Review

Cultural theory elaborations without predictive utility

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There is no single work that has stirred the debate about cultural theory in social science than Aaron Wildavsky's "Choosing Preferences by Constructing Institutions: A Cultural Theory of Preference Formation". Anthropologists' use of culture as an explanatory tool is quite acceptable because they (anthropologists) usually seek to describe what has been observed by using history, artifacts, language, lineage, etc. to link the past to the present. Explanations based on anthropological descriptions do not demand the rigorous proof required to establish causality in social science. They are largely informed assumptions based on one or several of the anthropological tools mentioned above. This paper examines Wildavsky's work on cultural theory to show the inadequacies in the use of the theory to establish causality and predictability in social science. The paper concludes that when social scientists attempt to use culture to establish causality, we lose the scientific boundary that sharpens our focus and orders the scope of the inquiry, and also eliminates the standard of rigor established in the field.

Key words: Culture, theory, elaborations, predictive preferences, endogenous, exogenous, inferences, constructing, utility.

INTRODUCTION

Many have tried to use culture as explanation for varied human actions, especially when nothing else would properly explain such actions. Anthropologists' use of culture as an explanatory tool is quite acceptable because anthropologists usually seek to describe what has been observed by using history, artifacts, language, lineage, etc., to link the past to the present. Sometimes some of these anthropological tools can explain why certain practices began, their purpose, and how they affect the present.

Lately, it has become fashionable for some social scientists to use anthropological explanations as predictive tools in their quest to establish causation. Explanations based on anthropological description do not demand the rigorous proof required to establish causation in social science. They are largely informed assumptions based on one or several of the anthropological tools mentioned above. For example, Van Gunsteren submits: "One important way is to develop a kind of policy analysis that pays attention to cultural differences more than current practices, which frequently violates even existing precepts to take culture into account. This is by no means easy, for it takes some counter-intuitive assumption to see that the proposal

makes sense" (Van, 2002). One cannot still determine whether the preceding statement makes sense or not because one cannot determine what "counter-intuitive" assumptions are. Intuitive assumptions must by nature be subjective. Hence, one cannot imagine what "counter-intuitive" means. A concept that cannot be defined or operationalized for clarity must not be used in an academic paper because it disallows others from using it. Using Van Gunsteren's statement as a point of departure, Robert Hoppe asserts, "taking cultural difference seriously and making it an ally instead of an enemy is the only sensible response for a policy analysis profession in tune with its times" (Hoppe, 2007).

While one cannot entirely be sure of the precise meaning of Hoppe's assertions, indulging him clarifies what he means. He asserts, "In research, culture is operationalized as the aggregate of individual attitudes, where individuals are seen as single units of analysis, free from social contexts" (Hoppe, 2007).

While operationalization of a concept allows the researcher to define that concept in a narrow scope tailored for the discussion in question, it does not allow for a complete departure of the accepted and established meaning of that concept. Operationalization must of necessity fall within the traditional meaning of the concept, but may be tailored for the purpose of a particular discussion. When operationalization completely departs from traditional and accepted meanings, we run the risks of reinterpreting concepts to fit any meaning we want, and thereby destroying the very concept of operationalization. For example, Hoppe's operationalization of culture as "the aggregate of individual attitudes, where individuals are seen as single units of analysis, free from social contexts" is contrary to the accepted and traditional meaning of culture. Culture is an attribute of groups, not an individual. An isolated individual free from social contexts may be said to have attitudes and preferences, but the congruence aggregate of individual attitudes and preferences are partly defined by culture. Therefore, one cannot talk about culture without the group. Culture is the stuff of society. An individual free from social context cannot be said to have culture. Hoppe's statement here is in line with Wildavsky's question of what causes preference formation, which he attributes to culture.

When social scientists attempt to use culture to establish causation, we lose the scientific boundary that sharpens our focus and orders the scope of the inquiry, and also eliminates the standard of rigor established in social science. Since culture explains all human actions, it can only be used as a tool for approximations and generalizations not precision and predictions.

There is no single work that has stirred the debate about cultural theory in social science more than Aaron Wildavsky's "Choosing Preferences by Constructing Institutions: A Cultural Theory of Preference Formation." Though pioneered by Mary Douglas (1992) in anthropology, cultural theory gained credence in social science largely due to Wildavsky's work. As such, this paper analyzes some of his claims by looking at the core arguments he makes in presenting his theory. The paper does this by quoting some of his assertions and subjecting them to common sense scrutiny.[1]

AARON WILDAVSKY'S "CHOOSING PREFERENCES BY CONSTRUCTING INSTITUTIONS…"

The title "Choosing Preferences by Constructing Institutions" (p.3) is the first problem. One cannot choose preferences; one has a preference or one chooses, but not both; this is tautological.

