*Jeffrey Friedman**

# ACCOUNTING FOR POLITICAL PREFERENCES: CULTURAL THEORY VS. CULTURAL HISTORY

*Liberalism sanctifies the values chosen by the sovereign individual. This tends to rule out criticisms of an individual's "preference" for one value over another by, ironically, establishing a deterministic view of the self that protects the self's desires from scrutiny. Similarly, rational choice approaches to social theory begin with previously determined individual preferences and focus on the means by which they are pursued, concentrating on the results rather than the sources of people's values.*

*A striking new attempt to go behind the liberal and rational-choice starting point in order to understand political preferences is found in Aaron Wildavsky's Cultural Theory. Yet Cultural Theory does not facilitate the criticism of preferences, because its understanding of them is fundamentally liberal. Even while rejecting methodological individualism, Cultural Theory's monocausally social theory of preference formation retains in a new guise the liberal preservation of preferences from criticism by reestablishing a deterministic view of the formation of values, leading it to share with liberalism an ahistorical view of their origins.*

Aaron Wildavsky, formerly the president of the American Political Science Association, has for several years advanced a sweeping answer to the

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question of what accounts for people's political values—the question of political culture.[1] His cultural theory (henceforth capitalized to distinguish it from competitors) is designed to overcome the tendency of rational choice theory to make value "preferences into a *deus ex machina* that drops from the sky uncaused."[2] In *Cultural Theory* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), Wildavsky and coauthors Michael Thompson and Richard Ellis set forth in systematic detail an explanation of the causal factors they think lie behind political preferences. The authors ask: "Where do preferences come from? This is the great unanswered question in the social sciences. Indeed, for the most part, it is the great unasked question" (55).

It is also the great unasked question in the societies usually studied by social scientists—liberal societies—even though (or rather, because) liberalism is dedicated to the satisfaction of people's preferences. Both democratic polities and market economies gratify the preferences of the choosing individual. This might lead one to expect that in liberal thought, the source of individual preferences is understood to be valuable. But while the source of preferences is indeed valued, it is not understood by liberalism at all; liberalism does not even seem interested in the matter. To grasp the importance of Wildavsky's project, then—and, it will turn out, to judge his success in pursuing it—we need to get a better handle on the paradoxical combination of reverence and indifference accorded by liberal economics, politics and culture to people's "preferences."

## *The Myth of Liberal Neutrality*

Liberal societies display little interest in the sources of individual values because of the pretense of liberal neutrality. The liberal legal framework, by allowing freedom of action to the individual, treats the possible ends of such action as essentially interchangeable. Hence the liberal commonplace that what is legal is an entirely different matter from what is moral: considered from the legal standpoint, it is impossible to distinguish among good and bad ends.

But liberalism holds that legally allowing people to do whatever they want (as long as they respect the equal right of others to do what *they* want) does not prevent them from voluntarily selecting moral codes which rule out certain legally allowed individual actions, or which rule in others. Indeed, "true" morality is said to depend on individual freedom: what merit, after all, lies in doing what one is compelled to do? The moral thing to do is in many cases what is *not* required by law, and in many others involves refraining from doing what *is* legally permitted. It is moral theory, then, not political theory that should be concerned with the sources of individual preferences in liberal societies.

The reason liberal neutrality is a myth is that in order to establish the value of neutrality in the first place, one must deploy reasoning that ends up undermining the moral/legal distinction on which neutrality rests. For to adhere to the value of neutrality is patently to take a moral position: it is to say that it is *better* for the law to allow people to do what is "morally wrong" than to force them to do what is morally right.

This non-neutrality is obvious when the rationale of individual liberty is not intrinsic, but is based on the good consequences liberty (arguably) produces: prosperity, social peace, the development of talents, cultural efflorescence, happiness, and the like. For such rationales entail the judgment that the individual immorality tolerated in a liberal regime is a price worth paying for the good consequences of individual freedom. Thus, a consequentialistically defended liberal legal order makes no claim to indifference among values: it places the good consequences of liberalism at the top of a value hierarchy and justifies non-interference with immoral individual actions on the ground that the negative consequences of interference would outweigh the benefits.

But it is just as true that we forego neutrality when we prize liberty as an intrinsic good rather than as a means to good consequences. For if one's right to do what is wrong inherently deserves legal protection, then in what sense is it morally wrong? The rationale for the "neutral," noncoercive legal framework demands loyalty to a different form of moral reasoning than that which would be required to establish the voluntary moral codes that are supposed to flourish within that framework.[3] For a libertarian legal framework—one that justifies individual liberty not as a means to other ends, but as an end in itself—requires a definition of morality that is concerned not with the *justice of actions* but with the *authority of individuals*. When individual authority is valued for its own sake, the appropriateness of actions is determined *not by judgments about the worth of actions* of the sort generated by voluntary moral codes, *but according to the single criterion of the freedom of the actor.* Rather than recognizing that values are answers to the question of *what one should do*, they must be seen as pertaining to the question of who has *the right to decide* what one should do. The first question inherently conflicts with the second, since an answer to the first question would establish obligations that would supersede the freedom of sovereign decision makers. Far from being neutral, then, individual sovereignty derogates every value but one: that of freedom.

Thus, attempts to enforce a given standard of appropriate behavior are seen in libertarian societies as mere efforts to "impose one person's values on another." Implicit in this expression are two paradoxically related assumptions: (1) that the only objective value is that of individual choice, and (2) that whatever an individual chooses is merely subjective and therefore should

not be imposed on others. Thus, at the same time that individual choice is elevated to the highest place on the scale of values, it is denigrated as being a mere exercise of what economists like to call "individual tastes." What accounts for this paradox is the peculiar nature of freedom as an intrinsic value. To value freedom as an end in itself means delegating the choice-making function of morality to the free agent, which in turn means approving of whatever he or she decides to value. But this blanket approval means that whether the individual chooses x or not-x is equally satisfactory—i.e., that the choice between x and not-x is *arbitrary*; the moral question ("what to do?") has been evaded.

Freedom is properly the description of an agent *before* he or she chooses a value, when he or she is at liberty to value what he or she wills. Once a value is selected, however, this freedom is curtailed: the chooser now aims toward one value and away from its competitors. Seen in this way, morality is inherently at odds with freedom: freedom is the multiplication of options, morality is the narrowing of them by the selection of one over the others. Even valuing freedom itself restricts freedom: for the freedom-lover loves freedom for everyone, not just for him- or herself. Thus, actions that deprive others of their equal liberties are forbidden by libertarianism. Only an extreme, Stirnerite libertarianism that is restricted to oneself, allowing one to do whatever one wants, even at the expense of others' freedom, imposes no restrictions on one's liberty of choice. But for precisely this reason, such complete individual liberty is *amoral*: it embodies not values, but the total absence of them.

But aside from equal freedom of action, libertarian liberalism implicitly denies the legitimacy of any other moral values, since what it values is not values but the pre-moral condition of freedom to select among them. To move beyond this condition into the constrained state of having chosen a value must be considered by a libertarian (were logical rigor to prevail) to be arbitrary, for if there were some non-arbitrary rationale for choosing x over not-x, it would make no sense to place greater intrinsic value on the freedom to choose not-x than on the actual choice of x. Antinomianism is built into the very logic behind liberal neutrality.

