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A Critical Theory of Community

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I would like to present a brief outline of a critical theory of community. I think this is timely and important because cultural theory can make important contributions to social theory, because there has been a resurgence in academic attention to the nature and desirability of community, and last, and probably least, because critical theory is the theme of this conference. I will briefly discuss what it is that makes a theory a critical theory, outline a cultural theory of community, and apply it to the literature on community.

Building a Critical Theory

An adequate critical theory should allow comparative analysis, but comparison should be constrained; that is, we need a limited number of basic categories into which social organizations, actions and preferences can fall. If everything is unique, nothing can be transferred and applied, and thus there is no learning, or at least no social science (What Landau calls "death by qualification"). This is aimless empiricism, description run amok, which unfortunately describes much empirical research.
But the categories of comparison, although limited, must be exhaustive, or else we will at best end up knowing quite a bit about very little. Social theory can easily exclude much of the field of social actions and beliefs from study through the manipulation, conscious or not, of assumptions and definitions. Organizational theorists who consider only hierarchical structures, or economists who assume individuals to be atomistic actors are prone to this sort of error.

Critical theory, then, should be comparative, constrained and comprehensive. Critical theory, as developed by Hegel, Horkheimer and Habermas, is certainly constrained; there is only one ideal -- an egalitarian society of autonomous individuals engaging in free discourse -- against which all existing social arrangements fall short. But this is a theory in which the criticism flows only in one direction. The contradictions of egalitarian society are unexamined, perhaps even irrelevant. The lack of attention to the legitimate bases and inherent contradictions of alternative forms of organization prevents analysis that is comprehensive and fully comparative. In effect, critical theory is not sufficiently critical.

Critical theory takes one goal -- freedom from social constraint -- and asserts it to be transcendent, the only legitimate basis for social theory and social life. Consequently, there is only one ideal form of social organiza-
tion, that of egalitarian individualism. For Hegel, the role of theory is to unmask the "false appearances" of society to allow the expansion of freedom (Denhardt, 1981: 629). The path of history leads toward the emancipation of the individual through the unfolding of reason. Traditional science, by concentrating on how existing relationships work, reinforces the status quo and blocks change that would free the individual, according to Horkheimer (1972).

The most significant contribution of Habermas (1971; 1985) to critical theory has been his emphasis on the central role of language in suppression and liberation of the individual. Repression is covertly carried out through the "privatization" of language -- the withdrawal of symbols from the public domain, which narrows the field of action that is open to individual choice. Habermas urges the construction of "universal pragmatics" that will allow undistorted communications and thus make individuals autonomous.

A "critical" public administration requires the exposure of the contradictions in bureaucratic hierarchy, according to Denhardt, so that the "true needs" of the workers can be discovered and developed. This Denhardt considers to be "democratic" (Denhardt, 1981: 633-634).

In terms of cultural theory, Habermas and his predecessors are advocating an egalitarian culture while ostensibly providing an objective framework for analysis. To make all language public is to level all relationships in a society.
This supposedly critical approach rejects the legitimacy of the hierarchical culture, in which language is privitized through the development of roles. This allows hierarchies to apply past experience to future contingencies, avoiding the need to continuously reinvent rules of social behavior. But in the egalitarian culture, roles are illegitimate unless each person fully understands and accepts the implications of the roles free from any constraint. When this is lacking, roles can only be accepted on faith and trust, which implies unequal relationships of power and knowledge. These unequal relationships impede free discourse as, of course, do roles, or they are not roles at all. The ostensibly objective methods of critical theory thus rule out all but one form of social organization before analysis has even begun.

Privitization of language is not limited to hierarchies. Indeed, we all practice it, although we call it learning. What was once new and mysterious becomes second nature; routines do not require constant justification. When the child asks "Why?" and the parent replies "Because I said so," the parent is asking the child to accept a privitized package of past learning. As generations, we put faith in, and build on, the experiences of our forebears (while also retesting them) by privitizing the language that was once the product of public discovery.

Language is also an obstacle to the good, moral life.
for Robert Bellah (1985). Curiously, though, the impediment he seeks to remove sounds distinctly like the nirvana Habermas seeks: individualism. Bellah seeks to expose the contradictions not of hierarchy, but of individualism, the "first language" of Americans, in order to build the moral community, which is a rather vague mix of hierarchy and egalitarianism. The contradictions of the latter two cultures are only briefly mentioned and never critically examined.