The amorphous nature of culture as a concept does not lend itself as a tool for social science inquiry. This is precisely why social scientists in the past have stayed away from culture as a tool for analysis. According to Huntington (1987:23).

the concept of culture is a tricky one in social science because it is both easy and unsatisfying to use. It is easy (and also dangerous) to use because it is in some sense, a residual category. …Cultural explanations are thus often imprecise or tautological or both, at the extreme coming down to a more sophisticated rendering of "the French are like that!" On the other hand, cultural explanations are also unsatisfying for a social scientist because they run counter to the social scientist's proclivity to generalize. They do not explain consequences in terms of relationships among universal variables…They tend, instead to speak in particulars peculiar to specific cultural entities (p. 23).

With Huntington's explanation of culture in mind, let us continue with Wildavsky's work. According to Wildavsky, preferences come from the most ubiquitous human activity: living with other people. Support for and opposition to different ways of life, the shared values legitimating social relations (here called cultures) are the generators of diverse preferences (Wildavsky, 1987:3). In short, culture is the generator of diverse preferences. But what is culture?

The Webster Dictionary definition of culture is: *the total pattern of human behavior and its products embodied in thought, speech action and artifacts and dependent upon man's capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations through the use of tools, language and systems of abstract thought.*

By the definition above, the use of culture to explain human action is not helpful in determining specifically why that action was taken instead of others. According to the UNESCO Declaration of 2001, culture "*should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value*

systems, traditions and beliefs." What constitutes culture then is the amalgamation of social practices, beliefs, and traditions that shape the outlook of the person. Since culture encompasses all human actions, including what Wildavsky calls preference formation, for which we prefer the simpler word, "choice," its use to explain human actions on the surface seems sound; but on close scrutiny, becomes tautological: a particular action was taken because of culture or is it the culture that made him take the action?[2]

We have already encountered a fundamental conflict in our discussion of cultural theory just by what Huntington and Wildavsky say. The two assertions are almost in opposition to each other. By the end of this discourse, we should either agree with Huntington or Wildavsky, but not both.

Any tool used to explain causation is the independent variable in that analysis. The results of causation, whether we call it effect, preference formation, choice, or human action, become the dependent variable. Since culture is all encompassing - language, thought, speech, artifacts, tools etc., which aspects of it is at work at a given time when a choice has to be made? Common sense dictates that combinations of these components are at work, but which ones? Since it is impossible to determine which components are at work, social scientists attempt to isolate some of these components in a given situation in order to narrow the scope of possibilities and thereby get a small handle on the underlying component of culture which is at work in that particular situation. This may be in terms of psychology, immediate self-gratification, gender, religion, etc. Even in this narrow scope, the explanation of the action should always be qualified by other unknown factors. Since culture can explain everything in a given society, it explains nothing. That is not to say that cultural explanations are useless. Indeed, culture can be used to predict certain broad generalizations when dealing with ethnic groups, nations, or in some cases geographic regions. However, the use of culture as a tool of analysis for intra-cultural action becomes so broad and amorphous that it cannot be used to establish causality and therefore loses its predictive potential.

According to Wildavsky, since the choice made in a given situation can be explained by culture, "choice" is equivalent to the "effect" and "culture" is equivalent to "cause" in a causation analysis. One can clearly see that the cause and the effect are both shaped by culture. The dependent variable is directly shaped by the independent variable, which under normal circumstance would show causation. But when we consider that all human actions are shaped by culture, then using culture and choice as cause and effect is like using culture and the result of culture as cause and effect. But the result of culture is shaped by culture! Obviously, this is not very helpful.

Culture as an explanatory tool becomes important when dealing with national, ethnic, or regional comparisons. Here, there can exist a clear and consistent trait that is peculiar to one group and not others. This possibility is what allows us to describe a "cultural area" in geography, for example. In everyday usage, cultural area is defined as "a contiguous geographic area comprising a number of societies that possess the same or similar traits or that share a dominant cultural orientation" (Webster Dictionary). Another way of looking at the problematic nature of culture as an explanatory tool is to consider the word "trait." Since one's traits are defined by one's culture, to say "cultural trait," is tautological. In fact "cultural trait" means trait. We can see clearly that the dependent variable is the same, or part of the independent variable.

