cultures.” He warns, “Culture and cultural identities . . . are shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the post-Cold War world The rivalry of the superpowers is replaced by the clash of civilizations” (Huntington 1993, 22; 1996, 20, 28, 29). For Huntington, “culture” refers to the purported enduring values harbored by “highly integrated civilizations”—also sometimes confusingly termed “cultures.”

This understanding of culture as a specific group’s primordial values or traits is untenable empirically. It ignores the historical conditions and relevant power relationships that give rise to political phenomena such as “democratization,” ethnic conflicts, and contemporary radical Islamicist movements. The group traits version of culture, moreover, rides roughshod over the diversity of views and the experiences of contention within the group or groups under study. In the case of Huntington’s depiction of the Middle East, for example, such claims of sedimented essences have led scholars of culture to pass over such now obviously urgent matters as the contemporary nature of Islamicist movements, the causes of their recent emergence, and the ways in which communities of argument exist over what makes a Muslim a Muslim, what Islam means, and what, if any, its political role should be. Treating culture as a set of traits that purportedly distinguish one group from another also neglects the terrains of solidarity and fluidity that exist among groups, the ways in which political communities of various sorts have depended on the cross-fertilization of ideas and practices. In short, by ignoring historical processes and specific relations of political power, the treatment of culture in political science has downplayed the heterogeneous ways in which people experience the social order within and among groups, while exaggerating the commonality, constancy, and permanence of intragroup beliefs and

values. As a result, cultural essentialist explanations of political outcomes such as ethnic or religious violence tend to naturalize categories of groupness, rather than exploring the conditions under which such experiences of groupness come to seem natural when they do.

Some practitioners of rational choice theory use culture similarly to refer to an already-given community that can be studied by listing its fixed shared beliefs or values. The *APSA-Comparative Politics Newsletter* of summer 1997 (see “Notes from the Annual Meetings: Culture and Rational Choice.” 1997), which features summaries from a roundtable debate entitled “Can the Rational Choice Framework Cope with Culture?” as well as solicited contributions, provides a case in point, exemplifying the conceptual confusions and empirical problems in current formulations of culture. On the one hand, scholars contributing to the *Newsletter* and those invoked within its pages have various understandings of culture and how it works—as common knowledge (Chwe 2001), as symbolic action (Johnson 1997), as “beliefs off the equilibrium path behavior” (Greif 1994), as pertaining “directly to the production of preference orderings” (Lustick 1997), and as “a socially shared and logically interrelated set of symbols, codes, and norms” (Rogowski 1997 and Lustick 1997). “Culture” is used in these examples as an analytic concept, which, as William H. Sewell, Jr. (1999, 39), points out, is usually “contrasted to some other equally abstract aspect or category of social life that is not culture, such as economy, politics or biology.” On the other hand, these same scholars invoke “culture,” as Huntington would, to denote the beliefs, values, and customs of a specified group. Despite Rogowski’s dismissal of the tautological arguments of “political culture” theorists, for example, he nonetheless takes for granted the existence of “respective cultures” with possible “cultural peculiarities” and “irreducible differences,” so that “culture” refers both to a “socially shared and logically interrelated set of symbols, codes, and norms” and to a particular community, such as “Catholic culture” (Rogowski 1997, 14). Similarly, James Johnson’s (1997, 9) knowledgeable account of “culture” as a symbolic system or as symbolic action is sometimes confused with “cultures”—the plural, concrete, highly integrated worlds within which symbolic systems (cultures) operate.

Despite the multiple understandings of the culture concept, all of these formulations share problems that can be traced at least in part, to political scientists’ heavy reliance on Clifford Geertz (whose own understandings of the term were influenced by his teacher, Talcott Parsons, and by Max Weber).⁶ Geertz’s

⁶ I have in mind Geertz’s *Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (1973); *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*; and his important case study, *Negara: the Theater State* (1980). In Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba’s (1994) influential political science handbook *Designing Social Inquiry*, the authors rely on one essay by Geertz, “*Thick Description*,” to discuss culture (pp. 37, 38-40). Abner Cohen’s (1974) *Two-Dimensional Man: An Essay on the Anthropology of Power and Symbolism in a Complex Society*—a rational choice analysis of the strategic manipulation of symbols—was also important to rational choice students of culture (Johnson 1997; Laitin 1986, 1998, 1999).

definition of a “system of symbols” was one that insisted upon coherence—on a reified, frozen system of meaning, rather than on what symbols do. When he studied Bali, for example, he looked for a closed and already configured set of meanings and, thus, was blind to the processes by which ongoing practices and systems of meaning change, are sites of political struggle, and generate multiple significations within social groups. Thus Geertz could invoke the same word “culture” to connote both a fixed, synchronic entity, such as Balinese “culture,” and the performances through which the researcher interprets meanings, such as cockfights, teeth filing rituals, state pageants, and funeral rites. The dual connotations of culture as an already given community and as a symbolic system were often made analytically compatible in Geertz’s work by the suggestion that the tight integration of a particular, bounded culture was determined by its semiotic coherence as a system of meanings. The insistence on semiotic coherence led Geertz to ignore possible discrepancies between the representation of events, conditions, and people and the ways in which such representations were received, negotiated, and subjected to risks by those who produced and consumed them (Wedeen 1999). People’s own divergent interpretations of what a particular ritual or practice meant were of little significance. Analyses of meaning-making focused on an already given, consensually understood “cultural schema” continually performed by actors of particular “cultures” who were seemingly unaffected by historical changes. For Geertz, power and processes of meaning-making became purely symbolic, as did culture and analyses of it.⁷ In his “significant system” there is no agency, only an intelligible, seamlessly coherent script or master narrative that actors follow in particular “cultures.” Such theorizations of culture also led Geertz to sample on the dependent variable, selecting symbols and meanings that were particularly prone to coherence or systematicity (Sewell 1999: 47).

Despite these problems, Geertz’s (1973) enormously influential book, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, gave some political scientists a compelling reason to take symbols seriously. As David Laitin (1986, 12) argued, “Symbols are important because they provide to individuals a sense of meaning. For Geertz, these symbols or, better, the various systems of symbols constitute ‘culture.’” Geertz’s refusal to produce falsifiable arguments was at odds with the positivist project of rational choice theory, but his attention to meaning allowed political scientists such as Laitin to discover “the nature of group values” (Laitin 1986, 16). According to Laitin

(1986, 16) Geertz’s “thick descriptions” of systems of signification were “methodologically useful” because they registered “the deeply held values of a cultural group.” For Laitin (1986, 16),

The database consists in symbolic structures. Only with a keen understanding of the meanings embedded in shared symbols... can one adduce cultural preferences without tautologically claiming that preferences can be derived from the behavior of actors who are assumed to be rational.

