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Empirical Power of Conceptual
Transformation"

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THE POLITICAL CULTURE CONCEPT:
THE EMPIRICAL POWER OF CONCEPTUAL TRANSFORMATION*

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ABSTRACT

The concept of a political culture is having a second life. Its first, associated with development studies and the behaviorist revolution of the 1950s and 1960s, faded with the decline of modernization theory. Its recent revival is among cultural and social historians influenced by anthropology, linguistics, and European social theory. Political scientists, political psychologists, and sociologists are conspicuously absent from this company. There is thus a worrisome lack of reflection on the connection between the two lives of the concept. But it is necessary to recall and explain the problems of the previous approach to prevent their repetition. It is argued here that the reductionism characteristic of the first life derived from sociology's early rejection of culture as a means to *sociological knowledge*. Yet because the new political culture concept insists on the autonomy of culture from society, it reproduces some of the same problems of the previous one--especially the binary opposition between culture and society. The untapped challenge for the new is epistemological; the concept of a political culture can move us beyond the society versus culture dichotomy supported by both the old and the new versions of the term. This paper presents the old and the new concepts of political culture and explores of the reasons for the failure of the first usage and for both the fruits and the limitations of the second. Historical studies of the political culture of property, citizenship-rights, and social science knowledge is examined to demonstrate the empirical power of conceptual transformation.

Margaret R. Somers

Political culture is a newly rejuvenated concept with a shady past. In between its new and old lives, many hoped the term was moribund. But its new incarnation is so energetic, its new applications so intellectually fruitful--and so seemingly unrelated to its previous life--that there seems to be little concern about its less than noteworthy past. Indeed there is an almost complete lack of reflection on the relationship, if any, between the two lives.1 Even in the now thriving subfield of the sociology of culture when political culture appears in its new usage, it is rarely with any explicit discussion of its history. This dissociation from the past is not surprising. Political culture's past life was almost exclusively associated with development studies and the behaviorist revolution of the 1950s and 1960s. But political scientists, political psychologists, and sociologists, are conspicuously absent from its revival among cultural and social historians, who are in turn primarily influenced by anthropology, linguistics, and literary theory.2 Given that few in this latter group are hardly likely to be acquainted with the former, it is not surprising that they fail to discuss political culture in its previous incarnation.3

But forgetting often proves a lost opportunity. For one thing, the success of a new theory often lies in its ability to account for the failures of the previous ones (MacIntyre 1980). The ability to recall the problems of the previous political culture approach permits insights into differences and similarities between the concept's two lives. Such powers of recollection will not only help us to prevent the reproduction of prior mistakes but also increase the probability of a richer analysis. In this line of reasoning, the three purposes of this paper are to examine the old and the new concepts of political culture, explicate the reasons for the failure of the first usage and explore both the fruits and the limits of the second, and to demonstrate through an historical case--the political culture of property-- just how much untapped potential for social analysis the revived concept still holds.

Political Culture as an Analytic Category

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1 . Alexander (1988a,1988b,1990) and Calhoun (1990) are important exceptions.
2 . Important exceptions include those few political scientists who have either returned to or have come anew to the political culture concept from the recent perspective. See especially Laitin (1986, 1988), Wildavsky (1987), Thompson,et.al. (1990), Eckstein (1988), Anderson (1991), Inglehart (1988)
3 . For examples of the new usage in history see Eley (1990a,1990b), Hunt (1988,1989a,1989b), Sewell (1990); in anthropology see Dirks (1990), Kertzer (1988).

Phase I (1950s-1960s): The political culture concept was first born out of an attempt to grapple with the towering problem that has haunted the social sciences since their inception: how can a systemically-conceived social structure epistemologically accommodate meaningful human action? Or, how is moral agency reproduced within social systems? Political analysis in particular has long been especially intractable to a solution to the balance between cultural interpretation and social explanation. Perhaps more than most social processes it is political ones, such as revolutions, that tend to involve seemingly abstract macro-structural phenomena (wars, depressions, industrialization) as well as social actions to which humans assign meaning.

The agenda for defining this balance with a functionalist tint was set when Kroeber and Parsons (1958) argued for the necessity of distinguishing between culture and society in a particular manner.4 Whereas the latter should refer to the system of interaction among individuals and collectivities, culture should only address "values, ideas and other symbolic-meaningful systems" (pp. 582-83). Taking up the dilemma of how moral action can co-exist with a law-driven social system, Parsons particularly argued that a sociological theory needed to attribute meaning as well as instrumentality to action. To this end he developed his famous tri-partite schema which analytically differentiated among three systems: the social, the cultural, and the psychological. Furthermore, Parsons argued that these analytic distinctions were evidence that all social interactions included dimensions of all three--*meaningful* referencing to the cultural system, indisputable rootedness in the social system, and causal influence from psychological motivations (Parsons and Shils 1951).