## *Libertarian Determinism*

If in libertarian parlance judgments of right and wrong become expressions of "mere individual preferences," then the one possible form of libertarian morality is egalitarian and individualistic: the morality that decries inequality and oppression and is aggrieved at the imposition of one person's arbitrary preferences upon another. But by its very nature, this morality does not serve the function of directing the choice of preferences:

it views as at best presumptuous, at worst oppressive, the notion that a person *should* choose one thing rather than another, since this notion shifts attention back from the question of individual authority to that of the appropriateness of actions, undermining the supremacy of freedom over other values. It is to the mysterious realm of *taste- or preference-formation* that what was formerly the question of morality—what should one *do* with one's freedom?—is relegated by libertarianism.

This accounts for the popularity of the notion that "there is no accounting for tastes." If tastes *could* be accounted for, they would stop serving the function of justifying the freedom to pursue them indiscriminately. If we could say that somebody's preferences originate in a biographically or historically explicable misunderstanding or mythology, then such preferences could be criticized and, if there were no countervailing anti-paternalistic considerations (such as the tendency of paternalism to backfire), we could intervene to prevent actions based on those preferences. The field would be open to a comparative genealogy of preferences, with all the potential that would hold for mutual criticism and (in the absence of consequentialist anti-paternalist considerations) intervention. But if tastes cannot be accounted for, they cannot very well be challenged—or changed; the challenger or changer must be seen as attempting merely to "impose his or her tastes on others."

The same holds true for one's internal moral dialogue. Rather than doing what another *tells* me to do, libertarianism frees me to do what I want. But in this condition of freedom, how do I decide what "I" want? Certainly not by telling myself what I *should* want—which would be as restrictive of my all-important liberty as it would be for *you* to tell me what I should want. Instead, I ask myself what I *do*—already—want. Life becomes a quest for self-fulfilment, where the "self" consists of whatever preferences are sufficiently familiar that they seem *natural.*

It is at this juncture that the greatest paradox of libertarian liberalism arises, for a doctrine that began with the goal of individual liberty ends up binding the individual in as ironclad a determinism as the most implausible mechanistic or Marxist reductionism. Classical determinism attributed our every thought to the forces of "nature"; vulgar Marxism similarly decreed that one's preferences were determined by the hard reality of one's class interests. In both cases, preferences were held to be determined by forces outside of the individual. The upshot was to make it fruitless to criticize somebody's views; why waste one's breath arguing with a person who is but the plaything of exogenously determinative forces?

Libertarianism rests implicitly on an *endogenous* determinism, which just as effectively as the exogenous variety stops one (let alone others) from *criticizing* oneself, i.e. from accounting for one's tastes in order to consider

the possibility of changing them, rather than merely expressing them. For according to endogenous determinism, there is a given self buried within, a fact that can be described, as can a natural law, but one that cannot, as can artificial laws, be *explained*. Gravity, atoms, the forces of nature are just unchangeably *there*: that is what the liberal self is like. (By contrast, laws—or "preferences"—devised by human beings could, by virtue of their artificiality, be historically contextualized, explained, questioned and altered.)

This naturalistic conception of the self still allows us to analyze why our selves act *irrationally*, i.e., in ways that frustrate rather than achieve what we *want*. But it does not allow us to analyze those wants themselves, for they express one's personal essence (unless one's wants are *violent*—i.e., unless they violate the single norm of egalitarian individualism, by threatening the one thing sacred: free selves, including one's own). One may speculate that this explains the popular enthusiasm for the reductionist side of Freudianism in the most libertarian nation on earth, the United States—that is to say, the Freudianism which provides a scientific nomenclature and a comforting exegesis of the determinants of neurotic values, safely attributing these sources of preference to the predetermined world of childhood. As for *therapeutic* Freudianism, which might be thought to be anti-deterministic in its promise to re-empower the will in facing down the misshapen drives of the "self," its inability to produce "results" may be its secret strength: for this failure means that the legitimacy lent by the therapist's devotion to lovingly unearthing, describing and categorizing one's self is not tarnished by the possibility that this lengthy and expensive process will end in a violation of the integrity of that self—i.e., in any fundamental *change* in it.

By shunting off the moral questions, questions of value and of the criteria of choice, to the black box of the inner self, libertarianism frees the individual of moral responsibility, which is relegated to the "spontaneous" action of the "personality." For most people, this may be enough to fend off the unsettling consequences of the destruction of traditional values brought on by science and by the instability of modern life—especially when they are helped in avoiding these consequences by the Freud who reduces deviant value choices to arcane "complexes." But anyone with a modicum of self-awareness understands that there is no spontaneous "there" in there—that one's actions are in large measure susceptible to rational control. This realization threatens to reburden the individual with the responsibility to choose values. Could it be that psychotherapy then saves the day, relieving some of the most sensitive of modern souls by fascinating them with the intricacies of their childhood-determined selves, no matter how instrumentally irrational the exercise proves to be?

Be that as it may, the logic of libertarianism tells against wondering

whether one should *not* do what one "wants" to do; instead, the libertarian self throws up his or her hands and says, against the brute fact of his or her wants: "That's me; that's what I prefer; who am I to interfere? My task is but to catalogue and satisfy my personality (unless it frustrates or endangers the pursuit of 'its' preferences or those of other selves, in which case I must try to repair it)." Indeed, one's integrity comes to be identified by liberalism not, as in classical and medieval thought, as the ability of one's reason to *overcome* one's tastes and preferences, but as the ability to be "true to oneself" by plumbing the depths of and catering to those preferences, i.e. to one's "identity."

## *Libertarianism vs. Cultural Criticism*

Lest the picture of one's choice-making inner self as a black box seem unrelated to libertarianism, consider the most elementary non-consequentialist justification of the free market: "The market sells people what they want; who are we to interfere?" The result is that when libertarians allow themselves to overcome their diffidence about inquiring into people's wants, it is only to defend *whatever* people want on the ground that it is freely chosen. The typical libertarian cultural posture, then, combines opposition to any restrictions on free choice with an indiscriminate defense of whatever results—whether what results is the culture of the freely choosing producers of the avant-garde or that of the freely choosing consumers of pop. To select either horn of this dilemma is, again, to put the authority of the sovereign individual above judgments of value. And, in turn, that means consigning the question of what sovereign individuals *should* choose to the unanalyzable realm of tastes and preferences.

Now consider the similarities between the logic of cultural libertarianism and that of multiculturalism. Rhetorically, at least, both seek the one and only libertarian goal: equal self-actualization. Both would agree, moreover, that interference with one's preferences constitutes oppression; so the purpose of education must be to serve, not to shape our tastes. In principle,[4] then, the only difference between multiculturalists and libertarians lies in where they locate the determined self who is the source of our preferences: in individuated or in shared identities. Libertarians tend not to notice, though, that beyond this difference multiculturalists are demanding that education respond to its *market,* i.e. to the pre-existing taste of its consumers for appreciative attention toward what they take to constitute their deepest personal identity: the denial of their equal liberty by modern society.