Geertz invited political scientists such as Laitin to pay attention to culture as a system of symbols from which researchers could read meaning, but political scientists thereby adopted many of the problems of the Geertzian concept of culture: that the system was reified and fixed, that it was identifiable as bounded, and that meanings were always already set in a given “text.” Thus in Laitin’s reading of Geertz, culture refers both to “systems of symbols” and to the “*deeply held values of a cultural group*” (emphasis mine). This slippage could remain unacknowledged because, for Laitin, as for Geertz, to refer to culture as a system of symbols was to claim that culture was a contained system of “deeply held” values and beliefs. Of course Laitin’s insistence that “thick descriptions” could be treated as a “database” may seem odd, given Geertz’s philosophical insistence on ethnography as an enterprise mediated through the anthropologist’s creative interpretation. Geertz’s own penchant for treating a particular practice, such as the Balinese cockfight, as synecdochic for Balinese culture made him a particularly blatant and, in many ways, self-professed mediator. In short, political scientists beholden to Geertz improved over the political culture literatures of old by producing theoretically motivated work that emphasized the importance of symbols and took ethnographic evidence seriously. However, Geertzians of various stripes unwittingly conflated various uses of culture in their analyses, thereby perpetuating confusions and compromising the term’s explanatory purchase by insisting on the semiotic coherence of a particular community, system of symbols, or “culture.” Culture became not only what a group has—beliefs, values, or a symbolic system—but what a group is (a Balinese culture). More importantly, theories of culture tended to render historicized analyses of practice and process impossible or irrelevant, explaining political outcomes as the result of empirically untenable, untestable assertions of uniformity and fixity. Most political scientists continue to think of culture as connoting fixed group traits.

Real Differences: The Individualist Orientation as an Example

Despite shared problems in formulations of the concept, divergent political, methodological, and epistemological commitments also divide political scientists and are responsible for treatments of culture being less robust than they otherwise might be. One commonly

⁷ Some critics of Geertz charge that he has no understanding of, or interest in, power relations, but this seems unfair. As Geertz (1980, 120) suggests in his study of political spectacles in nineteenth century Bali, “The pageants were not mere aesthetic embellishments, celebrations of a domination independently existing: they were the thing itself.” Moreover, in his famous essay “Thick Description,” Geertz claims (1983) that his “interpretive approach,” unlike the structuralism he opposes, is going to take into account considerations of power and history. His ethnographic work, however, does not execute this intention.

cited rift is between rational choice theorists and interpretive social scientists (on interpretive social science, see Rabinow and Sullivan 1987). Although I do not intend to reify this distinction, different assumptions, vocabularies, sources of information, and standards of evidence have produced recognizable communities of argument. Unequal access to institutional power and to material resources has also created experiences of groupness that hinder scholarly discussion. For my purposes here, one key difference is the importance the individual plays in analyses of political life.

In rational choice theory—as in the behaviorist political culture literature—the individual is the privileged unit of analysis, even if individual responses are subsequently aggregated for statistical purposes. As George Steinmetz (1999, 19) argues, “This individualistic bias [is] at odds with the point made even by Parsons that culture is not (or not primarily) a property of individuals.” This bias tends to produce arguments in which ideas, beliefs, or values, such as “national pride,” are often “misleadingly wrenched” from “the social conditions in which they [are] embedded and within which they receive [...] their specific meaning.” Similarly, “individualism,” as Alexander Wendt (1999, 166, 169) points out, implies that persons are “independently existing” rather than constituted through their linguistic, institutional, and practical relations with others.

Interpretivist approaches, among which can be counted the important innovation of practice anthropology in the 1980s, frequently invoke an agentive individual, but they do not assume a maximizing, cost-benefit calculator who is unproblematically divorced from actual historical processes (e.g., Bourdieu 1978). The rational choice formulation of the decontextualized, universalizable individual, whose ideas, beliefs, and values can be extracted from the social and political conditions under which they were generated, produces objects of inquiry that are incommensurable with interpretivist social science. Of course many rational choice theorists do analyze the conditions under which individuals make choices. The individualist bias, however, tends to require that culture be conceptualized as a “constraint” on individual’s strategic actions, or “as information for equilibrium selection,” or, in the plural, as “manifold equilibria” (Tsebelis 1997). An approach to culture as processes of meaning-construction, in contrast, assumes that actors understand themselves as individuals and as strategic, and as group members and nonstrategic, and that such self-understandings are always mutually constituted and affirmed by others. Meaning-making, in short, implies a social process through which people reproduce together the conditions of intelligibility that enable them to make sense of their worlds—a point to which I return in Part Two. Such a view of culture restores a manifestly collective aspect to political analyses that many individualist accounts lack, without requiring the shared coherence that many culturalist accounts exaggerate.

With innovations in game theory and computational modeling, scholars have begun to introduce learning, information updating, and adaptation into ratio-

nal choice and agent-based analyses.⁸ Dissatisfaction with the externalization of preferences in neoclassical economics has encouraged a focus in political science on preference formation, including attempts to make preferences “endogenous” to the models. This concern has led some rational choice theorists to examine how political identities and preferences are formed (Gerber and Jackson 1993; Hardin 1995; Laitin 1998). Yet even in as impressive a study as Laitin’s (1998) *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad*, the phenomenon of identity is ultimately reduced to a strategic choice in which individual actors calculate whether to switch from Russian to the titular language on the basis of what they think others will do. These works assume without question that individuals can be adequately conceived for purposes of political science as goal-oriented beings attempting to maximize their interests, given existing constraints (Tsebelis 1997, 16). Indeed, a “constructed” identity, for Laitin (1998, 3–35), is synonymous with a strategically chosen one. Laitin’s ethnographic sections are thus devoted to sorting out what his informants were strategic about, rather than analyzing “identity in formation”—how selves are constituted or how language might actually operate, or not, to generate felt identifications.

Rational choice theorists in political science may, of course, differ in the degree of rationality they accord to agents or disagree about how to understand equilibrium, but they are likely to share the common belief among economists that “institutions and patterns of behavior can be explained as the product or outcome of many individual decisions” (Young 1998, 4). Interpretivists might question not only the view of individuals such studies put forth, but also the degree of power or efficacy that individuals have within institutions. The main point to be registered here is simply that insofar as individualism presupposes agents who are forward-looking strategists forever calculating costs and benefits, there will be a serious ontological and epistemological divide between most rational choice and interpretivist theorists.⁹ Interpretivists can rightly claim, in my view, that individualist assumptions prevent rational choice scholars from posing questions that are of manifest importance to politics, not the least of which is how interests are collectively generated and defined, or how we come to know that people maximize their interests, if they do. These disagreements are important ones. It remains to be seen whether further substantive discussion will be worthwhile, but there is no need for such disagreements to foreclose possibilities of cooperation. Nor is there any theoretical warrant, from either side of the epistemological divide, for resisting the

⁸ For a sophisticated consideration of learning and adaptation in rational choice theory, see (the economist) Young (1998). For a computational model that attempts to explain how “culture” disseminates, see Axelrod 1997, 148–77.

⁹ David Laitin (1999) does point out that this understanding of the individual is not necessary from a rational choice perspective, but he does not operationalize another one.

introduction into political science of a post-Geertzian anthropological conceptualization of culture.

