2 The Study of Political Culture

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THE GERMAN–AMERICAN CONNECTION

Though its antecedents go far back to the very origins of political science (Almond and Verba, 1980) political culture theory in its modern form and version arose out of the collapse of Weimer democracy and the rise of Nazism (Verba 1965, p. 131). The effort to find an intellectual solution to this tragic historical puzzle – both the theories and the methods – came primarily out of American social science, then enriched by the creativity of German scholarly refugees form National Socialism (NS). We ought not to forget this strong German–American connection in the origins of modern political culture research. My interest in the subjective aspects of politics were greatly stimulated by the study of Max Weber under the tutelage of Albert Salomon and Hans Spier at the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research, the ‘University in Exile’ as it was then called. Other scholarly refugees from Germany whom I came to know in the 1930s and 1940s, such as Otto Kircheimer, Franz Neumann, Herbert Marcuse, Paul Lazarsfeld, Erich Fromm and Else Fraenkel-Brunswick, among others, drew my attention to the ‘authoritarian personality’ research which came via Frankfurt to New York and Berkeley.

The social and political science of the 1950s was obsessed with the collapse of democratic institutions in Germany, and the apparent robustness of democratic institutions in Britain and the United States. The striking contrast in historical experience, and particularly the disconfirmation of liberal and Marxist theory in the collapse of German democracy, created the ferment out of which political culture theory emerged. A generation has passed since that intersection of history and explanatory theory and methodology. How does political theory fare, and does the theory we developed in the 1950s and 1960s help us explain what has happened?
Reflecting on this intellectual experience is of use in two major respects. First, it can tell us what kind of a theory we have in the notion of political culture. How powerful is it in the explanatory sense? Where does it fit in the explanatory strategy of political science? And second, it is a kind of social science case study showing us how the human sciences grow, kind of a meta-methodological exercise which helps us to appreciate what kind of 'science' we political scientists are engaged in. I was anything but sanguine back in 1955, when I first broached the concept of political culture. I felt then that conceptual jargon, like passwords in warfare, often served the purpose of defining friend and enemy, rather than enhancing our capacity to explain important things. The utility and survival of concepts was in the hands of future scholarly generations as they tried them out for fit.

All these years later it is clear that the concept of political culture has found its way into the conceptual vocabulary of political science. It is part of the explanatory strategy of political science. It is the occasion for a persisting polemic in the discipline which is not as prolific as the pluralism polemic, but quite respectable in the quantitative sense. There are perhaps some 35–40 book-length treatments of political culture of an empirical and theoretical sort, and 50 or more article-length treatments in journals and symposia as well as 1000 or more citations in the literature.

A respectable part of the talent of the profession has been involved in these polemics including Samuel Beer, Samuel Barnes, Brian Barry, Archie Brown, Dirk Berg-Schlosser, Richard Fagen, Ronald Inglehart, Max Kaase, Dennis Kavanagh, Robert Lane, S.M. Lipset, Herbert McClosky, Robert Putnam, Lucian Pye, Carole Pateman, Irwin Scheuch, Robert Tucker, Aaron Wildavsky, Stephen White and others. The broad theme which runs through this literature is the stress on the importance of values, feelings and beliefs in the explanation of political behaviour. Political values, feelings and beliefs are not simple reflections of social and political structure and neither are they reducible to rational choice individualism. The political content of the minds of citizens and political elites is more complex, more persistent and more autonomous than Marxism, liberalism and rational choice individualism would suggest.

It was German political development in the 1930s that challenged and discredited Marxist and liberal theories of political progress. Liberal enlightenment theory would have predicted democratization in Germany, one of the most educated and knowledgeable people in the