advancing cultural explanations Fritz Gaenslen

Taken together, the chapters of this book add to the growing evidence of a major revival of interest in the concept of “culture.” Taken individually, each of the chapters attempts, in one way or another, to offer a cultural explanation of foreign policy-related behavior. My purpose in this afterword is to consider these offerings in the context of two broad questions: When do we want to make cultural explanations, and how do we want to make them?

when

We do not always want to make cultural explanations—or so it would seem to anyone who has followed within the social science disciplines the now-you-see-it-now-you-don’t history of the concept of culture. On many occasions, certainly, we have gotten along comfortably, even gratefully, without it. At other times, however, culture has impressed itself on our consciousness. In thinking about how to make cultural explanations, we may usefully begin by asking just when it is that culture most insistently intrudes.

historical perspectives

When did our present-day anthropological notion of culture first come into being? According to Sahlins (1995:1014), the term originated in the late eighteenth century, the product of German bourgeois intellectuals who, relatively powerless and without the formal unity of a country, sought to express a distinctive national identity (kultur) in opposition both to the Francophile pretensions of the Prussian court and to the ambitions of France and England as purveyors of “civilization.” The latter term, Sahlins (1995:10) writes, was invented in France in the 1750s, quickly adopted in England, and enthusiastically embraced in both countries “in explication of their superior accomplishments and justification of their imperialist exploits.” Culture, Sahlins observes, was a rejection of this universalizing hegemony and of the distinction between “more civilized” and “less civilized” people.

Several features of this account are worth emphasizing. First, the invention of culture appears to have followed upon the construction and contemplation of an ‘other.’ Second, this other was not only ‘external’ (France and England), but “internal” as well (the Prussian aristocracy). Third, with respect to both external and internal manifestations of the other, the inventors of culture felt themselves in a position of political disadvantage. Finally, they experienced their disadvantage as both social dislocation and injustice. Culture was not only an assertion of identity and “place,” but of equality as well.

Can a similar tale be told about other times and places? A growing literature (Foster, 1991:239241) suggests that it can. Consider, for example, the importation of the culture concept to Japan. In the view of a number of scholars (Morris-Suzuki, 1995; Najita and Harootunian, 1988), the word bunka (culture) first entered popular awareness in Japan in the 1920s as the antithesis to “civilization and enlightenment.” Where “civilization and enlightenment” had been the rallying cry of early Meiji Westernizers—affirming both the achievements of the European scientific and...
industrial revolutions and a universalist conception of cosmopolitanism—culture was taken as referring to a unique Japanese essence. Why the 1920s? The answer can be seen as having both external and internal components.

Externally, the 1920s saw the inauguration of the so-called Versailles-Washington system, an international order—defined by the Versailles Peace Conference of 1919 and the Washington Conference of 1921-1922—that largely served to protect the interests of Great Britain and the United States and to roll back Japan’s position in Asia. Internally, the 1920s saw a growing disaffection in Japan with domestic political and economic arrangements—with “incompetent” politicians and divisive party politics and with the extreme rapaciousness and inequality produced by industrial capitalism. Against these domestic threats, and the perception of Western colonial ambition, culture was an assertion of both national unity and national independence.

Finally, let us consider the introduction of the culture concept—in its incarnation as “political culture”—to U.S. political science. Introduced by Gabriel Almond in 1956, political culture achieved wide currency in the 1960s primarily as a tool for making sense of the problems facing the host of new states that emerged with the demise of colonialism following World War II. As Pye (1991:492) has written, “The emerging nations did not have well-institutionalized governments and therefore there was need for new concepts to describe them.” But there is more to the story than this. According to Almond (1980:610), the political culture concept had its true beginnings in the confrontation of the U.S. public and U.S. political science with the failure of enlightenment and liberal expectations about the inevitability of democracy. This confrontation was occasioned, most fundamentally, first by the Nazi seizure of power in Germany and then, in the immediate postwar years, by the perceived threat—internal and external—of worldwide communism (also see Pye, 1991:496). To a people revealed in surveys as uniquely proud of their governmental institutions (Almond and Verba, 1963:102), at a time when the “hearts and minds” of the citizens of the new states were seemingly up for grabs, political culture was, at least in part, an assertion of U.S. identity in the face of a threatening other.