For both libertarians and multiculturalists, then, the normative starting point is the analytical stopping point: it only makes sense to value uncritically the tastes that are served by the market and by multicultural educa-

tion if they express the irreducible and uncriticizable essence of the individual. Hence the false radicalism of both libertarianism and multiculturalism. Sociologically, both take for granted that what democratic, commercial society values most highly—one's unique individual identity—is indeed sacred and uncriticizable. What could be more bourgeois? Logically, they both cater to people's current preferences.[5] What could be more conservative?

What would be truly radical would be to *challenge*, rather than uncritically to accept, the equation of freedom with identity by going behind it in order to ferret out its artificiality, its non-givenness. This would, in the case of the market, mean studying the origins of consumerism and of the particular values on which it depends; that is part of what sociology and anthropology do. It is a research program of great interest to consequentialist liberals and "postlibertarians," since it bears on the question of whether *the cultural consequences of capitalism* are good or bad: Does capitalism elevate or degrade our preferences? Is its multiplication of desires compensated for by its multiplication of the means for satisfying them? And so on.

In the case of education, ironically, true radicalism would mean studying the history of Dead White European Males—not in order to worship it, canonize it, or even necessarily to affirm it, but in order to question it, and by so doing, to open to criticism the contemporary "preference" that makes the denial of our equal freedom to do whatever we want seem to be definitive of our identities. For it is in the history of Western civilization that the origins of modern libertarianism—and thus of multiculturalism itself—must be sought.

## *Theory vs. History*

For some reason, however, it is not to history that Wildavsky et al. turn in their search for the sources of our preferences. Instead, they look to theory. Specifically, they adopt from anthropologist Mary Douglas a fivefold classification of all human beings as either *"hierarchists," egalitarians, individualists, fatalists*, or *autonomists*. These cultural predispositions are rooted in eternal "pattern[s] of social relationships" (*Cultural Theory*, 1): the first four worldviews correspond to the only viable "ways of life" that are possible in association with other people (3), while autonomism represents withdrawal from society altogether.

Each of the four social ways of life results from a different combination of two possible dimensions of interpersonal interaction: "group," or the extent to which one joins "with others in 'common residence, shared work, shared resources and education'" (5, quoting Mary Douglas); and

"grid," or "the degree to which an individual's life is circumscribed by externally imposed prescriptions" (*ibid.*). In turn, each of the ways of life derived from the different combinations of grid and group carries with it a set of cultural biases that serve to justify it against the other ways of life. Thus, "strong group boundaries coupled with minimal prescriptions" (6) yield an egalitarian way of life, and egalitarianism as a cultural preference is the defense of strong boundaries and minimal prescriptions, a defense carried out by lauding group membership but deploring the inequality that would inhere in granting some group members authority over others. By contrast, when strong group boundaries are combined with differential power among group members, allowing a tight grid of constraints to be imposed on individual behavior, the result is a hierarchical way of life and a cultural preference for inegalitarian authoritarianism. In turn, weak grid and weak group—minimal prescriptions and an attenuated sense of membership—make for individualism as a cultural norm. And weak group boundaries in the presence of strong behavioral prescriptions create fatalists, resigned to being controlled by others but feeling no social ties to them. Finally, there are those who withdraw "from coercive or manipulative social involvement altogether. This is the way of life of the *hermit*" (7, emph. in original), who prefers autonomy.

*Cultural Theory* provides a wealth of important insights, especially concerning social science methodology. Explicitly, at least, the authors strike a much-needed balance between naïve, rationalistic versions of methodological individualism and the self-contradictory (if darkly appealing) extreme functionalism characteristic of some forms of Marxism. Against atomistic naïveté, Wildavsky et al. notice that people are not always, or even ever, so self-aware that they fully understand why they believe or "prefer" what they do. But the authors do not, like endogenous determinists, stop their inquiry at that point, refusing to probe the sources of people's preferences. They intend to go behind the back of the preference-determining "self" by exploring the cultural influences on individual preferences, by which they mean influences generated by social ways of life and, in particular, influences that may be unintentionally selected for because they serve the function of contributing to the survival of those ways of life.

Yet the authors' social functionalism does not (again at the explicit level) proceed to an exogenous determinism so extreme that it would not allow the possibility of transcending the social influences on one's preferences. Consequently, the authors avoid the self-negating posture of those who declare that our views are *inevitably and totally* the products of our social environment—a declaration that leaves unexplained how one can be sure of this view, which must itself be environmentally generated.

Stopping short of that point still allows, however, for admitting a large degree of environmental influence. Instead of a strict reduction of culture to social relations, the authors propose that such relations make some ideas "seem more reasonable" (37) to those engaged in them than others. The importance of this formulation cannot be understated. Unlike a strict determinism by class interests, it preserves the possibility of criticizing the views that give comfort to one's way of life, while allowing observers to find correlations between certain ways of life and the prevalence of corresponding views when people fail to be self-critical. One could use this procedure to argue, for instance, that the modern libertarian relativism of tastes and preferences seems reasonable to participants in societies in which economic and political choice-making is the stuff of everyday life: a much more plausible sociology of bourgeois ideology than Marx's exclusively interest-based explanation, and one that leaves room for answering the separate, historical question of how that ideology *originated.*

Unfortunately, however, this is nothing like what Cultural Theory does. Since the five ways of life with which it deals are theoretically rather than empirically generated, they do not capture the particular sociological formation of modern industrial society. Consequently, the links between the ways of life and the cultures postulated by Cultural Theory are spurious. Yet the authors do, along the way, accurately describe many of the characteristic preferences of modern egalitarians and individualists, especially. This is made possible by the fact that operationally, the five ways of life play very little role in grounding the authors' concrete descriptions of contemporary culture.

What the ways of life do provide is an implausible means of universalizing the authors' cultural insights to all times and places. The direct consequence of the authors' decision to present their interesting cultural research in the guise of a universally applicable, socially based theory of culture is to reify contemporary cultural tropes into determining ways of life, thereby insulating those tropes from the very criticism that sound cultural analysis would allow.

## *The Poverty of Theory*

These problems are reflected in the book's striking lack of concrete evidence for the relationship between ways of life and cultural biases. Admittedly, *Cultural Theory* is intended as a prologue to future research. But while we can expect that Cultural Theory will be able to guide and analyze survey research on contemporary opinions,[6] I shall argue below that this is because empirically, Cultural Theory is thoroughly grounded in

contemporary politics—and contemporary politics alone. Its hold on such a narrow slice of reality is what is ultimately responsible for *Cultural Theory*'s utter *ahistoricism.*

It is strange that in a book which claims to provide a framework for redescribing all of human cultural history, the focus is so abstract. Part one spins out the theoretical implications of Douglas's grid-group model, as explicated in the Introduction. Part two runs through the methodological inadequacies of past cultural theorists. Only in the concluding part three is the subject the empirical reality of cultures, and even here, as we shall see, the authors are reticent to do much more than dispute previous theorists' portrayals of culture (e.g. Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's analysis of contemporary political cultures). All of this preoccupation with other cultural theories seems to distract the authors from the question of why theory (in the sense of an always-applicable model) is necessary in the first place: what would be wrong with accounting for culture as legions of historians have already done, not as the product of a handful of timeless social causes, but as the outcome of the interplay of a variety of causes—not only social but political, economic, intellectual and psychological—with the accumulated contingencies of the past?