Fruitful Collaboration

The fact that rational choice theory has engaged with studies of culture invites conversation, and possibly productive argument, between methodological individualists and interpretivists. Game theorists, in particular, have begun to use culture to connote “common knowledge” in their analyses. “Common knowledge” helps to solve games in which preferences and capabilities generate “multiple equilibria”—stable outcomes from which a rational actor has no incentive to deviate. The idea of common knowledge enables rational choice theorists to solve these games by identifying “focal points around which actors’ expectations can converge, thereby limiting transaction costs and enhancing the possibilities for coordination under conditions of complexity and uncertainty” (Schelling 1960, 55–56; Chwe 2001, Goldstein and Keohane 1993, Weingast 1995, and Wendt 1999).¹⁰ An oft-repeated example is Schelling’s “tacit coordination (common interests)” problem: “You are to meet somebody in New York City. You have not been instructed where to meet; you have no prior understanding with the person on where to meet; and you cannot communicate with each other. You are simply told that you will have to guess where to meet and that he is being told the same thing and that you will just have to try to make your guesses coincide” (Schelling 1960, 55–56). Schelling (1960, 55) tried this problem on an unscientific sample of respondents from New Haven, Connecticut, and found that an “absolute majority” managed to meet at Grand Central Station’s information booth, and virtually all persons succeeded in meeting at 12 noon.

Some of the problems with culture as common knowledge are indicated by the example. The concept tends to assume the shared quality or commonness of knowledge rather than to question how—or the extent to which—such understandings are, in fact, tacitly understood or consensually shared. In other words, “common knowledge” derives from a consideration of knowledge that can reasonably be considered common, rather than from a consideration of culture as a manifold outcome of human activity. How do we know whether the outcome in Schelling’s Grand Central station example demonstrates common knowledge, or, say, the practicalities of train schedules, or some combination of the two? Are those who do not have this common knowledge outside culture? In those who use Schelling’s account, “common knowledge” seems analogous to nature, a background condition—always already there. By naturalizing the concept of culture in this way, rational choice theorists forgo the ability to know whether common knowledge actually exists in any particular instance or whether another, unspecified, variable is doing the work of coordinating action. By tracking how common knowledge gets produced,

is subject to change, or is implicated in political relationships of leverage and domination, we can produce robust explanations of why people coordinate their actions when they do, while avoiding erroneous causal inferences.

To be fair, nothing inherent in the idea of common knowledge interferes with asking how that knowledge is acquired or changed, although little practical work has been done on such matters thus far. To put my criticisms in the language of rational choice theory: (a) Common knowledge is one of the descriptors of an equilibrium state; (b) “given that the coordination dynamics on which common knowledge models operate have multiple equilibria, change to different equilibria is theoretically possible; (c) the problem is that noncooperative game theory hasn’t seriously modeled the move from one coordination equilibrium to another. Noncooperative coordination games with multiple equilibria are potentially dynamic,” but so far have been clunky and static.¹¹

Other problems with current uses of common knowledge make it less helpful than it otherwise might be. In a typical example—Michael Suk-Young Chwe’s (2001, 7) ambitiously eclectic book, *Rational Ritual: Culture, Coordination, and Common Knowledge*—common knowledge means “knowledge of others’ knowledge of others’ knowledge, and so on.” But the examples of common knowledge Chwe provides muddy his analysis and multiply the meanings of the term. Sometimes “common knowledge” means the condition of having the awareness that other people know what you know, and sometimes it seems to indicate the process of coming to know that others know. The “publicity” of public ceremonies sometimes generates common knowledge; at other times publicity refers to “common knowledge generation” (compare pp. 8 and 18). Most importantly, “common knowledge” slips from referring to the knowledge that other people are seeing the same commercial, ritual, or television program to referring to the knowledge that others understand what they see in the same way. And Chwe seems to imply that “common knowledge” is the knowledge that others know that they are interpreting what they see in the same way that each individual viewer does. How do we researchers know (without ethnographic or survey work) that “everyone knows that everyone knows it” or that “knowing it” means the same thing to everyone in question? Perhaps Chwe’s assumptions about coordination and conformity have to do with the primary areas with which he was concerned: advertising and rituals. But the latter are often less about generating actual coherence than about representing it publicly. The “common knowledge” that the regime can orchestrate the ritual is not matched by the “common knowledge” of what that ability means: Does it prove societal coherence or demonstrate state power or both, for example? Furthermore, Chwe’s operating assumption is that people will want to conform. What about instances of resistance and transgression? What

¹⁰ Game theory’s adoption of culture as “common knowledge” is discussed in Wendt 1999, chap. 4).

¹¹ This is David Laitin’s formulation in a personal communication with the author.

of critiques of prevailing normative orders? What of desires to be different, to be unusual, or to stand out? What of ambivalence? I can imagine conditions under which people conform, basing their actions, as Chwe and others assume, on what they think others are going to do, but I cannot imagine that such pressures are always operative, let alone decisive. Certainly, they are not exhaustively descriptive of politics.

In short, the concept of common knowledge assumes a coherent logic and a level of consensus that may not be empirically demonstrable. It is unclear what added value scholars derive from this *a priori* treatment of knowledge as common or of desires to conform as given. One justification might be, as Laitin points out, that “if a model has observable (and testable) implications, it can be empirically supported without direct information on the values of the independent variable (in this case, the existence of common knowledge).”¹² Yet scholars may thereby impute the presence of common knowledge when it does not exist or when degrees of common knowledge more accurately reflect citizens’ experience. Indeed, such studies often produce arguments that rely on the assumption of common knowledge in order to prove it. By assuming deeply embedded understandings rather than showing their existence, scholars tend to produce static, synchronic arguments that do not register transformations in levels, or fractures in systems, of knowledge. Moreover, Chwe’s version of common knowledge is sometimes generated by “cultural practices,” such as rituals or performances, and sometimes seems to be what culture means. His reliance on a Geertzian understanding of culture makes the work vulnerable to the conceptual confusions, empirical troubles, and theoretical limitations discussed above. In other words, “common knowledge” often operates as a fixed, frozen, “always already there” category, much like a Geertzian script or schema does.

Political scientists’ reluctance to tackle post-Geertzian theorizations of the concept forecloses possibilities of learning from, and contributing to, current work on culture. This reluctance may have something to do with the unfamiliarity of the language used, particularly in poststructuralist studies of culture. In addition, the disavowal of modernization theory in political science has not been as total as it was in anthropology. Nor have political scientists engaged in the self-reflexive work on knowledge production that has animated research in other disciplines. The focus on the mentality of the researcher among 1980s anthropologists—which is often what self-reflexivity entailed—dissuaded political scientists from reading anthropology, as did political scientists’ preferences for conceptual parsimony over the complicated, messy narratives of anthropological inquiry. Attacks on positivist social science generated by poststructuralism may also have driven away some political scientists. Whatever the reason, all students of politics—whether dependent on Parsonian versions of political culture, appreciative of Geertz and

rational choice, or dismissive of the culture concept altogether—would benefit from becoming familiar with an anthropological, diachronic, practice-based notion of culture.