This was an enormous move forward for the social sciences; it reflected Parsons' struggle to overcome the prevailing reductionism of the social science approach to culture and meaning. In moving away from E.B. Tylor's then reigning anthropological definition of culture as all human practices beyond the biological, Parsons was taking the first definitive step to what sociologists shortly thereafter began to call a "normative theory of culture"--so-called because it introduced ideals and meaning into social action (Jaeger and Selznick 1964). Parsons, however, then made a consequential decision in his approach to culture-- one which reflected his principal epistemological worry over the appropriate foundations for sociological knowledge. He argued that while cultural codes and

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4 . This and the following paragraphs on Parsons are enormously indebted to Alexander's important recent contribution to this topic (1990).

symbolic systems are useful foundations for art and philosophy, they *cannot be used to ground the conditions for sociological knowledge.* For concrete sociological explanation and analysis the exploration of cultural codes and meanings could contribute to social knowledge *only* by being transposed from analytically autonomous symbols to socially institutionalized norms and, hence, internalized into social values. Parsons concluded that sociology should thus limit its research on culture to the social system's processes of *values* and *norms.* This shift of emphasis from the analytic autonomy of culture to its social psychological reduction was an unfortunate move for Parsons (Alexander 1990, p. 5) and for sociology. The tremendous advances in the Parsonian attention to culture were canceled out with one stroke--ironically, the same stroke he had used to define a sociology of culture in the first place. If a conception of culture was to contribute to and indeed *count as social knowledge,* Parsons argued that it would need to be *attached to the subjectivities of individuals and collectivities.* Without this, he saw cultural systems as merely free-floating entities ultimately outside of sociological analysis.

In a single move the Parsonian paradigm gave the culture concept the *promise* of a central place in social analysis but only a functional role in the social system. This allowed Parsons to effectively address the Hobbesian question that drove the substantive research of his life: how and why do societies hold together; how and why do they fall apart or enter into periods of instability (Parsons 1967)?. Perhaps more significantly, though, the shift undermined the possibility of a non-reductionist cultural sociology. It excluded cultural analysis from the legitimate realm of *sociological knowledge.*

This approach to culture was also reproduced in its application to political processes. Following Parsons social scientists likewise used the concept of political culture to indicate the "subjective feelings, attitudes, and consequent behaviors" believed to characterize individual and collective "political orientations"--that is values--across a political system (Rosenbaum 1975, p.4). A political culture congealed the "underlying psychological forces" believed to shape much of civic life. If political values were considered to be the source of political behavior, political culture was seen as a window onto deeper understanding of numerous political events and processes--from coups and revolutions in Africa and Latin America, to Protestant and Catholic civil war in Northern Ireland.5 In applying the concept,

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5 . Among the most well-known classics of the period for political sociology are Almond and Powell (1966), Almond and Verba (1963), Banfield (1965), Black (1966), Deutsch and Foltz (1963),

social scientists specified its dimensions to follow a continuum from "integrated" to "disintegrated." This represented the degree to which "most people" have "similar, or compatible, political culture orientations" which are "congenial" to their political institutions. Congenial values and orientations were used to explain degrees of accommodation to a society's stability on the one end, while disruptive behavior (such as strikes and critical protest against government actions) was held to be the result of dysfunctional values on the other (Almond and Verba 1963; Pye 1966; Pye and Verba 1965). In combination these core elements of a political culture were perceived to be the fundamental variables to explain "the creation and maintenance of a society's fundamental political order" (Rosenbaum 1975, p. 6).6

But where did political values come from and how could variations in such values be explained? While numerous *mediating* factors were presented as partial answers (e.g. political socialization and psychological internalization), the basic social science claim was that political culture was a product *not* of the cultural but of the *social* system. In one of the classics of this genre, Smelser (1959) posits that early nineteenth-century English working-class social movements were the result of a transitional conflict between the "traditional" values attached to a traditional domestic artisanal division of labour, and the alienating "role strain" produced by conflicts over new values demanded by the industrial factory labour process. Similarly, Lipset (1967) suggests that "extremist" French trade unions were the result of the particularistic values of French employers (attached to a pre-modern economic system) which "lagged behind" the necessary universalist values necessary to modern capitalist markets.7 The only epistemological status acceded to the actual codes and meanings of a political culture was the tendency to

Eckstein (1964), Lipset (1963), Pye (1966), Pye and Verba (1965), Smelser (1959), Verba and Nie (1973).