While the criticisms of Bellah do not constitute a theory comparable to that of the critical theorists, they do suffer from similar failings of one-sided selectivity, which is often reassuring but rarely illuminating. The complexities and ambiguities of the world are consigned to "false consciousness," the Marxist's veto. Certainly there is criticism here, but the conclusions are predetermined. This is hardly analysis at all, and more like advocacy masquerading as analysis.

A critical theory of culture

All cultures encode learning, in that they develop social practices and values that are compatible; learning molds preferences and expectations, which in turn constrain our thinking. Herbert Simon refers to this as bounded rationality, which simplifies decision-making through the acceptance of fact and value preferences. Bounded rationality opens the door to the concept of multiple rationality:
Different forms of social organization "bound" their members with different premises, and thus have different standards of rationality.

Definitions of rationality are usually based on certain assumptions about social relations, and the possibility that there are other versions of rationality built upon competing assumptions is often defined away. A rational decision as understood in economics is one based on material self-interest; in management science rationality may require a comprehensive search of all relevant sources and the development of a explicit, logical sequence of goals, policies and reasons, in which case the pursuit of self-interest may be considered irrational.

Cultural theory asserts that rationality is multiple, and seeks to delineate the lines by which rationality is constrained. "Rational people defend their way of life," writes Aaron Wildavsky (1984). This deceptively simple approach erases the gulf between self-interest and social interest, allowing a more complete consideration of human motivations.

That man is a social animal will not be surprising to most people, but you might never guess this if you were a Martian with a penchant for American social science literature. Preferences are treated as preexisting and atomistic, as if social context were relevant only for the pursuit, and not the formulation, of preferences. There have been
creative attempts to dilute the concept of self-interest without abandoning it, such as Robert Salisbury's (1969) work on interest groups. Yet it seems much simpler and more fruitful to begin with the assumption that explanations must be rooted in social life (See Thompson and Schwarz, 1985).

Cultural theory, as I use the term, was developed by the anthropologist, Mary Douglas, and is known to some students of American politics and public policy through the recent work of Aaron Wildavsky. Cultures, which are comprised of shared values and the practices they legitimate, provide answers to the two great questions of life: Who am I and what will I do? More precisely, to what degree do individuals define themselves as group members (and act accordingly) and to what degree are individual actions constrained by rules? The first dimension is "group" and the second is "grid;" together they define the four basic forms of social organization: hierarchy (high group, high grid), egalitarian (high group, low grid), libertarian (low group, low grid), and despotism (low group, high grid).

Table A about here

The power of political culture lies in its comprehensiveness and its parsimony. It provides a framework for analysis of any set of social relations, yet its limited number of fundamental types makes comparison and criticism possible. It is a conservative theory in that it can provide a rationale for existing social structures and cautions
Table A: The Cultural Typology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Despotism</th>
<th>Hierarchy</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>High</strong></td>
<td><strong>High</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hirschman: no voice/ no exit</td>
<td>Hirschman: loyalty (limited voice, no exit)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etzioni: coercion/ alienation</td>
<td>Etzioni: pure normative/ moral</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Steinberger: managerialism</td>
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<td>&quot;Communitarians&quot;</td>
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<td><strong>Libertarianism</strong></td>
<td><strong>Equalitarianism</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Low</strong></td>
<td><strong>High</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hirschman: exit/ no voice</td>
<td>Hirschman: voice and exit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etzioni: renumeration/ calculative</td>
<td>Etzioni: social normative moral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steinberger: possessive individualism</td>
<td>Steinberger: communalism</td>
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<td>&quot;Critical&quot; theory</td>
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that the possibilities for change are not unlimited, yet it also points to competing forms of social organization and can provide the basis for rejection of existing practices. It can thus meet the concerns of Habermas and Rawls that theory be critical and universal. Cultural theory allows for both relativism and rejection.

A theory that is comprehensive, comparative and critical can carefully distinguish and integrate the empirical and normative functions of social theory. Cultures differ in the values they promote, the contradictions they entail, and the knowledge and resource levels to which they are best suited. Normative recommendations can be grounded in empirical assessments, such as: If the level of factual certainty is x, value agreement is y, and consequences z are acceptable, then this form of social organization is most appropriate. If conditions are not carefully stated, normative preferences of the researcher have a way of structuring the empirical analysis, such as in critical theory. Cultural theory emphasizes that society cannot maximize in opposite directions simultaneously; choices between cultures always involve tradeoffs. Theories that portray history as an inexorable march toward human perfection in which nothing of value need be forsaken miss a basic tenet of cultural theory: There are no free lunches in social organization.