Contemporary work on culture in anthropology, although indebted to Geertz’s cultural anthropology of the 1960s and 1970s, also acknowledges important critiques of that tradition. Recent years have seen analysts, influenced by practice theory in anthropology, challenge culture (in its abstract sense) as a seamless system of meanings whose consistency is logical and resistant to change. Anthropologists inspired by works as diverse as those of Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, and Michel de Certeau have emphasized the fragility, ambiguities, and historical ruptures evident in symbolic systems.¹³ When examining semiotic practices, these theorists have invited us to see practices, texts, and images as signs whose meanings are both fixed by conventions and also always at risk—part of overlapping semiotic systems open to various interpretations and saturated by complicated, contentious relationships of power. “Power,” despite the term’s considerable conceptual fuzziness, becomes more than just “leverage” in these accounts. It is many-sided, elusive, and diffuse (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). To study culture in the critical anthropology sense is to explore the processes of meaning-construction in which people’s practices and their material realities—their political, economic, and social situations—operate in dialectical relationship with their systems of signification. By “dialectical” I mean a relationship in which actors’ practices and their systems of signification do more than merely influence each other. Practices and

¹³ Despite the different epistemological orientations of these theorists, they are often grouped together under the vague rubric of “post-modernism” or, sometimes, “poststructuralism.” Anthropologists, in particular, have been inspired by Bourdieu’s theorizations of practice in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977) and *The Logic of Practice* (1990), but Bourdieu’s own ethnographic work remains structuralist in its execution—identifying the systems of parallels and oppositions that reveal the structure of a society. Emphasizing ambiguities and historical ruptures has led some practice-oriented anthropologists to cite passages from Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality, Volume One* (1978) that stress resistance, although there is nothing inherent in a study of practices (or in Foucault’s work) that makes this necessary or even obvious. For a particularly sophisticated example, see Comaroff 1985. In Comaroff and Comaroff 1991 this emphasis on resistance is coupled with a study of the workings of colonial ideology and “hegemony,” inspired, in part, by Gramsci’s (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Postcolonial studies more generally invoke the term “practices” and investigate the dynamics of power and resistance to colonial domination, but most scholars assert the power of discourses rather than the ways in which such discourses actually operate in practice. James C. Scott’s (1985, 1990) work in political science may also be viewed in the resistance tradition, as can the projects emerging out of subaltern studies. For an essay surveying the literature and critical of romanticizing resistance, see Abu-Lughod (1990, 41–55). Recent studies in practice-oriented anthropology (and sociology) have begun to reverse the trend, minimizing the role of resistance and focusing on the ways in which scientific and social practices generate hegemony. These works are also beholden to passages in Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, as well as to his theorizations of power in *Discipline and Punish* (1979). Nadia Abu El-Haj’s (2001) *Facts on the Ground* is exemplary, demonstrating how the practice of archaeology and its disciplinary dynamics work to substantiate historical claims and remake conceptions of territory in Israel.

¹² Personal communication with the author.

signification are defined and generated in reference to each other, yet can come into conflict, both conceptually in their meanings and causally in the world, so that the only way of handling such material is by synthesis—i.e., by maintaining an overview that includes both sides without stifling the conflict or denying their logical incompatibilities.¹⁴ As we shall see, a dialectical understanding of culture allows us to view meaning-making activities as being both stable and changeable, both a single system and internally various and conflicted, an aspect of both structure and agency, both (potentially) an independent and a dependent variable, depending on the research question and strategy adopted. This conceptualization connotes dynamism rather than stasis and allows for inconsistency rather than simply implying strict coherence.¹⁵ Culture in these accounts does not refer to essential values that identify a particular group or to particular traits that isolate one group from another. Rather, culture designates a way of looking at the world that requires an account of how symbols operate in practice, why meanings generate action, and why actions produce meanings, when they do. Such a version of culture does not require forsaking parsimony or the generalizing impulses many political scientists value. Focusing on semiotic practices dialectically may require, however, a theorization of how specifiable contradictions and ambiguities themselves work to produce political order, stimulate change, or generate leverage in negotiations.

It would be tempting to see this view of culture as mapping neatly on to the familiar structure–agency binary. Indeed, practice theorists themselves often argue that practice is “not an antagonistic alternative to the study of systems or structures, but a necessary complement to it” (Ortner 1984, 147). I want to argue somewhat differently: Systems of signification and practice entail both structure and agency. The word “systems,” of course, implies structure, but the language and symbols constitutive of any “system of signification” are created, reproduced, and subverted by agents speaking and acting in the world. I am not sure that there can be human signification without agency—people doing the work of interpreting and making intelligible signs. We nevertheless reproduce ourselves as agents or “subjects” within the confines of institutional and semiotic “structures,” what game theorists call “choice under structural constraint.” Practices, moreover, often have a structure to them (e.g., habits, routines, and institutional roles) at the same time that they refer to agents acting in the world, as the term “practice” suggests. Practices are actions or deeds that are repeated over time; they are learned, reproduced, and subject to risks through social interaction. Practices,

like actions (as opposed to “behaviors”), are also, in the sense that I use the term, unique to human beings. Like actions, they involve “freedom, choice, and responsibility, meaning and sense, conventions, norms and rules” (Pitkin 1993, 242). They may be self-consciously executed, but they need not be. They tend to be intelligible to others in context dependent ways. Practices, like human actions, are ultimately “dual,” composed both of what “the outside observer can see and of the actors’ understandings of what they are doing” (Pitkin 1993, 261). What a practice approach has made possible in anthropology is an attention to politics, to social asymmetry, historical contingencies, and political domination, key dimensions of both action and structure (Ortner 1984, 147). In contrast, the way the concept of culture has generally been understood in political science has limited its utility for political analysis. To the extent that “culture” suppresses lived political experience in its Parsonian, Huntingtonian, and Geertzian formulations, it sacrifices explanatory power.

Our conceptualizations have constrained our way of knowing and the kind of work we do. The concept of “political culture” or “common knowledge” with which most political scientists operate presupposes an internal coherence and stability that is indefensible empirically. My objective is to shift our conceptualization away from culture as a fixed system of meaning to culture as the practices of meaning-making through which social actors attempt to make their worlds coherent.¹⁶ In Part Two, I show that by adopting a notion of culture as semiotic practices, political scientists can ask novel questions, use new kinds of evidence, embrace fresh perspectives, and develop original answers to concerns of abiding relevance to politics.

PART TWO: THE POLITICS OF INTELLIGIBILITY

Thinking Through Practices of Meaning-Making

Understanding semiotic practices requires an analysis of the ways in which people use words, establish and interpret signs, and act in the world in ways that foster intelligibility. Intelligibility, in turn, works on multiple levels. Certain kinds of practices are intelligible and their meanings can be ascribed and described without much knowledge of language and context. The political theorist, Hanna Pitkin, whose work draws on ordinary language philosophy, gives one example. We might begin by saying, “I don’t know what they mean to be doing, but I can see that in fact their movement scatters those seeds in fertile spots, and later they harvest the fruit. It may be a game or a religious ceremony or something else, but in fact they are planting” (Pitkin 1993, 258). To discover whether the scattering of seeds is a game, a religious ceremony, or something else, ethnographic fieldwork or survey research data or both

¹⁴ I am grateful to Hanna Pitkin for suggesting that I bring this theme to the fore.