One cannot help but ask this question ever more insistently as one vainly searches *Cultural Theory*, particularly part three, for concrete evidence linking the prevalence and distribution of the five ways of life to the cultural biases Cultural Theory purports to explain. Where, for instance, are the colonies of egalitarianism that are supposed to be the source of egalitarian cultural preferences? We are referred only to unspecified "self-sufficient communard[s]" (7). The other "flesh-and-blood vignettes" that are meant to "illustrate each of the five types" have slightly more specificity, but only in a stereotypical sense, and this deficiency is never more than perfunctorily remedied. Embodying fatalism is an imagined Victorian factory hand; an unspecified Hindu villager stands for hierarchy; and individualism is represented by an unnamed "self-made Victorian manufacturer" (*ibid.*), as well as by Julian Simon's book, *The Ultimate Resource*,[7] and by the novels of Ayn Rand (8). Can these stereotypes really account for a substantial portion of human culture through the ages?

Perhaps they are not meant to? Like Weber's ideal types, could they be intended as heuristic abstractions from reality that, depending on the results of historical research, may or may not find any, or many, actual exemplars?

Unfortunately, there is little doubt that the authors intend their formal schema not as an ideal typology with no necessary relation to the distribution of phenomena in a particular instance, but as applicable to all societies in human history. Thus, they contend that "each way of life

needs each of its rivals, either to make up for its deficiencies, or to exploit, or to define itself against." (4). Since the ways of life are inseperable from the cultures they spawn, one should find the five cultures, too, exemplified in any and every society. Wherever we look, we should be able to find the various ways of life, each generating the corresponding culture, engaged in a never-ending struggle with the others to justify itself. In that case, why don't the authors give us examples of non-modern, non-Western societies in which the five cultures actually did coexist, or of modern Western societies in which the various cultures actually spring from five different ways of life? Instead, they resort to stereotypical illustrations of the alleged social bases of the cultural struggle or, at best, to occasional uses of one or another of the five ways of life to explain scattered cultural episodes.

One of the few premodern (if incomplete) examples, the basis of half a chapter in part three, comes from Edward Banfield's *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*,[8] which makes what seems (to a non-anthropologist) to be a strong case that fatalism as a culture emerged from the way of life of a southern Italian village. Yet this example omits the egalitarians, individualists, hierarchs and autonomists who are supposed to always and everywhere compete with the fatalists.

The other half of chapter 12, and the only other detailed examination of a premodern culture, is drawn largely from Lucien Pye's studies of China. And Pye does find that, for instance, the traditional Chinese bureaucracy fostered a culture that "glorified the established authority of the better educated and rationalized their claims of superiority on the basis of possessing specialized wisdom" (quoted at 228). Similarly, the authors can indeed point to three other Chinese cultures that competed with hierarchy. But another lacuna comes into view: the premodern cultural ideals seem qualitatively different from their modern variants. Yes, there was a deeply rooted "'entrepreneurial spirit'" in ancient Chinese culture (229, quoting Robert Scalapino), but this is hardly equivalent to the individualistic Reaganite belief in equal opportunity for everyone to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. And Chinese egalitarianism, which according to Pye "glorified the rebel and trusted magical formulas to transform economic and social reality" (quoted at *ibid.*), hardly seems comparable to the modern version of what the authors claim is always and everywhere essentially the same cultural phenomenon. But if modern Western and premodern Chinese individualism and egalitarianism are fundamentally dissimilar, then perhaps there is something about modernity or the Western tradition that has either altered them or—more likely—has created what we know as individualism and egalitarianism out of quite different materials?

This would be bad enough for Cultural Theory, but it is even worse if

Chinese and Western individualism and egalitarianism do *not* differ from each other in kind. In the last paragraph of the book, the authors ask what would count as evidence against Cultural Theory. Their answer:

> Most damaging would be a demonstration that values are little constrained by institutional relationships. If the same cultural biases thrived in dissimilar social contexts or, conversely, if dissimilar biases existed in similar social contexts, then our faith in cultural theory would be greatly weakened. (273)

But surely that is exactly what is shown if Chinese and Western individualism and egalitarianism are similar in kind, as the authors must contend (in order to preserve the universality of the five cultures). For there could hardly be more dissimilar social contexts than, on the one hand, the Chinese bureaucracies that spawned "individualistic" " 'prospering notable[s] who . . . combined good luck, quick wits, and hard work to advance' " themselves (229, quoting Pye), or the Chinese villages that gave birth to "egalitarian" peasant rebellions; and, on the other hand, the urbanized, industrialized, atomized market societies inhabited by modern Western individualists and modern Western egalitarians. Here is the first reason for the paucity of systematic historical evidence in favor of Cultural Theory: in historically recent Western society, cultural ideals are, for the most part, quite unrelated to variations in social way of life.

## *The Autonomy of Modern Culture*

The fact is that modern "egalitarianism" thrives in the same cosmopolitan social context as does modern "individualism"—which is also, for that matter, the social context of many "hierarchists" and "fatalists." If egalitarians lived on communes (as in the authors' stereotype), there could be some argument here. Indeed, Ellis and Wildavsky have claimed that the organization of pre-Civil War abolitionists in the United States into small, egalitarian social groups is confirmation of the predictions of Cultural Theory.[9] But it was not the small social groups that led to the abolitionist ideology, but the ideology that—sometimes—led to the formation of the groups.[10] Hence it was quite possible to be an abolitionist while not participating in such a group—just as it is possible now for egalitarians to participate in a competitive, individualistic society while deploring it. Cultural Theory's depiction of the egalitarian mindset describes not just the worldview of the minuscule number of egalitarians raised on communes, but also that of the hundreds of millions who are raised in nuclear families, who themselves found such families, and who are full participants in market economies—even while they protest the

plight of the homeless and unemployed and agitate for egalitarian policies to rectify those situations.

Egalitarianism plays perhaps the central role in the modern applications Wildavsky makes of Cultural Theory,[11] yet neither it nor its "adversary," individualism, can be correlated with a way of life that the vast majority of the adherents of both cultures do not share. Hence the fact that one finds among contemporary egalitarians the wealthy businesspeople and professionals who, if Cultural Theory were valid, should be individualists, but who actually underwrite liberal foundations and political causes. Then there are the "media elites"—the journalists, reporters, filmmakers, scriptwriters, songwriters, movie stars and other entertainers—most of whom are participants in highly competitive, profit-making businesses but most of whom nevertheless, Wildavsky himself has argued, display strong egalitarian biases.[12] Indeed, historically speaking, bourgeois society has always produced not only its champions but its most dedicated enemies: the egalitarian Marxes, Foucaults and deep ecologists as well as the individualistic Samuel Smileses, Herbert Spencers and Horatio Algers.