What do these vignettes of intellectual history tell us about when to make a cultural explanation? In broad summary, they suggest that the explanatory power of culture will be most impressive when the individuals whose behavior we seek to explain find themselves in circumstances that either make salient their own collective identities or make possible their mobilization of the collective identities of prospective political allies.

To render explicit a so-far implicit feature of these circumstances, let us now consider the origins of the present “culture revival.”

**contemporary perspectives**

The present revival of interest in the culture concept can be seen as both a response to recent upheavals in the world’s political landscape and the product of several scholarly debates. The recent political upheavals are familiar. They include the “third wave” of global democratization that began with the fall of Portugal’s dictatorship in 1974 (Huntington, 1991); the continuing growth since the Iranian revolution of 1979 of Islamist movements in much of the Middle East (Halliday, 1995); the burgeoning phenomenon of “collapsed states” in places like Somalia and Rwanda in Africa (Zartman, 1995); and, perhaps most notably, at the outset of the 1990s, the demise of Marxist regimes in
Eastern Europe and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia (Bunce, 1996). These upheavals have led many observers to draw the connection, noted above, between culture and “the politics of identity.” As one analyst (Street, 1994:96) puts it, they direct our attention “to the way regimes legitimate themselves and the way citizens identify themselves, both processes that suggest a mediating role for culture.”

But these political upheavals make vivid another lesson as well. They suggest that cultural explanations will seem most persuasive when the individuals whose behavior we seek to explain are unclear about the structure of rewards and punishments they face—when their situations are characterized by uncertainty. The argument is straightforward and unoriginal (see Geertz, 1964:6364; Gaenslen, 1986:8182; Goldstein and Keohane, 1993:16; Crawford and Lijphart, 1995:186): When an existing order has broken down and a new one has yet to be institutionalized, individuals will face continual doubt about their interests and how to maximize them. In these circumstances, cultural beliefs and values can plausibly provide mental antidotes to the problem of a tangible disorder by serving as sources of sociopolitical meaning and as guides to political action.

This point perhaps requires elaboration. I do not mean to suggest here that culture somehow fails to operate in more stable circumstances, or that its influence in such circumstances is unimportant. Rather, my point is methodological. Stable circumstances make it difficult to untangle the influence of culture from other influences; an absence of variance tends to produce overdetermined explanations with little opportunity for discriminating tests. It follows, then, that our cultural explanations are likely to prove more compelling to skeptical readers to the extent that we focus on times of relative turbulence. Does it also follow that, in offering cultural explanations, we ought to avoid the analysis of more stable circumstances altogether? This seems to me to give up too much. My own conclusion is more modest: Analysis of the cultural underpinnings of relatively stable political orders will usefully be supplemented by examining these same orders in times of turbulence and uncertainty.

The political upheavals of recent years have not been the only spur to a revived interest in the culture concept. For some analysts, external worldly events have been less important than internal scholarly debates. The debates include—and I shall use simplifying labels—those between “realists” and “idealists” in the field of international relations, between “rational-choice theorists” and “area specialists” in the field of comparative politics, and between “positivists” and “interpretivists” in the social sciences more generally. The first two of these debates seem to me to repeat the lesson offered above—that cultural explanations will be most compelling when political actors are faced with uncertainty.