¹⁵ Recent essays on “culture” in social movement theory often emphasize the term’s contestatory elements. But we do not learn what culture means or what would make a culture one culture (rather than two or 12). Nor do we have a sense of what would make a symbolic system one system (and systematic) to the extent that it is. We learn only that “culture” is not static. See, for example, Johnston and Klandermans (1995).

¹⁶ This formulation is beholden to an anonymous reviewer, to whom I am grateful, at *American Political Science Review*.

may be required. We would thus be able to consider the attitudes of those who partake in the practice, the language they use to describe it, and the fieldworker's interpretation of what is transpiring. We might conceive of political practices similarly by saying: I don't know what they mean to be doing, but I can see that in fact their movement takes a pen and checks off a box with a name beside it on a piece of paper, deposits that paper in a box, and later they tally the number of times each name is checked off and the one with the most votes makes political decisions for the next four years. It may be a game, a religious ceremony, a farce, a political event, or something else, or it may be a combination of these things. In many cases, what informants say they are doing and what the social scientist claims they are doing are not either/or choices. Rather, informants are "doing one by way of the other" (Pitkin 1993, 259). Social scientists must be able to know and to show that their interpretation is based on a grasp of native intelligibility, that in checking off a ballot the citizen is affirming the community's norms, or voting, or both, or neither. To demonstrate that voting is a way of affirming the community's norms, social scientists may have to relate the practice to local concepts, texts, and traditions. They may also check whether such practices actually work to affirm the community's norms by examining the practice's effects—the ways in which such practices are negotiated by, and generate consequences for, those who participate in them. How social scientists deal with ambiguity, complexity, and the fact of multiple significations will depend on the questions asked and the objectives desired. Although multiple significations often exist, they are not limitless, as the examples of scattering seeds or checking off a ballot make obvious. The contexts within which an action occurs help determine the range of significations that are possible and pertinent.

The advantages of conceiving of meaning-making practices in terms of levels of intelligibility are as follows: Intelligibility does not presuppose grasping an inner essence or getting into the heads of informants who are captive minds of a system but, rather, centers on the ways in which people attempt to make apparent, observable sense of their worlds—to themselves and to each other—in emotional and cognitive terms. In stark contrast to grasping an inner essence, such a conceptualization of culture and of meaning requires thinking pragmatically, discovering what we know (that seeds are beings scattered or ballots are being checked and counted) and what we need to know (what work this seed scattering or ballot tallying is doing, for example), even when we have only a minimal familiarity with context and language. It then prompts us to probe deeper, to ask questions about the conditions under which specific material and semiotic activities emerge (terrorism, for example), the contexts within which they find public expression, the work they do in the world, and the irregularities they generate in the process of reproduction. In short, the approach I am recommending generates empirical findings with observable implications of manifest importance to politics.

Contrary to the claim made by some anticulturalists that studies of culture tend toward too much specificity and are hostile to the generalizing impulses of comparative politics or of social science more broadly, the approach to culture I am recommending requires looking at multiple cases of habit and usage. These cases may be confined to a specific geographically bounded nation-state, but they certainly need not be. Studying culture should not entail insisting on a country's allegedly specific characteristics, values, or beliefs. The conceptualization of culture I am recommending would specifically exclude any such judgment. Nor need a cultural approach exaggerate the coherence of perceptions and practices that structure politics. In this increasingly information-reliant, transnational world, discrete societies, peoples, or "cultures" are far less likely to be wholly discrete than they ever were before, and it is easy to adduce historical evidence that notions of cultural isolation or "purity" have always been based more on myth or political intention than on fact. The notion of boundedness was always "constructed"—in the minds of cartographers drawing the boundaries of nation-states, for example, and by researchers' own categories of groupness or locale.

This is not to argue that geographical territories and semiotic practices are never correlated. There may at times be what Sewell (1999, 49–50) calls a "thin coherence"—a variable, contested, incompletely integrated way in which the inhabitants of a specific territory share a set of semiotic practices. It is probably easy to agree, for example, that people who live in France are by and large committed to some form of republicanism. Any political analysis that seeks to discuss the relationship between republicanism and Frenchness must take into account the following: (1) Republican ideas can come to stand for Frenchness because of the ways in which they have been used (by politicians, historians, and advertisers) to objectify what it means to be French (see Handler's [1988] study of Quebec); (2) non-French people may also subscribe to republican ideals; (3) not all French people adhere to republican ideals; (4) not all French people interpret republicanism or understand its significance in the same way; (5) antirepublican French people may not have the same relationship to republicanism as do antirepublican thinkers and citizens elsewhere, but they may; and (6) it is not clear who counts as a "French" person. Recognizing these possibilities invites theorizing about the historical relationship among regional political practices, nation-building policies and imagery, and the production of republican ideals in France, while also facilitating comparisons and contrasts with other groups or geographical locations. Semiotic logics are themselves an effect of people's actions, institutional power, and historical circumstances. State institutions, like theoreticians of culture, may, in Sewell's (1999, 57) words, "subject potential semiotic sprawl to a certain order—to prescribe (contested) core values, to impose discipline on dissenters, to describe boundaries and norms—in short, to give a certain focus to the production and consumption of meaning."

An understanding of meaning-production as a process through which conventions become intelligible to participants through observable usages and effects suggests that meanings are open to various and changing interpretations, while also sometimes appearing to be overly coherent, fixed, or inevitable. The analyst's task, then, may not be to specify the relationships that govern this semiotic logic (structuralism), or to search for silently intended meanings (hermeneutics), but rather to identify the range of semiotic practices relevant to explanations of a given political phenomenon and explore how such semiotic practices work. Consider, for instance, the study of patriotism in the United States. We might select pledging allegiance to the flag as one semiotic practice in the range a scholar investigates in studying patriotism in the United States. We would want to do more than analyze its content or infer symbolic patriotism from its family resemblance to flag ceremonies elsewhere. We would inquire into the effects of the relationship between pledging allegiance and patriotism, a task that calls for a number of additional studies. We might research the history of pledging allegiance, including the mechanisms by which the ritual was enforced over time. We might observe the practice ethnographically in areas selected for their varying regional, ethnic, racial, class, and political affiliations. We might conduct open-ended interviews and surveys, asking a wide variety of people about the meanings they attribute to pledging allegiance and the effects it produces in them: Was the flag salute mind-numbing, uplifting, apathy-inducing, or irrelevant? Finally, we might collect transgressive materials, such as evidence from court cases and protest movements, as well as source materials from "popular culture" media, such as newspaper reports, films, jokes, cartoons, and songs, that may offer alternative ways of seeing the pledge of allegiance. Such an analysis would allow us to discern whether the pledge of allegiance could be a banal, routinized practice, an activity invested with and productive of patriotism, or both.