By the same token, what of the government employees— teachers, civil servants, welfare caseworkers, political appointees—who should, if way of life determines culture, be "hierarchists," yet who have often entered government service out of a belief in the social responsibility of all people to help others, and who promote *egalitarian* causes by means of their hierarchically organized power? On the other hand, the ranks of bureaucrats also include those responsible for throwing the American trucking and airline industries open to "individualistic" competition via deregulation; how can Cultural Theory explain that? And what does it make of the working and lower classes who, victimized by the unpredictable operation of the business cycle, ought to be fatalists but instead favor egalitarianism? Cultural Theory is as ill equipped as vulgar Marxism to make these various cultural superstructures fit the foundations supposely lain by social bases.

It may be that there are only four or five basic types of social order. But even if we concede that before the advent of mass literacy and the dissolution of strong group boundaries by urbanization, these social types could explain most cultural phenomena, that is surely not the contemporary situation. Now culture has assumed an autonomy which dictates that even if we could trace the roots of "the" five cultural types to five premodern ways of life, there is virtually no correspondence any more between the cultural biases that have subsequently evolved and contemporary social forms.

## *The Uniqueness of Egalitarian Individualism*

But it is not even likely that that concession is warranted. If the first source of *Cultural Theory*'s paucity of evidence is the failure of modern ideas to correspond to any differential social bases, the second problem is that in premodern societies, where there was admittedly less cultural autonomy, two of the five cultures—egalitarianism and individualism—were largely, if not entirely, absent.

There have, of course, been many premodern egalitarian *societies*—for instance, the Essenes and monastics, and the chieftainless bands that predated the development of organized government. But egalitarianism as a cultural ideal is a very different matter. Where, one wants to know, can it be found outside of the modern West? The issue is complicated somewhat by Douglas's grid-group schema, which entails that egalitarians restrict their doctrine to an exclusive group. This makes cultural egalitarianism seem rather common in premodern settings. But modern egalitarian ideals are *not* restricted to one's group, making them dissimilar to premodern egalitarianism by the terms of Cultural Theory itself. One of the greatest problems in the authors' usually insightful treatment of contemporary culture is, indeed, its failure to acknowledge that modern egalitarianism is *universalistic*—presumably since this would conflict with the notion that it is congruent with the way of life of bounded premodern groups.

Much the same can be said of individualism. As a social phenomenon (i.e., weak grid, weak group), individualism is evident in antiquity among the hoi polloi against whom Plato directed his critique of materialism and the indulgence of the appetites. Indeed, wherever there has been long-distance trade, one can imagine traders who were detached enough from social hierarchies that they were able to concern themselves with the pursuit of profit and with the least possible encumbrance from any outside authority. But such self-interested attitudes were rarely, if ever, translated into a *universalized* individualistic ideal before the advent of modernity.

The similarity of the cases of individualism and egalitarianism is, of course, due to the fact that as ideals, they are inseparable. Indeed, one reason previous cultural analysts have insisted on a premodern-modern dichotomy is that *equal individual freedom* as the highest ideal is so clearly a new and protean phenomenon. In *The Republic* one will find Socrates' disputants arguing for the primacy of self-interest, but not for individual rights or anything close to them.

For such ideals to emerge required the intervention of the notion of human equality as a positive good. This intervention probably came

from Christianity, through the idea that each human soul is sacred because, like God, it is free to choose between good and evil. Undeniably, social phenomena must have paved the way for the spread of the egalitarian individualistic ideal. Among these was the decay of feudal hierarchy that preceded the epochal moment in the rise of egalitarian individualism: the advent of Protestantism.[13] Eventually, however, by the modern era, social and other factors had combined with the impact of Western religio-cultural teachings to produce an ideal that was plausible to people *regardless* of their social ways of life: the ideal of individual equality, which attributes equal moral worth and *equal moral authority* to all individuals per se.

"Individualists," the authors write, insist "that the best of all possible worlds is one in which each sovereign individual bids and bargains with every other. . . . Their great moral principle [is] equality of opportunity" (95). But if individualism is, as Cultural Theory claims, antagonistic to egalitarianism, why would an individualist favor the sovereignty of all individuals, rather than just his or her own? Why not advocate *in*equality of opportunity—a hierarchy with oneself on top? If we stick to abstractions, we might be able to escape this problem by attributing the individualist's universalism to a dim awareness that that is a more easily defended posture than Stirnerite egoism would be: in plain language, equality of opportunity is a better ideological tool than unvarnished selfishness. But the historical reality is that even the Victorian entrepreneurs who are supposed to embody extreme individualism were deeply religious and truly believed in the sanctity of all human beings, as shown by their commitment to philanthropy. One can see even in such stereotypical exemplars of individualism that it goes together with egalitarianism (however imperfectly they embodied the latter): individual rights inhere in every human being, while equality is a moral imperative only if the equals in question are individually valuable. Even John Galt would not dream of infringing on the equal rights of his competitors.

Regardless of whether one agrees that individualism is inextricable from egalitarianism or that they jointly emerged from Christianity, however, it should be clear that no alternative accounts of their emergence are available within Cultural Theory. For if, as it holds, individualism and egalitarianism are cultural constants, then they cannot have *emerged* at all: they must have been there from the beginning of human social life. This ahistorical picture of individualism and egalitarianism leaves us in the position of expecting to find John Galts and Karl Marxes populating ancient Athens or the Yanomamo villages of the Amazon. Incredibly, this is just what the authors do seem to expect.

## *Back to Determinism*

That is the apparent implication of their numerous discussions of the five cultures in jarringly contemporary terms, suggesting that they could essentially be reproduced in any era—as if affirmative action and opposition to "Big Government" are merely contemporary adaptations of eternal biases.

This ahistoricism comes out most clearly in the authors' attribution of distinctive views of the natural environment to the five types: not by means of a comparison of such views in several actual societies, modern and premodern, but via an abstract argument about how unidentified participants in the five ways of life *must* see nature, a discussion that derives its plausibility solely from its correspondence to the way many people in modern industrial society *do* see nature. Thus, the authors write that

> the idea of resource scarcity is useful to hierarchists, who can then proceed to allocate physical quantities by direct, bureaucratic means. Resource depletion is a useful belief for egalitarians, who can blame "the system" for exploiting nature, as it does people, and who can then try to get the authorities to change their inegalitarian life-style. The idea that resources are limited is rejected by the individualist because it implies that exchange will make people worse off (and should therefore be curtailed). . . . (62)

This is doubtless an acute assessment of why the contemporary left tends to be pro-environmentalism, the libertarian right, anti-. But it cannot explain the pro-industry attitudes of even relatively recent egalitarians like Marx. And trying to fit the nature-worshipping yet "futurist," pro-technology fascists and Nazis into the schema would be a Procrustean nightmare. This begins to tally the difficulties of applying the authors' argument merely to the last century of Western history—let alone to all of human history. (Should we expect that Mayan entrepreneurs, demanding the freedom to exploit nature, derided claims of resource scarcity as a priestly conspiracy designed to keep the political hierarchy in power?) Yet if they are to do any work in establishing the plausibility of Cultural Theory, the authors' generalizations must be intended as eternally valid analyses—which the slightest historical investigation would falsify.