The criteria employed in cultural theory to deduce fundamental forms of social organization are novel, but the
phenomena it seeks to explain are not, and it is not surprising that other theorists have developed similar concepts. The group dimension is similar to ends and values, since it is agreement on values, or ultimate ends, that binds the group. Grid refers to rules, which are the formalization of means, or the acceptance of factual premises to constrain action. Simon's (1947) emphasis on fact and value, and the typology of Thompson and Tuden (1959), both of which sought to explain decisionmaking in terms of uncertainty and agreement, are compatible with the cultural approach. The four fundamental forms of culture are also similar to what Etzioni (1975) calls "congruent types."

Hirschman's (1970) classification of organizations on the basis of how they respond to failure yields similar categories. His use of voice is similar to group; in essence, how far one's voice carries defines the group. In Hirschman's terms, as grid increases, there is less opportunity for exit. In hierarchies, loyalty to the group takes precedence over individual expression, while in libertarian cultures ineffective alliances and networks are broken off and new ones formed (Hirschman's exit). Egalitarians use both voice and exit in times of crisis: They seek to eliminate dissension within the group through discussion and consensus, and when this proves impossible the dissenters leave, rather than keep discord within the group.

Peter Steinberger (1985) has developed a set of urban
"ideologies" that share common elements with the cultural approach. His possessive individualism is essentially libertarianism, although he denies it can be the basis of a moral community. Possessive individualism, according to Steinberger, is "without firm theoretical supports" and has produced "no positive experiments." (1985:27) He also sees "managerialism" (that is, bureaucratic hierarchy) as valueless, ignoring the value of order itself. The moral basis of hierarchy is particularistic, in that different hierarchies can have different standards for role development. Advocates of libertarianism and egalitarianism, which are more universal in their implications, often misconstrue the diversity of hierarchies as lack of values.

Steinberger's communalism is similar to egalitarianism, although he does perceive that there is a conflict between this ideology and what I would call the hierarchical communalism of scholars such as Robert Nisbet. The problem arises because community, unlike equality and liberty, is not a fundamental term from which a social order can be derived; Rather, community is culturally relative, and is a very confusing term unless assumptions are specified.

Despotism is the problem child of political culture. It is the imposition of rules of behavior when group responsibility and value agreement are lacking. It has little to recommend it, except to the despot. Wildavsky refers to this form as fatalism, in which case the "box" is inhabited
by the powerless "rubbish men" (M. Thompson, 1979) who have fallen out from the other cultures. But this leaves us with a culture of all followers and no leaders, dependent for its existence on outside cultures. This anomaly weakens the analytical power of political culture. I prefer to include the leader and thus make despotism a theoretically independent culture. But despotism is rarely an important category for the analysis of social and political conflict; it tends to show up only in the arguments of partisans of other political cultures, who portray their opponents as indistinguishable advocates of despotic evil.

Egalitarianism is a more interesting form, but it is very difficult to maintain. Procedures and preferences must be continuously renegotiated if power inequities are not to result. Egalitarian groups tend to be small and have short lives. A indicative statement of egalitarian values is taken from the East Bay (California) Green Alliance:

Global responsibility, inclusiveness, postpatriarchal values, personal and social responsibility, non-violence, future focus, respect for spiritual values, ecological wisdom, decentralization, grass-roots democracy, and community-based economics.

Pure egalitarianism is a difficult form to maintain, but it is an important source of values and rhetoric in policy debates. In practice advocates of equality may tend toward hierarchical means, leading to the predicament that Steinberger calls "forced to be free." An interesting form of
egalitarianism is the collegial group, which can be incorporated into a hierarchical agency to allow the pursuit of knowledge when uncertainty is high but there is agreement on basic objectives.

Cultural theory shows that there is more than one way to organize, but not an unlimited number of ways. Any society or community should be accommodated by the typology, although most examples of social organization will not likely fall cleanly into one box or another. This approach is most useful in explaining the dimensions that conflict in a social grouping will take, as different cultural approaches compete for dominance. Cultural theory has been used to explain everything from political regimes to gardening styles and eating habits. I will apply it to some recent work on community and to local land-use regulation.

Culture and Community

The intensity of recent intellectual attention to community is both surprising and overdue. Local community has long been in disrepute among academics, despised as a stronghold of ignorant bigots who stifle the spirit of their young and blow away strangers on motorcycles. The community is the "last refuge of reaction," in Schlesinger's words.

Perhaps the new age communalists are more properly called "Neo-communalists," former cosmopolitan urbanites who have been mugged by nostalgia. But it is not clear if they
yearn for the days of small-town America, or for the centuries of pre-Enlightenment Europe. Community, like society or the public interest, is a very plastic term; it can be molded into many different shapes to fit one's fancy. The models used by the communalists are rarely specified with any precision, but always implicit.