Although the meanings people might attach to a particular practice such as pledging allegiance to the flag are multiple and unstable, to be intelligible—by definition—they need to be recognizable by others. As Ferdinand de Saussure argued, the meaning of a sign is a function of its contrasts with other signs in a semiotic system. People form a semiotic community to the extent that they recognize the same set of contrasts and therefore are able to engage in mutually comprehensible symbolic action.¹⁷ Resistance and obedience are intelligible insofar as they make reference to this shared set of oppositions, without which political activities or speech acts would hardly make sense. Saussure's account may exaggerate coherence, but his insight—that intelligibility requires both a minimally shared set of

relations among signs and a group of people able to recognize them—is critical for our thinking about the political import of meaning-production (Sahlins 1985, 143–56; Saussure 1959; Sewell 1999, 23–24). Intelligibility does not imply that linguistic or semiotic meanings are stable, but it does require at least enough stability so that what one actor learned still applies when another speaks. Put differently, intelligibility suggests that instabilities in discourse and in practices make sense only within the signifying operations of a shared conceptual system (Saussure 1959; Sewell 1999, 50; Wedeen 1999, 85).

Initially, this formulation of intelligibility may seem similar to a "common knowledge" approach, but intelligibility differs from common knowledge in at least two fundamental ways. First, "intelligibility" refers to conditions that are observable rather than assumed. Second, intelligibility connotes a minimalist sense of what is shared rather than a highly integrated one; a common conceptual system (intelligibility) is not the same as a shared episteme ("common knowledge"). When we see children pledging allegiance to the flag in elementary school, we do not think that they are ordering an ice cream soda at the drugstore. The words that they utter signal that they are reciting an oath of loyalty to the United States and that the flag symbolizes the United States. We do not know whether they experience this particular recitation as an avowal of their patriotism or indeed whether they ever have such feelings. We do know, however, because of our shared experiences of language acquisition, that their action is intelligible as an outward demonstration of allegiance. Wittgenstein argues that we learn the meaning of words such as "flag" and "allegiance" through other people's uses of words in contexts such as pledging allegiance to the flag. According to Wittgenstein (1958, 225) "What 'determining the length' means is not learned by learning what length and determining are; the meaning of the word 'length' is learnt by learning, among other things, what it is to determine length" (Wittgenstein 225). Similarly, the meaning of the word "flag" is learned by learning, among other things, what it is to pledge allegiance to it.

To summarize, "meaning" connotes intelligibility, which is produced through and compounded by repeated, context-dependent use that is observable. Language and symbols are intelligible insofar as they are made manifest through practices. Practices make sense because they are reproduced historically and conceptualized through language. Practices and signs may be "thinly coherent" (Sewell) in the sense that they relate differentially to other signs (Saussure) and yet have a recognizable range of applications (Wittgenstein). Yet they rarely exhibit the sort of highly integrated, logical consistency attributed to them by structuralists or by semioticians such as Geertz. Attention to dynamism, risk, misunderstandings, ambiguity, and historical encounter calls for an analysis of the effects of semiotic practices: the ways in which, for example, official rhetoric in Syria or negative political advertisements in the United States affect people's actions and interpretations, which, in turn, play a

¹⁷ Saussure's (1959, 14) concerns were with language, which he saw as "the social side of speech, outside the individual who can never create nor modify it by himself; it exists only by virtue of a contract signed by the members of the community." For his discussion of the nature of the linguistic sign, see pp. 65ff.

role in determining future actions. Systems of signs are inscribed in material, observable practices; semiotic practices produce material effects, the observable implications of which are so important for positivist social science. And material effects reproduce systems of signification, which are communally intelligible and therefore open to interpretation.

Applying Semiotic Practices

How might this understanding of culture as the dialectical relationship between people's practices and systems of signification be applied as an "explanatory" or "independent" variable in current political science research? Through an investigation of two examples—compliance and ethnic identity-formation—I show how culture (as semiotic practices) can be used in causal analyses.

First, in *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, I (Wedeen 1999) examine the ways in which a particular set of semiotic practices (in this case, patently spurious official speeches and the ironic distancing strategies of the citizenry) works to produce political compliance. The object in that study was the "cult" of Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad—all of the rhetorical practices and official imagery that substituted for discussion of substantive political issues in public. For much of Asad's rule (1970–2000) his image was omnipresent. In newspapers, on television, and during orchestrated spectacles, Asad was praised as the "father," the "gallant knight," even the country's "premier pharmacist." Yet most Syrians, including those who created the official rhetoric, did not believe its claims. The book asks, Why would a regime spend scarce resources on a cult whose rituals of obeisance are transparently phony? The answer: Because it works. The book concludes that Asad's cult operated as a disciplinary device, generating a politics of public dissimulation in which citizens acted as if they revered their leader. By inundating daily life with tired symbolism, the regime exercised a subtle, yet effective, form of power. The cult worked to enforce obedience, induce complicity, isolate Syrians from one another, and set guidelines for public speech and behavior.

Studying "culture" as semiotic practices with political effects can lead to surprising findings. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the rhetoric and symbols of Asad's cult did not produce "legitimacy," "charisma," or "hegemony," enabling political leaders to win support for themselves and their policies by fostering collective ethnic, national, or class identifications. Yet Asad's cult was neither epiphenomenal nor unimportant. A focus exclusively on material concerns does not explain why the Syrian government expended exorbitant sums of money and scarce material resources on symbolic production, instead of marshalling its limited funds for either increases in punitive enforcement or the positive inducements that goods and services could offer. *Ambiguities of Domination* shows how official rhetoric and images not only exemplify but also produce power for a regime. Asad's cult cluttered public

space with monotonous slogans and empty gestures, draining citizens' political energies. The insinuation of formulaic rhetoric and self-serving state symbolism into the daily lives of citizens habituated people to perform the gestures and pronounce the slogans constitutive of their obedience. Representations of power and obedience in Syria also operated to generate power and obedience by disseminating credible threats of punishment. Although threats, to be credible, must at least occasionally be carried out, in general they suffice to ensure the compliance of most citizens. In coercive compliance, people obey because they fear being punished. The images of citizens delivering panegyrics to Asad's rule, collectively holding aloft placards forming his face, signing oaths in blood, or simply displaying pictures of him in their shop windows communicated to Syrians throughout the country the impression of Asad's power independent of his readiness to use it. And the greater the absurdity of the required performance, the more clearly it demonstrated that the regime could make most people obey most of the time. Studying Syrian "political culture" in this sense does not entail identifying the traits that inhere in Syrians, but investigating the rhetorical practices and symbols that generate compliance for the regime.¹⁸

On the basis of ethnographic research, I demonstrate that Syrians under Asad both recognized the disciplinary aspects of the cult and found ways to undermine them. The fact that so many tolerated, politically critical cartoons, films, and television comedies were published or circulated raises the question of why a regime would allow symbolic affronts to its official claims of omnipotence. To ask the question differently: To what extent can such individual artistic "victories" be politically effective ways to resist a regime's politics of "as if"? On the one hand, these practices were politically effective to the extent that they counteracted the atomization and isolation fostered by public dissimulation. Whereas seeing others obey may have made each feel isolated in his/her unbelief, a shared giggle, the popularity of a comedy skit, and the circulation of cartoons and transgressive stories enabled people to recognize that the conditions of unbelief were widely shared. Both permitted and prohibited methods of registering resistance were thus partially effective to the extent that they reasserted this widely shared experience of unbelief. At the moment when a joke is told and laughter resounds in the room, people are canceling the concrete isolation and atomization manufactured by a politics of "as if." They are affirming to themselves and to others their shared status as unwilling "conscripts" (Scott 1990, 15).