The purpose of pointing out the ahistoricism of so much of *Cultural Theory* is not to suggest that its authors have done a bad job of applying Douglas's typology to the empirical data. They have done as well as anyone could. The problem lies in the very nature of their project: the ambition to create a *social theory* of culture rather than simply to do cultural history. This initial choice guaranteed an ahistorical outcome—unless the

authors were to have developed a theory that interpreted history itself as being governed by socially generated laws of development. Since such an *historicism* is the position taken by most of the previous cultural theorists against whom Wildavsky et al. contrast themselves, one can see how the authors made their fateful turn away from *history*. Part two of the book is devoted to criticizing such previous cultural theorists as Comte, Spencer, Durkheim, Marx, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, and Parsons for postulating excessively general dicta about the historical growth of social specialization or about constant functional tendencies toward social stability. Their error was to attempt to formulate developmental laws; such laws must be overly general in order to be applied to the diversity of human history. Wildavsky et al., with Douglas's help, try to formulate meatier laws—but must virtually ignore history to do it.

At the end of their book, the authors take notice of this, raising the question of whether their theory implies that "history is irrelevant." They can only answer in the negative by pointing out that even by the lights of Cultural Theory, history "can tell us which means or instruments of policy are available and which ones will, based on the experience of these particular people, be seen as relevant to their circumstances" (272). But this is to admit that where the selection not of means but of ends—i.e. of preferences—is concerned, history *is* irrelevant.

Perhaps the ultimate source of the authors' ahistoricism is their allegiance to the sociological assumption that the only alternative to naïvely individualistic theories, which assume that individuals consciously deliberate about and freely choose their tastes, is to assert the primacy of social relations. This alternative may not be naïve, but it is surely arbitrary. On what basis can such empirical claims as that "social relations are the great teachers of human life" (56), that "the most basic desire of human beings [involves] how we wish to live with other people and others to live with us" (57), and that "what matters most to people is how they would like to relate to other people and how they would like others to relate to them" (97) be asserted as if they are a priori truths not worthy of investigation? Yet it is only by accepting such dogmas—thereby repeating the reactionary reflexes of nineteenth-century sociologists against equally dogmatic Enlightenment rationalism—that the authors can assume, with neither hesitation nor justification, that "social relations are sustained by generating preferences that in turn generate those social relations" (66), so that "notions of what is expected, what is valued, what is natural, what is just, and so on are given to us by our social relations" (207). When this is taken for granted and is combined with Douglas's typology of recurrent social forms, an ahistorical typology of recurrent cultural forms is sure to follow.

Cultural analysis must by its very nature pay attention to the possibility of exogenous influences on individuals' cultural "choices"—their "tastes and preferences." But the questions of (1) the extent and (2) the nature of these influences cannot be answered before empirical investigation begins. Indeed, since determining the extent and nature of these influences is the purpose of empirical investigation, that task—i.e., cultural history—will be foreclosed if one decides beforehand on set answers to either question. The only thing one can say a priori is what it is necessary to say if writing history will be possible at all: that environmental determinism cannot be complete and ineluctable, or at least that we cannot believe that it is, since this would invalidate in advance the historian's own conclusions by making them the mere products of his or her own environment.

As mentioned, the authors explicitly avoid the trap of asserting in advance an answer to the question of the degree to which environment determines culture. But they are not so adroit when it comes to the question of the *source* of environmental determination: here they are convinced a priori that the answer must be one's social relations. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this vitiates their explicitly non-determinist methodology. If the answer to the question of the *source* of environmental determinations is unequivocally social, then do we not also have an a priori answer as to the *extent* of environmental influence— i.e., must it not be total?

To see how much this assumption narrows the scope of the possibilities that can then be uncovered by investigation, one need only note that it rules out religion as anything more than a social function, even though it is arguably just as basic to human beings that they are worried about their mortality as that they are engaged in social relations. But existential reflection can find no role in a monocausally social theory of culture, meaning that the urge for spiritual purity evident in hermits (and, for that matter, in egalitarian religious communities and in Jesus' teachings of brotherhood) is misinterpreted as an inexplicable desire to secede from social relationships per se (e.g. 65); in the parenthetical cases just mentioned, as a desire to reproduce egalitarian social relations for their own sake; or as stemming from attitudes toward nature that serve to defend social ways of life (e.g. 10,11).

If ways of life alone cause cultural biases, no middle term can mediate this causation so as to allow people independence enough to overcome their ways of life. Thus, any recognition of the mediating role played in transmitting traditions, values and assumptions by such *institutions* as families, organized religions, formal education, art, literature, cinema, television, and so on—any recognition, in short, of culture as anything but what inheres in the power relations of one's social group—is truncated in Cul-

tural Theory, because to introduce cultural institutions into the picture would mean threatening the exclusive influence which Cultural Theory asserts is exercised on one's cultural predispositions by one's way of life. Once such institutions were acknowledged, it would be utterly absurd to overlook the *historical contingency* of the ideas they transmitted, i.e. their development out of *traditions* that—even if initially founded in social relations—subsequently take on a life of their own.

Thus, only to the degree that cultural institutions can be interpreted as mirroring ways of life can they be noticed by Cultural Theory, for instance by attributing New England Federalism to an authoritarian mode of child-rearing (236). But families do not just reproduce their power structures; they teach children notions about the way the world works and about the way it *should* work—i.e., political preferences—notions that vary not merely according to relations within the families themselves, but according to inherited religious and national doctrines and the variable life experience of parents. Similarly with what is taught by elementary and secondary schools, universities, churches, friends and co-workers, and the newspapers, magazines, books, movies, videos and sitcoms one daily encounters (which are in turn usually produced by well-educated, uncritical imbibers of the conventional wisdom of a historically particular time and place). But to see any of this would mean admitting that especially in modern societies, cultural ideals can be and usually are unrelated to social ways of life.

Cultural Theory's social monocausalism allows it to ignore the role of cultural institutions, i.e. of history. The two forms of ahistoricism that result, in turn, hide each other's deficiencies. After making the a priori assumption that there are five universal and essentially *invariant* socially caused cultural types (or four if withdrawal from society is not counted), one is free to run together evidence from all historical periods. This allows the conflation of evidence of primarily modern *cultural* forms, such as that regarding egalitarianism and individualism, with evidence of primarily premodern *social* forms, such as that regarding the attitudes of Chinese or Italian peasants.

## *Cultural Theory As a Mirror of Modernity*

Thus, the authors' many suggestive observations about modern cultural biases (such as in the passage on natural resources quoted above), although formally attributed to social ways of life, are operationally quite independent of them. In the modern context which is the authors' primary arena of interest, "fatalism," "hierarchism," and especially "egalitarianism" and "individualism" actually serve as free-floating labels for the different types

of values we constantly encounter in contemporary political discourse; only rarely (e.g. in Ellis and Wildavsky's interpretation of abolitionist associations) is more than nominal attention paid to whether these cultural biases are really linked to differences in the way those who hold the biases live. Thus, for example, Wildavsky does not link the egalitarianism of media elites to any peculiarities in their ways of life. Inasmuch as Cultural Theorists do produce plausible observations about modern culture, it is because their relentless ahistoricism allows them to use what are primarily premodern ways of life to fill in the social placeholders foisted on them by Douglas's typology.