Consider, first, the debate in international relations between realists and idealists. Pared to its essentials, the realist position stresses the rationality of decisionmaking units, conceived as nation-states; attributes security-maximizing utility functions to each state; and characterizes the international environment of states as ruthlessly competitive (see Tetlock, 1996). This last point is the most important. In the realist account, the competitive environment does double theoretical duty. First, it serves as the source of policymaker rationality: International competitive pressures are said to create incentives for the clear appraisal of threats, the methodical evaluation of options, and the unemotional assessment of alliances. (Note that it is this assumption that permits realists to treat states as “unitary actors.”)
Second, the competitive environment serves as the source of foreign policy itself; that is, states are said to pursue the policies they do in response to structural incentives provided by the international system. For present purposes, the idealist objection is as follows: “Given the causal ambiguity inherent in complex historical flows of events, systemic constraint cannot be sufficiently constraining to be a powerful explanatory tool” (Tetlock, 1996). Instead, idealists claim, we must look to the causal beliefs of particular policymakers and to their particular notions of good and bad outcomes. Both the beliefs and the notions, idealists would add, may sometimes be the products of culture.

The second debate that has spurred a revival of interest in the culture concept has been the one between rational-choice theorists and area specialists. This debate can be seen as a more general version of the one between realists and idealists in international relations. Rational-choice theorists seek to understand social and political phenomena as the product of purposive, goal-seeking choices by individuals possessed of stable and ordered preferences; individuals are said to assess their available options and to choose those they expect will best achieve their goals. Area specialists have expressed several reservations about the rational-choice project (see Little, 1991; Gaenslen, 1986). First, they note that although much human behavior can properly be described in rational-choice terms, at least some behavior seems usefully understood as more expressive than instrumental. Second, they observe that the rational-choice description of rationality does not go far enough—that it does not specify the nature of the goals that individuals pursue, the decision rules they use to select among options, and the level of detail needed to describe the environment of choice. Finally, area specialists object to the common practice in rational-choice analyses of merely positing goals, decision rules, and the salient features of the environment rather than investigating them. The result of this practice, they argue, has been the propagation of an ethnocentric and economistic view of both social institutions and human motives that is insensitive not only to such behavioral impulses as love, friendship, loyalty, habit, and anger but, most significantly, to the particularities of cultural difference.

How do the debates between realists and idealists and between rational-choice theorists and area specialists serve to reiterate the lesson that cultural explanations will offer more convincing accounts of behavior in “uncertain” environments than in “predictable” ones? The answer lies in the fact that although the objections raised by idealists and area specialists are telling, they do not completely carry the day. If idealists and area specialists can claim differences between states and between peoples, realists and rational-choice theorists can reasonably claim similarities—core interests of security and well-being that states and peoples share. When environmental constraints can be shown to make salient these core interests, we are likely to find realist and rational-choice explanations persuasive. Conversely, when environmental constraints are demonstrably uncertain, we should expect to find cultural explanations more convincing.

A third debate that has contributed to the revival of interest in the culture concept is that between “positivists” and “interpretivists.” However, this debate seems to yield a lesson that contradicts the lessons I have offered so far. At the center of the interpretivist position is a deep skepticism about the possibility of positive social science. Reality, in the interpretivist view, is a word that means little unless enclosed in quotation marks; our apprehensions of reality are never raw, unmediated, or simply objective. Thus, in a critical vein, much interpretivist analysis has sought to show how the practices and products of mainstream social science research encode and conceal value positions that need to
be brought to light. More affirmatively, however, interpretivists, relatively unencumbered by positivist methods, have directed considerable energy to cultural analysis more broadly conceived. In particular, they have focused on features of language and discursive practice that would seem, in general, to be necessary elements in our stories about how culture works its effects (see Yee, 1996:94-101). Although positivists would defend themselves with the reminder that performing sociology of knowledge on other people’s arguments is not the same as showing these arguments to be logically flawed or factually unsupported, their neglect of language and discursive practice—and of culture—seems less defensible. Yet interpretivists too are easily charged with neglect. As positivists would point out, we still need some way to tell a good interpretation from a bad one.

**this book**

My argument to this point has been that we ought to be sensitive to the temporal environment of those whose behavior we seek to explain—that our cultural explanations will be most effective when, in the eyes of policymakers, times are turbulent and/or issues of legitimacy and identity loom large. Does this analysis offer a useful way of looking at some of the contributions to this book?