On the other hand, and paradoxically, it is precisely this shared acknowledgment of involuntary obedience that can make a cult so powerful. Asad's cult was powerful, in part, because it was unbelievable. Acts of transgression might counteract the atomization and isolation a politics of "as if" produces, but they also shore up another disciplinary mechanism, namely, the ways in which such a cult relies on an external obedience

¹⁸ For a sociological formulation of how "culture" as a repertoire or "tool kit" influences "strategies of action," see Swidler 1986.

produced through each citizen's unbelief. Asad's cult disciplined citizens by occasioning continual demonstrations of external obedience. External obedience, unlike good judgment or conviction, depends on a self-conscious submission to authority that is predicated on not believing. Recognizing the shared conditions of unbelief thus reproduces this self-consciousness, without which a politics of "as if" could scarcely be sustained. In short, such resistance might counteract the atomizing effects of a personality cult, but it also reinforces the cult's own mechanisms of enforcing obedience. As the philosopher Slavoj Žižek (1991) points out, even if people keep their ironical distance, even if they demonstrate that they do not take what they are doing seriously, they are still complying, and compliance is what ultimately counts politically.

Studying the ways in which semiotic practices produce compliance for a regime need not be confined to authoritarian cases. One could also imagine scholars of voting behavior, for example, considering the ways in which consistently false campaign promises might operate to depoliticize the electorate. Similarly, scholars of capitalism might analyze advertising campaigns, investigating how images of the "good life"—of comfort, efficiency, and love—are marketed, consumed, and resisted. Such analyses would go beyond readings of public opinion polls, campaign promises, or advertisements as texts and look both toward their effects (the sorts of reactions they stimulate) and to these various practices as themselves effects of specific, historically contingent relations of political power.

Existing political science frameworks either fail to pay attention to rhetoric and symbols, which means that they have no account of the work symbols do, or make claims about symbols that are unwarranted or untested empirically (that they generate "legitimacy," for example). As noted in Part One, some scholars use the term culture to refer to an entirely different area of inquiry—the identification of purported group traits. The way in which we conceptualize culture affects the kind of research we do and the evidence we bring to bear on our projects. Analyzing culture as semiotic practices has significant empirical and theoretical payoffs for political science. Interpreting semiotic practices overcomes the difficulties of what Timur Kuran (1995) calls "preference falsification," giving us insight into the attitudes of citizens, which may be particularly difficult to discern in authoritarian regimes. My work also allowed me to pose a puzzle that had been ignored by political scientists, namely, Why would a regime use rituals of obeisance that are transparently phony? The evidence I gathered to code unbelief—published and prohibited cartoons, underground and tolerated comedy skits, short stories, and risky political jokes—suggests the utility of these materials for the analysis of lived political experience. And the process of collecting such evidence prompted new questions about the extent to which individual artistic practices could be considered resistance to the cult's mechanisms of social control. Moreover, the book's dialectical approach allows us to see how both the rituals of obeisance and the transgressive practices poking fun at political life

work in tandem to generate compliance. The same dependent variable, compliance, could be explained by arguing that the cult creates charisma. But political scientists lose empirically and theoretically by failing to understand that the mechanisms shoring up the regime are both the "as if" habitual rituals and the practices of transgression. The patterns we see are not reliant on a notion of culture as fixed or natural. Rather, the fissures, tensions, and instabilities in meaning-making practices actually work to produce social order, albeit a fragile one. The explanations the book provides give us a new theory of how symbols operate, why regimes spend scarce resources on their deployment, and why political scientists ought to take such modes of social control seriously.

Turning now to the second example, recent work on ethnic identity-formation and ethnic violence in political science could produce empirically more sophisticated causal accounts and more fine-grained coding schema by taking "culture" as semiotic practices seriously. Here is one possible application: Whereas understandings of the "nation" as constructed and imagined are now taken for granted, "ethnicity" often operates in datasets as a given category of belonging. People are Hutu or Tutsi, Slavs or Germans. Consequently, some work on ethnic violence, particularly in international relations, suffers from the tautological reasoning of former "political culture" analyses: Interethnic tension is caused by the tensions of interethnicity (Brown et al. 1996). As Fearon and Laitin (1996, 715–35), point out, interethnic relations are more often characterized by cooperation than conflict, which suggests that imaginings or "constructions" of ethnicity may be more important than its seemingly objective existence. Put more radically, ethnicity may be less objectively real, or more variable, than some researchers tend to assume. Yet even scholars sympathetic to constructivism have been slow to apply its lessons, in part because the coding work entailed in generating a large, constructivist-oriented dataset would be difficult to do (a subject to which we shall return).

Work by anthropologists, such as Liisa H. Malkki's (1996) "National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees," suggests the political consequences of different levels of intensity in ethnic identification. Malkki's case examines forms of Hutuness—various ways in which semiotic practices (narratives of identification and everyday activities) register experiences of belonging that are not captured in standard categorizations of ethnicity. As Malkki shows, residents of a refugee camp established in western Tanzania after the Burundi massacres of 1972 experienced themselves as "pure" Hutus, whereas Hutu-Burundi refugees living in the township of Kigoma did not. Camp refugees constructed their sense of national belonging to Burundi and their ethnic identification with Hutuness in terms of moralizing commentaries about heroism and homeland. In contrast, town refugees championed a rootless and mobile cosmopolitanism—a creolized "impurity." They were not essentially Hutu but, rather, just "broad persons" (Malkki 1996, 446, and Eley and

Suny's [1996, 432] commentary on Malkki; see also Malkki 1995). A semiotic-practical analysis of ethnic identity-formation would compare the relationship between everyday practices and the rhetoric of belonging within refugee camps with the language and everyday practices of those outside the camps. For formal modelers or the quantitatively minded, developing a dataset based on an intensity scale accounting for people's experiences of identification would produce a more precise and generalizable explanation of how the lived conditions of ethnic identity-formation might determine conflict when they do. Attention to the production of cosmopolitan understandings might also help to explain the absence of ethnic conflict in cases where such identifications are weak.

Coding ethnic groups is an inherently perilous enterprise. The importance of particular identifications changes over time, yet scholars have tended to rely on "objective" measures that are one-dimensional, such as linguistic or religious affiliations. These markers may have little to do with people's experiences of identification. Authoritative compendia of linguistic or religious distinctions may suggest the existence of groups whose members do not see themselves as a community or whose shared language or religion have no political salience. Yet because a research project may depend on specifying potential ethnic groups, scholars have to develop criteria for thinking about what makes a group a group and under what conditions experiences of political identification might crystallize along, say, ethnic lines.