PREFERENCES ARE ENDOGENOUS, NOT EXOGENOUS

According to Wildavsky (1987:5):

Cultural theory is based on the premise that preferences are endogenous - internal to organizations-so that they emerge from social interaction in defending or opposing different ways of life….When choices are not completely controlled by conditions (cultural theory holds), people discover their preferences by evaluating how their past choices have strengthened or weakened…their way of life. Put plainly, people decide for or against existing authority. They construct their culture in the process of decision making. Their continuing reinforcement, modification, and rejection of existing power relationships teaches them what to prefer (Wildavsky, 1987:5).

Analysis of Wildavsky's assertions above will show the general weakness of cultural theory. The assertions above do not explain any further for social scientists or the man on the street what culture theory is; it is simply a restatement of the definition of culture in everyday usage. By the definition of culture and by its dynamics, though culture evolves through people, people do not construct culture; culture constructs people! That is why Robinson Crusoe cannot be said to have had a culture on the island. One person's proclivities are called habits, personality, or character, not culture. Culture is an amalgamation of many different social forces, experiences, and heritage passed on from generation to generation in a given group. The thought processes at work during decision making is the manifestation of one's cultural mold, together with other factors such as self-interests, experience, and the importance of the issue at hand, which by itself demands other human considerations. In the discussion of Bakhtins's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* Caryl Emerson writes:

Bakhtin would say, therefore, that we evolve the

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[2] For the same problem with cultural theory, see Elkins and Simeon's paper "A Cause in Search of Its Effects, or What Does Political Culture Explain" (Comparative Politics, January, 1979).

mechanisms to express that which our environment makes available for us to experience. At any given time the fit between self and society may not be perfect, indeed cannot be perfect, but the mechanisms are always present to engage self and society in dialogue. In such a model of reality, there is no room for - and perhaps no conceptual possibility of - an independent unconscious. (Emerson, 1983).

As expounded above, cultural mold is what gives us the primordial traits of standards of social relations and sets parameters for human behavior and expectations. This primordial trait may vary slightly from society to society, but it is the beginning point in any decision making. This dimension of cultural mold is what gives a group, a nation, or region, a certain orientation and outlook different from others. When experiences, self-interests, and other personal or special factors are brought to bear, there results a range of choices that differentiate one individual's choice from another, even though they may come from the same culture.

Illiteracy, ignorance, poverty, and perhaps a heavy dose of prejudice have given different groups certain negative dispensations towards others. In Ghanaian society, these negative stereotypes are seldom dealt with. While many in the southern part of Ghana look upon Northerners as backward, many Northerners consider the Asantes[3] especially as cheats and arrogant. Within the Northern group, some tribes are seen as thieves, while others have come to assume a certain sense of superiority over their neighbors. Many in Brong Ahafo consider women from Nkoranza as "men stealers." The insinuation is that the Nkoranza women know how to make their husbands happy. Here, what should have been a positive attribute is turned negative by prejudice. The list goes on. The man on the street may indulge in this situation of mutual animosity and prejudice, but the social scientist cannot make such broad generalization born of ignorance. While it may be true that some of these attributes exist in particular groups, many who make such statements have friends from these same groups who do not show the negative attributes. In addition, how do we explain the underlying cause of the negative attributes even if they were true? Which part of the group's culture produces these negative stereotypes? Applying the rigorous standards of social science may reveal that lack of education alone is the cause of such behavior. Education, as we know is not an attributes of culture, it may enhance culture!

DERIVING PREFERENCES FROM CULTURE: FOUR WAYS OF LIFE

Cultural theory is based on the axiom that what matters

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[3] The Asantes of Ghana are part of the Akan group which make up about two thirds of the population of Ghana. "Ashanti"- the anglicized version of Asante sometimes used to refer to the land or people who originally migrated from the north-western part of the Niger River in West Africa.

most to people is their relationships with other people and other people's relationships with them…An act is culturally rational, therefore, if it supports one's way of life (Wildavsky, 1987: 5-6)