Consider, first, the chapters by Chafetz and his associates and by Zurovchak. These authors locate their studies at the same historical moment. In the early 1990s, with the breakup of the Soviet empire and the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself, policymakers in Belarus, Ukraine, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia faced for the first time, in effect, the task of making independent foreign policy. The moment, in other words, was “a defining moment.” Sensitivity to internal and external others was high, and concerns about legitimacy and collective identity crowded the political agenda. Interestingly, however, the two chapters illustrate different lessons about when to make a cultural explanation. Why did Belarus embrace nuclear nonproliferation and why did Ukraine hesitate? For Chafetz and his associates, the circumstances I have described induced in policymakers a particular concentration of mind: They served to make culture, in the form of different national role conceptions, the object of conscious contemplation. In Zurovchak’s account, however, these circumstances did not so much concentrate policymaker attention as diffuse it, with culture influencing behavior below the threshold of policymaker awareness. Why did Slovak foreign ministry officials adopt more centralized and less flexible decisionmaking procedures than their Czech counterparts? According to Zurovchak, both sets of officials behaved “naturally” in the face of novel circumstances; in the absence of pressures to the contrary, they simply acted in accordance with their different cultural assumptions about the proper organization of human relationships.

Like Chafetz and Zurovchak, Breuning and Lotz are each concerned to explain policymaker choices at particular historical junctures. Breuning’s focus is on Dutch and Belgian foreign assistance policies circa 1986-1987. Lotz’s subject is the U.S. ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement at the end of 1993. However, neither author is much concerned to explain why culture (in the form of either national role conception or national myth) should be especially salient to policymakers at these specific moments. Instead, both authors can be seen as making a more general argument—an idealist argument—about the uncertainty associated with issues of international political economy. Whatever the international political and economic constraints at the time, these authors suggest, they were
not so constraining as to preclude the mobilization of contrasting national role conceptions by Dutch and Belgian policymakers or opposing national myths by Albert Gore and Ross Perot.

Finally, let us consider the chapters by Banerjee, Van Tassell, and Katzenstein. Like Chafetz and Zurovchak, each of these authors focuses on "a defining moment." For Banerjee, the moment is India on the eve of independence, with India’s future national identity the object of internal and external contention among Hindus, Muslims, and British. For Van Tassell, the moment is the new American Republic as it struggles for the first time to define its role in Central America and the Caribbean in the face of a wider European presence. For Katzenstein, the moment is the transition between the Ming and Qing dynasties when China first grappled with the issue of how to treat "rebels" on Taiwan. None of these authors, however, provides an illustration of one of my lessons about when to make a cultural explanation. Instead, each of them offers a useful lesson about a related, but different question: How are we to describe a country’s culture? Breuning, in her chapter, suggests that important elements for such a description are likely to be associated with significant turning points in a country’s history: founding events and major shocks or crises. Banerjee, Van Tassell, and Katzenstein would all seem to agree.

How are we to make a cultural explanation? My central premise is that demonstrating in convincing fashion the independent influence of culture on political behavior is difficult. To further understand the difficulty, we may usefully turn to the culture concept itself. Following widespread practice, I define culture as the shared assumptions and meanings of a group. However, this definition still leaves plenty of room for both conceptual confusion and problems of operationalization.

Reducing conceptual confusion
In its home discipline of anthropology, the culture concept has come under heavy attack in recent years for implying timelessness, homogeneity, and uncontested sharedness. Others have responded, however, that these implications are by no means necessary and have argued instead for a more “historicized” and “politicized” notion of culture (see Ortner, 1995:180). This discussion within anthropology offers a lesson about how to make a cultural explanation: Namely, there is no one best way to do this. How we conceptualize culture—how we treat such issues as timelessness, homogeneity, etc.—should depend on the particular case and our precise theoretical interests.