6   In the words of one of the leading political scientists of the day, political culture refers to the "attitudes, beliefs and sentiments that give order and meaning to the political process and provide the underlying assumptions and rules that govern behavior" (Pye 1966, pp. 104—5). These succinct definitions also explain the concentrated and extensive research attention paid to the political culture concept in the decades of the late 1950's, 1960's and early 1970's. Research into political culture was intended to be a window into the sources of massive political instability and the "pervasive political violence in the modern world" that seemed to characterize the problems of nation building in the postcolonial world. Introductory textbooks to the subject begin by documenting everything from the number of successful coups in Latin America, Central Africa, Middle Eastern and West African nations—in one case, between 1945 and 1975—to the internal ethnic battles and disputes in countries ranging from Greece to Ireland to Canada (See, for example, Rosenbaum 1975, Ch. 1 and passim).

7 .   Examples can be found in the excellent collection on culture and society by Alexander and Seidman (1990).

argue that "social progress" could be impeded by "backwards" values which lagged behind long after traditional societies had been transformed into modern social systems. According to Banfield's (1965) famous theory, for example, the political culture of southern Italy had values and practices so "morally backwards" that it left the region in no condition to receive the benefits, or take on the responsibilities, of Western economic progress.

It was the conception of a "continuum of political integration," however, that most sharply defines the functionalist political culture concept and locates it within an historical period overwhelmingly concerned with rapid global disequilibrium and political violence. When in the late '60s and '70s a full-scale assault on the paradigm was launched by political scientists and sociologists employing new structural approaches, not surprisingly the political culture concept was one of the first casualties. The idea of political culture had apparently become so tainted by its previous usage that it now appeared to lack redeeming features. In the midst of an explicit search for the causes of political stability in the post-war world of nation-building and decolonization, moreover, it is more plausible that that the fate of the political culture concept was sealed by its utility in addressing what had become the overriding social science concern--one could say obsession--about societal equilibrium and political instability characteristic of the political climate of the 1950s and 1960s.[8] Influenced by various versions of Marxism, Weberian theories of bureaucracy, and the Braudelian *Annales* school, the new structural approaches rejected theories of "backwards" cultures and values as explanations for social change or stability. Instead , the new approaches stressed analyses of structural domination by classes, developed over underdeveloped nations, core nations over periphery ones, states over societies. To the extent that political culture was addressed explicitly in any of the influential structural theories of this period, it was solely for purposes of criticism and rejection.[9] In light of the way in which traditional behaviorist social scientists constructed non-"modern" or non-Western cultural practices as primitive and

8 . The concept was also pegged to a massive research methodology that was cross-national and global in scope, entailing highly quantified survey research techniques. The monumental growth of US research technologies, the majority of which were government-sponsored, was both cause and consequence of this context. US scholars were sent all over the globe to survey world populations in the belief that analyzing and comparing the global data would provide explanatory links between individual attitudes and behaviors and the very survival of political regimes (See especially Almond and Verba 1963 Ch. 1).

9 . Moore (1965), Tilly (1975a,1975b,1978), Tilly et.al (1975), Wallerstein (1974), and Skocpol (1979) were among the most influential critics, each of them offering major alternative paradigms for social change and development.

constraining forces on economic progress, political culture was an idea most critics
of functionalism were happy to abandon.10

Phase II(1970s-1990s): In its rejuvenated form, the new political culture
concept keeps very different company. With the exception of Bellah (1970,1980)
and Tiriyakian (1978,1988) the primary recognition of a revised concept has come
from intellectual and social historians as well as cultural theorists influenced by
European social theorists, philosophers and linguists--notably Saussure and
Foucault--cultural anthropologists, such as Geertz (1973, 1983), Bourdieu (1977)
and Mary Douglas (1966), and such anthropologically-oriented social historians as
E.P. Thompson (1965) and Natalie Davis (1975).11 And even though there are
now many different conceptions of the meaning of political culture, some common
themes can be gathered from the various literatures.

Whereas the Parsonian paradigm used political culture as an aggregate of
subjective values individually held towards the political system and ultimately
generated by the social system, the revisionists see it very differently. They define
culture in both analytic and concrete empirical terms as an autonomous and
contested representational system or form of political association which is
comprised of "rules and codes" in no way reducible to or decipherable through the
social system. Such political practices and discourses have autonomous meanings
and autonomous histories. While they may be seen in part as the accretions of
multiple social acts, they cannot be understood as residing in subjective values