We agree with Wildavsky's assertion that what matters to people is their relationships with other people, but not just anybody. What matters to people is their relationships with certain other people who for one reason or another are more important in that person's life. These may include family, friends, acquaintances, etc. The rationality and socialization of human beings equip us with the tools to adhere to certain minimum standard of human expectations and behavior, which allows us to relate to total strangers with decency. This is what affords human beings dignity. To assert that an act is culturally rational if it supports one's way of life, is to claim that there are no human standards. Granted, certain localized acts may seem strange and irrational to outsiders, while perfectly normal and rational to the actors. Often, such acts are not critical for that group's survival. It may merely be a variation of certain human actions based on those groups available resources for addressing a particular issue, or a practice created by certain important personalities in the group, such as high priest or king, in a bid to force certain orientation on the group, or simply an act born of ignorance which still persists. To go from that to a generalization of all acts, is to presume that all acts are socially acceptable if they support one's way of life. A criminal act, for example, may support one's way of life, but cannot be said to be culturally rational. An altruistic act though culturally rational cannot be said to support a way of life, since the actor may indeed pay with his or her life. Besides, cultural rationality applies to groups not individuals. Individuals may be cultured, but only groups have culture. While it would make little sense to attribute a man's actions on the streets of New York to culture, especially if one is trying to understand why a certain action was taken, it will make perfect sense to explain certain actions by groups in New York by culture. In the example above, the attempt to explain certain human actions solely based on one's culture sets a dangerous precedence which at best breeds prejudice and all its resultant vices.

In dealing with his four models of culture, Wildavsky makes several assertions that need commenting on. He states: Though we can imagine an infinite number of potential cultures, only a relatively small number…are filled with human activity; the rest are deserted…The dimensions of cultural theory are based on answers to two questions: Who am I? And what shall I do? (Wildavsky, 1987:6)

Culture is by definition a human activity. A culture devoid of human activity cannot be called culture unless we are talking about culture, say, in biological terms. It is interesting to note how the American culture has shaped Wildavsky to frame his dimensions of cultural theory in individualistic terms, even in dealing with a group oriented concept such as culture. When an infant

becomes self conscious, it is most likely to be in the company of others. Why is the question not, who are we, and why are we here? Obviously, the "we" question would arrive at a different answer from Wildavsky's.

The claim that, *cultural theory may be distinguished by a necessity theorem: conflict among cultures is a precondition of cultural identity. It is the differences and distances from others that define one's own cultural identity"* (Wildavsky, 1987:7), is without foundation. Here, Wildavsky is engaged in "ad hoc theorizing:" building a theory by grabbing statements that seem to support his position at any given time. Social scientists should be careful not to fall for "theories" of mankind based solely on particular examples found only in certain localities. Awareness of ethnocentrism is one of the first standards imbued into social scientists in their early development in the field. The foundation of a good theory is well defined in the beginning of the inquiry, which sets parameters for the scope and applicability of the theory. What then follows are explanations, elaborations, and affirmations, or lack thereof. What Wildavsky is doing is building the theory as he goes along. As has been shown, the use of culture as an explanatory tool is problematic to start with, to add these assertions and unsubstantiated theorems further complicates the matter.

Conflict among cultures may arise from differences of outlook among groups, which further exacerbates other differences among them. The sharpening of differences may indeed make one more aware of his or her own outlook vis-a-vis outsiders. To leap to the conclusion that conflict, therefore, is a precondition for one's cultural identity is not only fallacious but dangerous. Conflict between two groups is only an indication of disagreement on an issue or several issues between them. This in itself in no way defines the identity of any of the groups. It only indicates the positions of the groups on that particular issue. A land dispute between two groups may have little to do with culture and a lot to do with greed. It is true that sometimes it is helpful to describe something by first describing what it is not. However, since human beings share certain traits, simply for being human, and since there are several variations of human conduct, describing what one is not, does not necessarily describes what one is. We wonder how a conflict between say, Britain and Argentina defines the cultural identity of both. Here, the conflict itself may be mitigated by other circumstances, not culture. If Britain did not have the military force to oppose Argentina, the conflict between them would have taken a different form, most likely negotiations, and the Falkland Islands may be called Malvinas today. If Argentina did not have a military government, the conflict may not have arisen at all.

Groups may be separated by language, history, and distance and still share certain fundamental beliefs that make the cultures close on certain core values. For example, the Asantes of Ghana and the Navajo Indians share a common cultural value in terms of deference to age, reverence for their ancestors, and kingship arrangements. Both societies are matrilineal, which dictates that everyone in the kingship group is responsible for everyone else. This common cultural attribute makes the Asante spiritual and social outlook very similar to that of Navajo even though the two cultures are separated by thousands of miles of ocean. Surely, there are several such examples to be found elsewhere contrary to Wildavsky's claim.