The function of the ways of life is to give a social-scientific veneer to what one suspects *really* matters to the authors: the pluralization of the uniform rationality assumed by rational choice theory—which flattens our picture of partisan politics, reducing even ideology to the pursuit of a univocal "self-interest"—into a more variegated, and thus more realistic understanding of people's political interests.[14] It is from this pluralization that Cultural Theory derives its only plausibility. For the five cultures (or at least the four social cultures) are, if nothing else, close matches to contemporary political self-understandings.

This is particularly true in the United States, where a rhetorical commitment to private property and small government has seemed so prominent during the last twelve years. This historically contingent tradition, which identifies individual liberty with private property, finds its expression, of course, in Cultural Theory's "individualistic" construct. The other main element of the Reagan coalition, consisting of defenders of traditional Protestant morality, is of course supposed to be captured by "hierarchism." Liberals and leftists are "egalitarians." And the "underclass," which Wildavsky asserts "lives largely in the present,"[15] is rendered as "fatalistic." This fourfold division may mirror contemporary political alignments better than the conventional left-right dichotomy; but Cultural Theory then takes this comparative advantage overboard, transforming four blocs of contemporary American political opinion into timeless, placeless cultural universals. This not only renders the above-mentioned logical and historical similarities between the egalitarian premises of "individualism" and the individualistic premises of "egalitarianism" invisible, but if taken seriously, it would send us on a wild goose chase in search of peculiarly individualistic ways of life among libertarians and communal ways of life among egalitarians.

Thus, Cultural Theory's applicability to contemporary political contestants is bought at the price of obscuring their commonalities and their historical uniqueness. Just as in libertarianism the ahistorical "self" cannot have its preferences interrogated, in Cultural Theory *the preference for liber-*

*tarianism* (i.e. for egalitarian individualism) *itself* cannot be interrogated: it is just *there*, an aspect of one of the universal ways of life. Contemporary relevance is purchased by historical obliviousness.

But if Cultural Theory does not tell us very much about where our culture came from, it does *illustrate* its peculiarity. For the authors derive Cultural Theory's "superior[ity]" from the fact that "both the grid and group dimensions measure social restrictions upon individual autonomy" (103). That the degree to which individual autonomy is restricted can unblinkingly be considered the most universally important aspect of society and culture is highly instructive about the ruling assumptions of the age. As another critic of Cultural Theory has written,

> Wildavsky's four-box matrix of cultural types illustrates something important about his own culture. The central issue addressed by this matrix is the trade-off between individual freedom and government authority. Indeed this issue has been a central point of concern in the Western political tradition. . . . But in other cultures, for instance, the Confucian, these issues are not juxtaposed as opposites or as obvious trade-offs. What we learn from Wildavsky is the central importance of the debate about freedom in his culture, and we can predict that consensus will often fracture along this fault line.[16]

In short, Cultural Theory is contemporaneously plausible because it is based on the libertarian premises that structure our politics. While before the advent of modernity, Western normative theorists asked how people should live—what they should prefer—libertarian liberals ask who should have the authority to decide how to live, i.e. who should have the power of autonomous choice: the equal individual or some hierarchy placed over him/her. This is exactly the question embodied in Douglas's typology. Cultural Theory responds to this insistent Western preoccupation with the distribution of power in the way that sociologists "prefer" to respond to it, that is, by asserting the power of society over the individual, rather than as economists prefer to respond to it, by asserting the autonomy of the individual over society. The sociological answer merely moves the question of "given" preferences back a level, from the individual to the group. If individual preferences are a *deus ex machina* in rational choice theory and in libertarianism, group preferences are the *deus ex machina* of Cultural Theory. In each case the starting point is a "natural fact": either the essence of the self or that of the group. And the consequences of these determinisms, too, are similar. In one case we are helpless victims of our ineffable tastes; in the other, of our social way of life.

Yet Cultural Theory cannot uphold a simple reduction of individual to group preferences; for this would leave no room for individuals to transcend their social contexts, and we have already seen that explicitly, this

space is something the authors realize they must preserve. To account for changes in preferences, then, Cultural Theorists must somehow escape the exogenous determinism toward which they are implicitly committed. How do they accomplish this without falling back into the arbitrarily given, whimsically plastic "tastes" of rational choice theory?

## *From Value Irrationality to Instrumental Hyperrationalism*

The answer is that the authors weld onto the socially determined body of Cultural Theory a rationalism as naïve as any produced by the Enlightenment. Thus, while the logical implication of a one-to-one correlation of cultural biases and social ways of life is that individuals are the passive recipients of socially functional preferences, Cultural Theory holds that individuals are somehow simultaneously active, self-conscious evaluators of socially given assumptions:

> The existence of competing ways of [social] organizing gives individuals knowledge of other possibilities, and the opportunity to observe how the people who live according to these other ways are doing. Individuals use their powers of reasoning to compare existing social arrangements with alternatives. Thus . . . in some of the most privileged enclaves that capitalist systems have produced, we find cliques (like "The Apostles" at prewar Cambridge) dedicated to moving their society in the opposite direction. (13)

Do the authors mean to suggest that the Apostles' Communism was a result of the careful study of socialist forms of social organization? Is it not far more likely that the pull exerted on them by leftist ideals was based not on comparative economic studies, but rather on training by Cambridge University to a deep appreciation of the finest egalitarian ideals of Western civilization?[17] But Cultural Theorists cannot entertain that possibility, because it does not involve the cultural defense of a given social way of life. The alternative to which they turn is solitary, self-conscious, rational individual deliberation. Cultural Theory thus attempts to fuse the extreme holism of the nineteenth century and the extreme individualism of the eighteenth:

> How does change ever occur? If ways of life are self-protecting, instructing people what to value, what to ignore and notice, shun and embrace, how is it that ways of life ever lose (or gain) adherents?
>
> Much the same way, we suggest, as scientific theories lose and gain adherents: the cumulative impact of successive anomalies or surprises. . . .
>
> Ways of life, like theories, cannot exclude reality altogether. As evidence

> builds up against theories, or as ways of life do not pay off for adherents, doubts build up, followed by defections. A persistent pattern of surprises forces individuals to cast around for alternative ways of life (or theories) that can provide a more satisfying fit with the world as it is. (69)

Now it is nonsensical to speak of "evidence building up against" values, as opposed to evidence building up against the success of ways of life in satisfying the values allegedly impressed by the ways of life onto their participants as being desirable. In other words, there can be evidence from "surprises" against means, but not ends. So by appealing to the role of cognitive dissonance, the authors *cannot* explain changes in people's preferences; they can at best explain changes in people's strategies for achieving their preferences. As in their claim that history can play a role in Cultural Theory, it is only by conflating what Cultural Theory purports to explain (the formation of ends) with what it does not (the evaluation of means) that the authors create the illusion that it is compatible with change.

But even in accounting for changes in the means for satisfying preferences, Cultural Theory must isolate the suddenly rational individual from any interaction with others or with cultural traditions. For if it were admitted that historically contingent cultural institutions might provide information about means—e.g., that Cambridge might have inspired enthusiasm even for communist means of social organization—it would take little imagination to ask if cultural institutions could have inspired enthusiasm for communist *values* as well. Hence the naïve scientism of Cultural Theory's portrait of the *Zweckrationale* individual, who receives the stimulus to changing his or her mind not from autonomous or semi-autonomous cultural influences, but from *reality itself*; and who, in deciding upon his or her new means-preferences, draws solely on the unmediated observation of reality. This is the only way that change could be allowed to enter an exogenously deterministic model without letting in history along with it.