Still, our conceptualizations of culture should probably be more restrictive than inclusive. Barnes (1994:45-9) cites approvingly a definition of culture by Schein that seems more concrete than most definitions of the term. Here is Schein’s (1992:12) most recent wording. The culture of a group can be defined as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.”

Also potentially useful is Barnes’s emphasis on the distinction between cultural assumptions and individual beliefs.
Culture is not involved in all individual beliefs, he states, but only in those that the individual understands are shared with others. Maintaining the conceptual distinction between cultural assumptions and individual beliefs is necessary, Barnes argues, if we are to understand better the interplay between them.

Finally, on the question of how many people must share beliefs to be labeled a culture, Barnes echoes the point that this should depend on the goals of the analyst. He reminds us, however, following Schein, that culture is a learned product of group experience and is therefore to be found only where there is a definable group with a significant history.

Can we go further in meeting the challenge “to narrow the concept of culture so that it includes less and reveals more” (Keesing, 1974)? One obvious strategy is to disaggregate the concept, as far as possible, into discrete parts (beliefs, values, preferences) and to represent these parts as variables. This strategy will help us minimize vagueness and the unexamined conflation of multiple meanings and, as a result, reduce in our cultural explanations the possibility of circular reasoning (Smelser, 1992:20–25).

**problems of operationalization**

Not all students of culture will find this narrowing of the culture concept congenial. Especially likely to be disgruntled are those who are concerned less with cultural explanation than with cultural description—that is, with representing adequately the sensibilities and outlooks of particular collectivities of people. It is not that this latter task is somehow unworthy. Indeed, against the satisfactions of “thick description”(Geertz, 1973), the straightforward testing of hypotheses can sometimes seem sterile. Certainly, in this book, we get a more vivid sense of China from Dellios’s elegant rendering of that country’s strategic culture than we get of Belarus or Ukraine from Chafetz’s study of nuclear nonproliferation. Nevertheless, the distinction is important. To describe an aspect of a country’s culture is one task; to show some impact of that culture on political behavior is another. The first task seems to me to be the primary focus not only of Dellios’s chapter, but also those of Banerjee, Katzenstein, Lotz, and Van Tassell. The Breuning, Zurovchak, and Chafetz chapters, on the other hand, appear more concerned with the second task. The cultural descriptions in this latter group may not be as richly textured, but the dependent variables are more clearly specified.

Yet the “worlds”of cultural description and cultural explanation are not so unrelated as many analysts (e.g., Brint 1994:10) would have us believe. First, even those who see themselves as primarily residents of the “world of social science explanation”must, in developing their hypotheses, concepts, and measures, and in making sense of their findings, spend considerable time in the “world of interpretive description”(see Nathan, 1993:936). Thus, virtually all the contributors to this book attempt to operationalize culture through the interpretation of texts and/or utterances. Second, even those who see themselves as primarily residents of the “world of interpretive description”must, if they are to demonstrate the validity of their interpretations, spend considerable time in the “world of social science explanation.”Thus, virtually all the contributors to this book wrestle, at least implicitly, with a question I remarked on earlier: How do we tell a good interpretation from a bad one? Let us consider this question more closely.

Although the rules for describing a culture are largely undeveloped, they are probably most developed if we seek to
operationalize culture through the mechanism of the sample survey. In this volume, only Zurovchak and Lotz employ surveys to look at culture—albeit in different ways. Even surveys, however, must be interpreted, and we are always free to worry about a host of issues pertaining to the reliability and validity of the results: timing, format, sample size, wording of questions, response stability, representativeness, and the like. Our problems are compounded if we seek to operationalize culture through the interpretation of canonical texts (Dellios) or the public utterances of political elites (Banerjee, Katzenstein, Lotz, Breuning, Chafetz, and Van Tassell). For these approaches, we have even fewer rules to guide us and, therefore, more reasons to worry about reliability and validity. My point, however, is not that we should prefer survey methods to other approaches. In particular, if we wish to show the influence of culture on foreign policy, a focus on what policymakers say seems more than reasonable. My point, rather—and I take it to be Banerjee’s as well—is that just as we have developed over the years rules for making sense of survey responses, we need to develop rules for the cultural decoding of public discourse.