The pervasiveness of the adversarial system which has created the "us versus them" mentality in all walks of American life rears up its ugly head even in such intellectual exercise such as this. Wildavsky's statement that conflict among cultures is a precondition for one's identity is quite profound. Such an outlook perpetuates divisions not only on the inter-cultural level but intra-cultural as well. On the inter-cultural level, this attitude justifies certain national actions that have been branded imperialistic. America's cold-war actions in many developing nations are examples. On the intra-cultural level, this is manifested in America in terms of Republicans versus Democrats, males versus females, heterosexuals versus homosexuals, Blacks versus Jews, and white males versus everybody else. This outlook brings about social division instead of unity.

"PREFERENCES NEED NO INFERENCES"

Wildavsky asks the question: *How does the social filter enable people who possess only inches of facts to generate miles of preferences? What is it about culture that makes them the kind of theories that ordinary folk can use to figure out their preferences? The ability of people to know what they prefer without knowing much else lies at the crux of understanding preference formation….Preferences can and do come sideways, from identification, experiences, and conversions* (Wildavsky, 1987:8)

As has been shown by the definition of culture and also by our own experiences, human beings, through socialization, experience, education, upbringing, etc., at any given time possess stores of information, conscious and unconscious which are brought to bear in any decision making process. Even with these tools, we do not always know what we want. For example, sometimes we may buy something only to return or exchange it later not because it is defective, but because we do not like the color, shape, or simply do not like it. And what about falling head over heels in love, get married, only to be divorced soon thereafter? The dynamics of choice is not simple enough to allow for the kind of study Wildavsky and others want to undertake. Granted, under certain conditions, certain human actions can be predicted by knowing certain information about them. But this hardly makes cultural studies scientific. Just about any situation one can think of can be predicted to some extent if

certain information is available. Using culture to explain causation is akin to saying, there is a dog, when one hears a bark. Though one may be alerted to the existent of a dog nearby, this is not an explanation, but a restatement of the obvious, since no other domestic animal barks. Just hearing the bark does not tell us why the dog is barking or who it is barking at. It may be barking at a person, a rabbit, another dog, or simply alerting its owner that it is hungry or cold. For some people, making a choice depends on the issue at hand. For some, it is a matter of copying others whose judgment in the past has been helpful to them. For others, it is a matter of picking without thought, an arbitrary act as in "inni, mini, myni, mo!" For yet others, it is a process whereby certain psychological orientation based on experience, personal and otherwise, coupled with socialization and enlightened self-interest are brought to bear. And what about factors such as kingship ties, age, race, gender, etc? People do not use culture theory to figure out their preferences as claimed by Wildavsky. Cultural theorists are trying to use preference formation to figure out culture theory, instead of the other way around! As has been established in this paper, the tools for preference formation are built into human life, some fixed, others forever changing. Even the ones we think are fixed are to some extent dependant on the issue, time, and place.

What does political culture mean? What does it mean, for example, to say "the political culture of Republicans?" Such a statement is a broad description of the majority of Republicans, limited to political categorization only in terms of differentiating Republicans from other groups such as Democrats and Independents. Though this categorization may be clear to Americans, most outsiders who are not Western Europeans would not find it immediately useful as a gauge for political division. Besides, do all Republicans behave alike? How does one become affiliated with a political group? Is it the same process involved, say, in buying a shoe, or is it a different process altogether? Though both are acts of choice, the act of political affiliation demands consideration of more intense factors than buying a shoe. The factors involved in buying a shoe may include the following: price, leather or synthetic, color, size, style, and comfort. These are all personal preferences, which are not very difficult to make. That is why we do not spend hours in a shoe store. Besides, if we do not like it, we can take it back, or give it away. The thought process involved with political affiliation is more demanding than that. This may involve parental influence, experience, religion, gender, race, income level, education, sexual orientation, locality, and an approximate convergence of the political party's position on certain key issues and ones own interests.