There are two strands of thought running concurrently through the communitarian literature. One is a call for greater understanding of cultural dynamics; that is, of how social practices are related to fundamental values, and how social context affects preference formation and ranking. Researchers must know local social practices, according to Charles Taylor, in order to understand "internal goods," such as desert or honor, which only have meaning in context (1986). He refers to the "glorification of ordinary life," which encourages awareness of how people try to bring dignity and morality to their everyday lives.

"The exercise of rationality," writes Philip Selznick, "must be guided by an objective order within which aspirations are defined, preferences are regulated, and the interplay of means and ends is respected." (1986:23) This emphasis on social context, which implies that preferences are socially constructed, is shared by cultural theory, and represents a promising trend among social scientists. Other arguments that the study of policy and organizations should give more attention to how social interaction shapes prefer-
ences can be found in the "new institutionalism" of economics (See Moe, 1984), in Simon's work on human nature (1985:303), and in Robert Reich's analysis of the Environmental Protection Agency's experience in Tacoma (1985).

The second strand running through the communitarian literature is advocacy of particular forms of community. Just what is being advocated is not always clear. Bellah provides a lively critique of individualism (which he denies can be the basis of a legitimate community), but does not clearly explain how the Biblical and Republican traditions can bring back community, or what that community would be like. He particularly fails to adequately consider the contradictions in the community models he prefers. My best guess is that he advocates some combination of hierarchy and egalitarianism, but that he has not fully considered the implications of this. He writes that we should "ameliorate the differences that are patently unfair while respecting differences based on morally intelligible commitments." This is deceptively simplistic, as what is morally intelligible will depend on what cultural preferences one accepts.

Communitarianism is in large part a reaction against libertarianism and egalitarianism. Selznick rejects egalitarianism as a basis for community when he writes that community can become "a parody of itself... if, as in some 'intentional' communities, the structure is so tight that it finds all social differentiation offensive." (1986:9) He
also dismisses the notion that community can be based on the pursuit of the self-interest of the nuclear family. This is both a rejection of the egalitarianism popular in academic circles during the last two decades and a reaction against the recent resurgence of interest in libertarian philosophy among scholars, politicians and fellow travelers.

This disdain for "low grid" cultures leaves hierarchy as an acceptable basis for community. MacIntyre (1981) explicitly rejects all modern systematic politics, and argues that an appreciation of local context, or community, is fundamental to a civil, moral life. Social relations are made meaningful through reference to the "balance of indebtedness", which determines virtue or desert. Selznick emphatically states that community cannot be based on unlimited choice (and thus cannot be low grid): "Responsibility presumes choice, but not unconditioned choice... the deepest and most important obligations flow from identity and relatedness, not from consent." (1986:11) Indebtedness, obligation, responsibility -- these are the currency of hierarchy, and sound somewhat anachronistic in this liberal age.

For critics such as Rawls, the emphasis the communitarians place on social context eliminates any standard by which the society could be rejected, and thus there is no measure of justice. The writers on community provide two basic replies to this criticism: One is that the particularistic justice provided by their ideal communities can be
superior to universal standards of justice, which ignore circumstances. Secondly, most communitarians express some appreciation for the notion of rights, and desire to somehow retain the benefits, without the vices, of liberalism. Political culture can be useful in this regard, since it provides a basis both for the appreciation of different forms of community and for the rejection of existing practices, by making the relationship between social practices and underlying values explicit.

**Culture and Social Theory**

Cultural theory has the potential to be a major tool in the development of a general social theory that is valid and reliable. I have argued that it is a superior critical theory and is both exhaustive and parsimonious. Much is still to be done in the elaboration of its theoretical implications and in integration with other social theories. But the true test of a theory is in its application. Cultural theory can be useful in ordering and clarifying social structures, processes and language; I have briefly explored the application of cultural theory to models of community.

If cultural theory is to fulfill its promise, it should also be relevant to day-to-day decisionmaking. Cultural theory can be field-tested through value studies and analysis of decision processes. Decisionmaking is the crucial act of social organizations; it is the process by which an organization reveals its identity, or its lack of one.
Social organizations exist to constrain action in line with knowledge and preferences, and the decision point is where this constraint takes place. If no patterns can be found between values and structure along the lines suggested by cultural theory, and if decisions are made without any apparent cultural constraint, then cultural theory may prove to be nothing more than a sand castle of the intellect. But if, as I expect, cultural theory will help illuminate how individuals and groups form and pursue their preferences, then it will be a significant contribution to social theory.
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