

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41581-1 - Compliance Ideologies: Rethinking Political Culture

Richard W. Wilson

Frontmatter

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This book is about political culture. It examines developments in the social sciences and integrates them into a theoretical explanation of historical changes in political values. The starting point is the premise that political culture is rooted in the interaction between individual thinking and social norms. Individual reasoning develops according to Piagetian principles. Conceptions of social life reflect the way thought is organized; they are expressed, however, through symbolic forms constructed from prevailing cultural orientations. Social norms reflect the reasoning capability of society's members but are not organized conceptually in the same manner. They also serve institutional purposes by providing moral justifications, comprehensible to all of society's members, for inequality and solidarity. Institutional efficiency is enhanced when status arrangements are considered legitimate. Moral criteria that justify compliance thus serve to reduce friction in, and hence the costs of, organized activity. Moral justifications, however, as an aspect of cultural orientations in general, may be challenged following technological innovation that alters institutional arrangements. In the turmoil that accompanies change new moral guideposts are debated. Through discourse, individual conceptions of social life are transformed and, interactively, social norms and cultural orientations as well.

The first two parts of the book explore these issues theoretically. The second two examine them empirically by showing the ways that political cultures have changed over time. In the modern period the differences in the political cultures of capitalist and communist systems are contrasted; although both conceptualize social life in terms of property accumulation, they utilize different cultural orientations to reduce institutional transaction costs. The way the tensions between these two systems can be resolved is also explored.

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*To the memory of my parents,
Richard Henry Wilson and Susan Agnes Pasley Wilson*

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Preface

Differences among societies have fascinated observers since ancient times. Customs vary, words convey subtle, not quite familiar meanings, and responses are often unpredictable. Even our own close ancestors can seem remote. Photographs from a century ago reveal people who are near in time yet, somehow, far in spirit. Their letters and poetry, speeches and novels, speak to concerns that we understand, but to us they are strangers whose lives have a fabric and rhythm different from our own.

In politics knowledge of how others interpret events is vital. All too often great plans for peace and war have gone awry because intentions were misjudged; knowing the mind of an opponent is truly the first key to victory. Yet this means understanding the perceptions of others; it means putting aside our convictions about what is desirable and, instead, seeing the world through a different set of lenses. Broadly speaking, this is what is meant by cultural analysis, determining how others think and feel and what it is that societies consider significant.

Those who study political life are aware that culture is important. Few concepts, however, have so bedeviled research. Problems have been both theoretical and methodological. For instance, how do cultural norms come to exist and how do they affect the ways that people think? Indeed, what is thinking itself? What kinds of propositions can make sense of the diversity of human experience? These are only a few of the questions that must be asked. So thorny have these problems been that many have simply stepped around them, preferring to believe that all people think in roughly the same way and are motivated to obtain similar goals. Then unforeseen events occur, such as the recent turning away from communism in Eastern Europe or the confrontation in the Persian Gulf. The importance of understanding political cultures then becomes clear and immediate.

This book is about political culture. It takes a fresh look at theoretical developments in the social sciences and seeks to integrate them into a new frame of reference. The starting point is the premise that political culture is

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rooted in the interaction between individual thinking and social norms in contexts that are deeply affected by considerations of economic efficiency. How choices are constrained by the norms that govern organized activity, how organized activity influences the shape of norms, and, finally, how norms are transformed by the choices that are made in response to social changes are crucial matters for inquiry.

The focus of the book is on historical changes in cultural norms and in the related patterns of right and obligation in social and political life. Following a theoretical discussion in the first half of the book, the second half discusses historical transformations in political cultures and lays out the probable trajectories of future change. Although political cultures are shown to be exceptionally diverse, they nevertheless all change in ways that are theoretically commensurable.

In writing this book I have incurred a debt of gratitude to many. I would especially like to thank Stephen Chilton, Thomas A. Metzger, and Andrew J. Nathan, who criticized my ideas as I was developing them in various papers. At a later period James C. Davies made detailed comments on the manuscript from beginning to end. His contribution to my understanding has been matched only by his unstinting support. I am indeed profoundly in his debt. My gratitude goes also to Lucian W. Pye and Shawn W. Rosenberg, whose thinking has deeply influenced my own. Thanks are also due to Emily Loose of Cambridge University Press for valuable suggestions and for patience in steering the manuscript toward publication. My appreciation goes to the Faculty Academic Study Program of Rutgers University for providing me with the time for research and writing. I wish also to express gratitude to Phyllis Moditz of the Rutgers Political Science Department for her extraordinary care in typing numerous drafts. And my deepest thanks go to my wife, Myoung Chung Wilson, who throughout has been a constant and un-failing source of encouragement.