Analysis of how one makes political choices shows that it is a complicated matter, sometimes impossible to pinpoint the exact factors that go into the making of the choice. For example, if a person is raised to believe that

he is where he is because he worked hard, or even if he inherited assets from grandpa, the idea that grandpa worked hard is by inheritance transferred to him. Such a person would likely have at the core of his political ideology, the idea that hard work is the key to success, and is likely to oppose any remedial program, and support limited government intervention in society. It is fairly reasonable to characterize many Republicans in America with such an outlook. Having said that, how do we explain their actions? Is it because of their upbringing, personal experiences, and interests, or is it because they are Republicans? If we answer that it is because they are Republicans, the next question is why do Republicans act that way? Do we then fall back on their upbringing or personal experience? Which part of their personal experience and upbringing? Is it the fact that they worked hard and had a hard time growing up? In that case most Black Americans should be Republicans. Or is it the fact that they had it easy? In that case Republicans should not be any different from others. How then do we use culture to explain how two people, born of the same parents, growing up in the same household, and privy to the same developmental information and orientation, end up, one Republican, one Democrat?

CONCLUSION

How do we use culture to explain choice? Impossible, except where one is dealing with cross-cultural comparisons. This is because culture encompasses all human actions, that is why "culture trait" means trait; it is the culture that gives the trait and at the same time the trait describes the culture's orientation. To finally put to rest what has been called culture theory, for which we call "cultural elaboration," the following metaphor will suffice.

Using culture to explain causation is like telling a mechanic that your car would not start. Though useful information, indicating to the mechanic the general condition of the car, this information does very little in terms of helping the mechanic diagnose the problem. If that information was not given by the customer, that would have been the first and easy information he would have found out by simply turning on the ignition.

Likewise, cultural explanations are only generalizations of certain group pre-dispositions, not explanations that can be used to predict future actions. In the car example above, the problem may be from several sources. It may be an electrical problem. If it is, is it the battery, or coil, or spark plugs, or the computer, a fuse, bad contact, distributor, or a short in a wire, etc? It may be a fuel problem. If it is, is it the fuel pump, relay, out of gas, kink in the gas line? If it is an older car, is it the carburetor? If it is the carburetor, is it the float, spindle, or bad diaphragm? If it is a newer car, is it the injectors, throttle sensor, or injection pump? After all this trouble, it may

turn out that the catalytic converter is stopped up, or the engine is locked up. Telling the mechanic the car will not start is a description of the symptom, not a diagnosis of the problem.

Cultural explanations are tools for approximations and generalizations not precision and predictions. The narrowing down of possibilities as found in the case of the car is what will help us come up with reasons why and how human beings make certain choices; that is, if such a feat is at all possible.

In addition to the parts mentioned in the car analogy, there are several large and small parts that work together to make a car run. So it is with culture. The various parts of human development are so intricately linked and complicated that it becomes virtually impossible at any given time to isolate certain components of one's culture in order to identify specifically how and why a particular choice was made. Asking the question Wildavsky asks: "what is it about cultures that makes them the kind of theories that ordinary folk can use to figure out their preferences," is like asking what is it about a car that makes it able to move from point A to B?

First, a car that is not designed to move from point A to B is not a car. By definition, that is what a car is supposed to do. Otherwise it is just a metal enclosure, perhaps a small noisy metal home? A human being deprived of culture ceases to be human. Now, if one asks, what makes the car go, what would the answer be? Is it the tires, electrical system, transmission, gasoline, oil, axles, or perhaps the engine? Which parts of the engine? I would not bother going into the many parts in the engine that work together to make it run. Even if we consider the engine as one unit, that alone will not make the car run. It takes all the parts, coordinated in a specific way for the car to move from point A to B. So it is with human beings, if we make culture analogous to the engine of a car, for which the many components cannot be isolated or identified as the specific cause for a choice, that alone cannot be used to explain why one action was taken instead of another. If this were the case, people in the same culture should have similar preferences, and there would be no need to talk about intra-cultural differences - Republicans versus Democrats for example, within the American political culture or NDC versus NPP among the Asantes in the Ghanaian political culture.

The dynamics of "preference formation" is a bit more complicated than what Wildavsky asserts. Like a car, it takes more than just the engine to work. To come to a particular choice, it takes the many components and dynamism of culture, experience-personal and otherwise, education, upbringing, religion, lifestyle, self-interests, gender, race, age, etc. How these various components work together in making a choice is impossible to determine.

If Wildavsky had bothered to operationalize some of his broad concepts such as "identifications," "experiences,"

and "conversions," he would quickly have realized that these concepts are not necessarily independent of each other; they are directly shaped by culture. Once again, the dependent variable is a subset of the independent variable. Causality under these terms cannot be established. Anthropologists are free to use culture theory because in that field, simple narrative and descriptions will suffice in many instances. In addition, it must be stated that culture is not static; it is weighted and directed by many social forces. Culture theory simply does not stand up to the methodological scrutiny and rigors of social science.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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