One promising way to improve on, if not avoid, the estimate bias bedeviling datasets such as Ted Gurr's (1997) MAR one, is to think about degrees of ethnicity—of Hutuness or Tutsiness or Kurdishness or Irish American-ness. To do that, a scholar could first list the range of identifications that might take on political salience, given specifiable criteria, while explaining why others are unlikely to do so. Thus, at the very least we would have to come up with reasons why coding the intensity of ice cream eaters or Pittsburghers would seem silly, while coding the intensity of Hutus and Tutsis would not. Harder to justify is the inclusion or exclusion of various linguistically distinct subgroupings of Ashantis in Ghana or of Spanish-speaking Californians in the United States, but a semiotic practical approach invites those studying "identity" issues to research the conditions under which certain practices take on political meaning and intensify political claims of group affiliation.¹⁹ Listing actual communities and potential ones in terms of the intensity of groupness for a large dataset might require, as Matthew Kocher has argued, treating ethnic or nationalist identification as a phenomenon that cannot be measured directly, but only inferred from a correlation matrix. Factor and principal components analysis might be used to

measure the intensity of identity indirectly, through a specification of factors or components that are measurable.²⁰

For example, we might have theoretical reasons to think that interstate war affects nationalist sentiment and thus use it as one factor. But we might also have sound theoretical justifications for arguing that it is the *threat* of interstate war that consolidates nationalist sentiments. We might then consider factors of a semiotic-practical nature, such as narratives of conspiracy or threat and the impact these have on citizens. That impact might be registered in newspaper reports, protest movements, the formation of organized groups, and political speeches, songs, sporting events, and television serials. Ethnographic and historical work might also be used to check various cases, to see, for example, how the categories of Hindu and Muslim have changed from 1850 to the present, so that a dataset on Indian riots or one that incorporated intensity measures could account not only for violence, but also for the shifting relevance of appeals to ethnicity in riots. We might look for evidence of intensity in the content of state-initiated formulations of national identity in laws and public spectacles. A semiotic practical approach would also require us to register the observable effects these have on various populations of citizens, perhaps by conducting surveys. In addition, we might supply theoretical reasons for how the presence or absence of catalyzing events, such as September 11, strengthens nationalist feelings and use that as a factor; a semiotic practical approach could help us determine what counts as a catalyzing or traumatic event. The location of a population in a poor, resource-deprived area could also be an indicator of group intensity. Malkki's work on refugees suggests that continual, quotidian experiences of severe poverty can induce intense feelings of groupness, although these may not be articulated along explicitly economic lines. Indeed, political economists who assert that the poor as a group are prone to revolt when they have nothing to lose might explain variations in actual, organized revolts among "the poor" by considering the role semiotic practices play (Boix n.d.; Lipset 1959, 1960; Stokes and Boix n.d.). What work is done by myths such as the Horatio Alger story, for example, in reproducing convictions that economic conditions can be ameliorated through individual effort rather than through collective action? By taking culture as semiotic practices seriously, causal accounts will be more nuanced and precise, even if an accurate coding schema for large datasets eludes social scientists intent on constructing one. Datasets that can take into account intensity in the ways sketched above should be more accurate than current ones.

¹⁹ I am indebted to Matthew Kocher for sharing his thoughts on ethnic identifications and his experiences attempting to recode the MAR dataset. In a private conversation, he used the example of trying to code a "subgrouping" of Ashanti in Ghana to demonstrate the persistent dangers of estimate bias and of infinite regress.

²⁰ Mathew Kocher has pointed out to me that the *locus classicus* for factor analysis is IQ. Like intensity of identity, we cannot measure intelligence directly, so scientists have devised a number of tests that operate as "functions of intelligence." A relevant example of confirmatory factor analysis is Laitin's (1998, 217–42, 392–4) use of the "matched guise" test created by Wallace Lambert. Laitin used confirmatory factor analysis to construct indices of "friendship" and "respect" out of survey responses from bilingual students in the former Soviet Union.

These examples are suggestive of how studying culture offers us new purchase on perennial and intractable issues in political science. Paying attention to symbolic displays of power, for example, provides scholars with the opportunity to understand the dynamics of political compliance and to explain why regimes spend scarce material resources on such displays. Scholars can document empirically the skirmishes that take place between ruler and ruled as they are represented in the regime's idealized presentation of itself and in people's reception of it. They can also theorize the ways in which symbols themselves create, sustain, and undermine the disciplinary circumstances through which any regime exercises some of its power. Studying semiotic practices generates explanations of how political identifications are formed, instances of groupness crystallized, and alternative possibilities of belonging foreclosed. Investigating semiotic practices can also help scholars to establish important criteria for differentiating passionate forms of solidarity from vague, mildly constraining experiences of "affinity and affiliation" (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 21). Establishing such criteria would enhance studies of nationalism, ethnic conflict, identity-formation, collective action, and hegemony. A semiotic practice-oriented approach can also assist in answering important questions such as, When will a subversive organization invoke ethnicity to activate violence? How intense are people's identifications in particular nation-states? When will states experience violence from groups who claim ethnicity? When will organizations that claim to represent ethnic groups form? When will they be successful at mobilizing support around ethnic or national claims? and How do groups manage to gain public support and to get their claims taken seriously? A semiotic practice-based approach also draws our attention to the problems of presuming ethnicity as an objective marker. Large datasets using objective categories suffer from selection bias toward conflict (Fearon and Laitin 1996). An intensity measure, devised through a combination of statistical techniques and ethnographic ones, might produce more reliable large datasets or, at least, point scholars in new directions. Generalizable arguments about the conditions under which ascriptive identifications get produced, or become the basis for organized resistance, or rigidify in state institutions focus attention on the meanings of ethnicity in practice, thereby acknowledging some of the actual complexities of political identification, without forsaking commitments to causal stories or large-*n* work.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The gulf between interpretivists and rational choice theorists may be too wide to bridge. In many ways, the concerns of rational choice theorists and interpretivists are simply incommensurable. Epistemological commitments to uncertainty, ambiguity, and messiness invite interpretivists to focus on social movements, political resistance, and modern power in ways that

are irrelevant to rational choice theorists. Similarly, epistemological concerns with stability, order, and governance make those who emphasize the "science" part of the discipline or who look to economics for inspiration less compelling to interpretivists than philosophers and anthropologists are. For those with an interest in culture on both sides of the divide, however, there is no reason not to move beyond the traditional understanding of political culture. A semiotic practices approach avoids the ahistorical, empirically untenable formulation of culture currently invoked by political culture and some rational choice theorists. And it gives us explanatory purchase on key dependent variables, such as compliance and ethnic identity-formation. Researching dynamic semiotic practices enables both accounts of general political processes and nuanced causal arguments about particular cases in ways that are more theoretically robust and empirically accurate than mainstream formulations of culture in political science currently permit.

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