By carefully restricting the influences on an individual's preferences to either her given social structures (for her ends) or others' given social structures (for her means), Cultural Theory parallels the naturalistic tendencies of endogenous determinism by reducing society to the status of a physical object, like the rocks beneath our feet or the trees in our path, to which we passively conform. When our preferences do change, it is because we bump into something we did not expect to encounter, awakening us from our dogmatic slumber just long enough to allow us, with no help from others, to conduct experiments upon our environment until we find a more "fitting" way of life. In this picture of human life, only the instrumental rationality of preferences is ever called into question, and

then only by an individual conceived of as an atomic fragment of a preference-determining whole, bereft of culturally mediated relationships to the ideas of other people—contemporaries or predecessors. The upshot is that Cultural Theory tells against the genealogy and criticism of preferences just as effectively as does its libertarian progenitor.

Only if culture is not a realm in which we merely collide with each other in our passive mode, or rearrange our relationships with each other in our active mode; only if it is where we *communicate* with each other—through symbols that take on a history of their own—all the time, is it possible that investigations of culture will expose to criticism the sources of not only the means, but the ends we find reasonable. By making culture a device by which self-contained, yet monocausally determined social monads signal one another in order, as economists put it, to *coordinate* their movements, Cultural Theory reproduces in a different form the deracinated and conservative picture found in economistic and libertarian theory. In both Cultural Theory and libertarian liberalism, human deliberation is concerned only with the forms by which people array themselves against each other, about which nothing more need be telegraphed than "this is what I prefer"; there is no place for the communication and criticism of values, i.e. of what one *should* prefer. Both in its passive, socially reductive mode and its active, atomistic rationalism, Cultural Theory fails to allow for the criticism of preferences, shielding them from genealogy by making them either means decided scientistically by atomized individuals or ends determined automatically by social context. In neither case do we get any closer to finding out their sources than in the libertarian liberal view, in which preferences are ends determined automatically by the inner self.

Max Weber saw modernity as the triumph of instrumental over substantive rationality, a triumph of technology over morality. In our terms, this is the triumph of a determinism of ends over a recognition that it is we, not our social contexts or our inaccessible selves, who decide what to value. The conditions which led to this triumph—and to modern culture—have yet to be fully investigated. But progress along these lines will be slow as long as the investigators are themselves caught up in the question of the distribution of authority, which is the very question that needs to be explained.

## NOTES

1. E.g. Aaron Wildavsky, "Choosing Preferences by Constructing Institutions: A Cultural Theory of Preference Formation," *American Political Science Review* 81, no. 1 (March 1987): 3–21.

2. Id., "Can Norms Rescue Self-Interest or Macro Be Joined to Micro?" CRITICAL REVIEW 5, no. 3 (Summer 1991): 301–24.
3. Cf. Ryszard Legutko, "Society as a Department Store," CRITICAL REVIEW 4, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 327–43.
4. The following analysis of multiculturalism merely obtains in principle because only on one level is multiculturalism negative-libertarian; at a deeper level it is positive-libertarian. For only in part is its purpose to give students from oppressed groups the sort of education they would "prefer" to receive; if this were their only purpose, then multiculturalists would join libertarians in trying to marketize education so that it responded to its "consumers'" desires. That they do not do so indicates that the deeper intent is to *shape* students' preferences so as to prevent them from oppressing each other in the future, by informing them about the horrors of oppression past and present. This is not to say, though, that even on this deeper level multiculturalists are not libertarians; after all, what constitutes oppression for them is precisely the violation of people's equal right to individual liberty.
5. That is, the preferences of those among the oppressed who recognize that the most important feature of their identity is whatever it is that has led to their oppression.
6. E.g. Aaron Wildavsky and Karl Dake, "Theories of Risk Perception: Who Fears What and Why?" *Daedalus* 119, no. 4 (Fall 1990): 41–60.
7. Julian L. Simon, *The Ultimate Resource* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).
8. Edward C. Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1958).
9. Richard Ellis and Aaron Wildavsky, "A Cultural Analysis of the Role of Abolitionists in the Coming of the Civil War," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32, no. 1 (January 1990): 89–116.
10. Some passages of *Cultural Theory* suggest equivocation about the direction of the causal arrow. The authors write that "causal priority, in our conception of ways of life, is given neither to cultural bias nor to social relations. . . . As in the case of the chicken and the egg, it is sufficient to show that cultural biases and social relations are responsible for one another, without confronting the issue of which came first" (1). They add that "institutions generate distinctive sets of preferences, and adherence to certain values legitimizes corresponding institutional arrangements. Asking which comes first or which should be given causal priority is a nonstarter" (21). But as the many passages quoted in the text show, the authors fail to take these disclaimers seriously, typically suggesting that they do accord initial causal priority to society over culture—as confirmed by these remarks: "the problem we have set for ourselves is not one of origins—when and how did ways of life emerge? It is instead a problem of persistence—*how, having come into being, does a way of life sustain itself* (and change)?" (1, emph.

added). To say that "*social relations generate preferences and perceptions* that in turn sustain those relationships" (2, emph. added) is not the same as saying that the issue of origins is a non-starter.

In any event, the real problem is not the direction(s) of the causal arrow. The problem is the absence of a middle term, intersubjective culture, which introduces historical contingency into what people find reasonable. The authors' explicit inclination against a vulgar reduction of culture to society is ill served by a schema in which only those two terms exist: in the absence of a middle term, a critic might inquire which of the social types it is that makes Cultural Theory itself seem reasonable to its originators, or whether Cultural Theory is not itself a manifestation of one or another of the cultural biases. This would cause the same problems for Cultural Theory that plague those versions of Marxism that leave no room for Marxists whose beliefs derive not from class position but from education. I argue below that in order to extricate themselves from an equally rigid social determinism, the authors end up embracing an implausibly atomistic rationalism.

11. See e.g. references in nn1, 6 above.
12. Aaron Wildavsky, "The Media's 'American Egalitarians,'" *The Public Interest* no. 88 (Summer 1987): 94–104.
13. For a masterful survey of both the ideological and social factors that may have been involved in the rise of egalitarian individualism, see J.G. Merquior, "For the Sake of the Whole," CRITICAL REVIEW 4, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 301–25.
14. Wildavsky, "Can Norms Rescue Self-Interest?"
15. *Ibid.*, 307.
16. David Laitin, "Political Culture and Political Preferences," *American Political Science Review* 81, no. 1 (March 1987): 589–93, at 590.
17. In fact, Kim Philby did study economics at Cambridge, but apparently only *after* being inspired by the left-wing idealism of Maurice Dobb, which played to Philby's already well-established sympathies. See Phillip Knightley, *The Master Spy: The Story of Kim Philby* (New York: Vintage, 1988), ch. 1, esp. 30-31 on Dobb and 33 on Philby's prior conviction "that the rich had had it too damned good for damned long and that the poor had had it too damned bad and that it was time that it was changed."