How can we do this? Although I hesitate to close off any avenue of inspiration, I do not believe we shall proceed very far in developing rules for deriving culture from discourse if we look to grand theories about discourse in general. Relatedly, I do not believe that a “linguistic turn” will lead us to useful answers about the relationships between language and other forms of knowledge and practice. The controversies surrounding these relationships are so long-standing that they are now described as “classical” (Hill and Mannheim, 1992:382). Instead, just as improvements in survey research have been the product of fine-grained analyses of the results of particular surveys in particular contexts, so I would expect the development of rules for the cultural decoding of discourse to proceed from analyses that were similarly fine grained and similarly context specific. Such analyses would address a variety of questions, including those suggested by Rieder (1994:127-133,146): (1) How far, and to what relevant community, might one generalize the sentiments encoded in a particular speaker’s utterances? Is there a difference between the culture of the speaker and the culture of the listeners? (2) Is a particular discourse representative of the discursive field, or are there a variety of discourses? Is there one discourse for genteel settings and another for the back room? Is there one discourse for mobilizing an in-group and another for legitimating the group before outsiders? (3) What are the conditions and occasions that will allow us to presume the sincerity of utterances? What do particular utterances hide as well as reveal? What dividends—tangible or symbolic—do they yield? And what might utterances “do” rather than express? In summary, if we are to develop rules for the cultural decoding of public discourse, we need to pay at least as much attention to contexts as we do to “texts.”

Must we wait until rules for the analysis of discourse are better developed to tell a good cultural description from a bad one? Happily, no, but only if, as I have suggested, we are willing to spend considerable time in the world of social science explanation. To evaluate a cultural description, we need to follow the advice of King, Keohane, and Verba (1994:47) and consider the description’s observable implications. We need to ask, “If my [cultural description] is correct . . ., what else might I expect to observe in the real world?” In short, the best way to demonstrate that a cultural description merits attention is to use it to advance a compelling cultural explanation.

What are the salient features of such an explanation? Let us consider two recent examples.
Two Examples of Cultural Explanation

Example one. In *The Child and the State in India*, Weiner (1991) offers a cultural explanation for why India, almost alone among the countries of the world, has no effective laws mandating universal education and no effective laws banning child labor. India, he points out, is the largest single producer of the world's illiterates. Weiner attributes this state of affairs to a set of beliefs widely shared by state bureaucrats, social activists, academics, and, more broadly, the Indian middle classes--of whatever political persuasion. These groups, he argues, tend to view social inequality and differential privilege as the natural and proper order of things and to see the role of education as maintaining this order. Educating the poor, these groups believe, will disrupt existing social arrangements by arousing unrealizable ambitions and by creating dissatisfactions that could lead to social unrest. Weiner argues that these beliefs have their origins in religious notions and in the premises that underlie India's hierarchical caste system--notions and premises that resist changes in group status.

Example two. In *Culture of Honor*, Nisbett and Cohen (1996) offer a cultural explanation for differences in homicide rates between Northern and Southern white males in the United States for the period 1976-1983. Southern white males, they argue, are more likely to be deeply concerned about honor--defined as rights to precedence or status--and to see affronts to honor as requiring a violent response. This set of beliefs, which they term a "culture of honor," tends to have its historical roots, they suggest, in areas where individuals are highly vulnerable to economic loss and where state regulation of conflict is largely absent. More particularly, cultures of honor have been associated historically with herding economies. The U.S. South, Nisbett and Cohen maintain, was originally settled by Scottish-Irish herders, and the higher incidence of homicide among white Southern males today should be seen as a cultural residue of this heritage.

The first thing to notice about these examples of cultural explanation is that they share a common design. Both studies attempt to explain differences (in laws; in homicide rates) and both studies treat culture as an independent variable (India/not India; North/South). Both studies, in other words, are explicitly comparative. If we do not want to say that adopting this design is necessary to offering a cultural explanation by definition, I would suggest that it is at least necessary to offering a cultural explanation that is compelling. In this book, Breuning, Zurovchak, and Chafetz adopt the same design as Weiner and as Nisbett and Cohen.

But adopting the right design is not enough. If we are to offer cultural explanations that are compelling, we need to pursue two additional strategies. The first strategy requires that we focus on the dependent variable and ask: What, besides culture, might account for the observed variation? Can the absence of compulsory schooling in India be attributed to budgetary constraints or to the need by parents and employers for children's income and labor? Weiner shows that India's education budget as a percentage of GNP compares well with those of other developing nations whose records are far superior, and that little relation exists historically between a country's introduction of education and child labor laws and its level of national and per capita wealth. Can the higher homicide rates among Southern white males be attributed to the South's hotter temperatures, the legacy of slavery, greater poverty, or the wider availability of guns? Nisbett and Cohen take considerable pains to show that they cannot. The essence of this strategy is straightforward: If we can eliminate all of the plausible rival explanations for the differences we observe, then the
only explanation left standing will be our own—a cultural explanation.

Two further comments about this strategy are in order. First, the strategy is demanding in the sense that thinking up plausible rival explanations can require considerable knowledge. The knowledge requirements may be particularly great for those concerned with the impact of culture on foreign policy. As Hudson observes in her introduction, students in the subfield of foreign policy analysis stand at the interface between the study of international relations and the study of domestic politics. So if we wish to make a compelling cultural explanation from this vantage point, we must eliminate plausible rival explanations in both domains. The contributors to this book are generally more concerned with battling the international dragon of realism than the domestic dragon of rational choice.

Second, the strategy of eliminating plausible rival explanations can carry us just so far. With this strategy, we may convince readers of the efficacy of culture in general without convincing them of the precise cultural explanation we wish to advance. We may come to believe that the absence of compulsory education in India has cultural roots without believing that these roots lie in religious beliefs and the premises of the caste system. We may come to believe that different homicide rates in the U.S. North and South are indeed the product of different cultures without giving credence to the idea of a culture of honor. In short, if we want to make our cultural explanations more compelling, we will need to go beyond the elimination of plausible rival alternatives.

A second strategy, then, requires that we focus not on the dependent variable, but on our independent variable. The strategy involves asking a question I posed earlier: If our cultural explanation is correct, what else might we expect to observe in the real world? If a belief in social inequality as the natural order of things is a cultural belief, we should expect to find Marxists, trade unionists, and social workers in India espousing the same education policies as employers and conservatives. This is what Weiner finds. If higher homicide rates in the South are attributable to a culture of honor, we should expect to find (1) that homicides involving arguments, brawls, and lovers triangles are the principal source of the difference; (2) that Southerners are more likely to approve of violence only for the protection of property, in response to an insult, and as a means of socializing children; and (3) that in laboratory experiments Southerners exposed to an insult express more anger, show more increase in cortisol and testosterone levels, and engage in more dominance behavior. Nisbett and Cohen find all these things. In summary, the strategy of pursuing additional observable implications can help make our cultural explanations more compelling.

**Conclusion**

At the outset of this afterword, I observed that the culture concept is currently enjoying a major revival of interest, a revival that owes its origins to political and economic upheavals worldwide and to theoretical and methodological debates within the political science discipline. Once again we are deciding—rightly—that culture is a concept we cannot do without. But its intractabilities remain. Thus, drawing on the contributions to this book, I have sought to present my thoughts on how to make a cultural explanation compelling. Several chapters make plain, however, that this is but half the task. We want to develop not only cultural explanations of politics, but political explanations of culture. A question for the future, then, is how to do this.
references