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10 . Barrington Moore's comparative historical analysis of the varying routes to the "modern
world" was the text that set the terms for revisionist scholarship (Moore 1966). Moore
provided a monumental challenge to the antihistorical premises of political culture and
modernization theory--that there exists a single "normal" developmental path to the modern world
and that variations from this pattern are deviant and dysfunctional, rather than alternative routes.
By problematizing variation, rather than assuming deviance or "lags," Moore demonstrated how
comparative historical methodology could be used to address issues of social change and class
analysis to a very different effect than that of modernization theory. Moore's mantle was
handed on in the 1970s to both Wallerstein (1974) and Anderson (1974) with the publication of
the initial volumes in each of their projected multi-volume recastings of the making of the
western capitalist world. Tilly's *Formation* volume (1975) should be seen as the third point in
this early triad of second generation (considering Moore and Thompson as the first generation)
influences on the shape of the historic turn in macrosociology. See Skocpol's (1984) edited
collection on historical sociology for the best summation of these influences.
11 . The most well-known of these include Furet (1981), Sewell (1980), Hunt (1984), Chartier
(1987, 1988, 1991), Lacqueur (1991) and those represented in Hunt's (1989) collection *The New
Cultural History*. There is also a recent small growth of American sociologists using it either
explicitly or implicitly (Alexander 1988b; Collins 1988; Forment 1990; Lamont 1987, 1989;
Somers 1991, 1992; Swidler 1986, 1987; Wuthnow 1987, 1990). In its new incarnation the
political culture concept has only occasionally been defined explicitly, and in these cases by social
historians (Hunt 1989b; Baker 1990; Chartier 1991).

"internalized" in persons. Rather these practices and political discourses exist independently in many forms ranging from legal doctrines, to political or civil "societies" to discursive representations.12 This *analytic* autonomy, in turn allows, even mandates, a central role for culture in contributing to political outcomes. The structuring power of cultural discourses and codes, for example, permits the understanding of political action and the meanings attributed to action to be reconstituted in an entirely different way from those that focus on the "fit" of political values with a social or political system. Identities, rather than interests, become the key theme for understanding action (Pizzorno 1985; Bourdieu 1985; Somers 1986,1992).

Another distinction from the previous usage is that these works question whether it is possible to discover a single meaning in any given cultural practice. Instead the central focus of empirical investigations shifts to an emphasis on how aspects of political culture are *variably* appropriated and utilized, made and remade, and with what effect--usually in the context of different relations of power (Foucault 1982; Chartier 1988). Such an approach leads us to more closely reconfigure the constitutive and, often contested, *intersubjective* meanings embedded in social processes and collective actions without falling into the potential hermeneutic trap of looking for either fully subjective or singular conceptions of meaning--recognizably one of the long-time goals of post-Marxist and post-functionalist social analysis.

Empirically, much of the new work on political culture has focused on the French Revolution via French semiology and Saussurean linguistics. The hallmark of the semiotic approach to culture and meaning was its rejection of the "speech-act" which Saussureans believe to be a voluntarist theory. Instead the semiotic approach emphasizes the internal study of linguistic systems as a relatively coherent system of symbols, meanings, and linguistic practices. Semiotics defines language as a system of signs abstracted from other dimensions of social life and organized by its own internal rules. Social actors who use speech are constrained by these formally independent sign codes and its internal relationships. Once

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12 . See especially Chartier (1988) for a deeply sociological definition of "representations". In recent works on the French Revolution, for example, the range of topics addressed under the rubric of political culture--and thus thought to represent various forms of cultural rules and codes--include ongoing coffee-house associations and reading societies (Chartier 1991); political symbols, festivals, and revolutionary rituals (Ouzuf 1988; Hunt 1984); journalistic techniques; the languages of politics (Furet 1981); Enlightenment categories of thought republican conceptions of Reason (Baker 1990); the daily life of the sans culottes (male and female) and the gender dimensions of republicanism (Landes 1988).

these cultural codes have been deciphered, the social analyst can explore how real social actors use them in any empirical situation. The result is an analysis of social process that only has intelligibility in the context of its cultural mediation (Saussure 1964, [1916]; Alexander and Seidman 1990). Saussure did not limit his argument to linguistic systems, however; he argued forcefully that his semiotic approach applied equally to social life as to language. Thus social actions do not merely interact with an intersubjective cultural system of language they can themselves be conceived as intersubjective cultural systems with internal codes, relationships, and social discourses. It is the influence of this Saussurian *social* semiotics, that can most directly be seen in the French historians' use of political culture.

With semiotics as his intellectual weapon, Francois Furet (1981) launched one of the first and most influential of assaults on the long-reigning Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution. Instead of class struggle, demographics, or deep structures, Furet argued for the autonomy of politics and culture as the driving force behind the causes and consequences of the Revolution. Without using the term political culture explicitly, Furet's semiotic explanation eschewed any form of interest-based analysis. Instead it focused on the impact and meaning of the new democratic republic political language of the revolutionary struggle. Furet thus conceived of political forms in cultural and discursive terms with their own internal systems of logic and relationality rather rely on for explanations ideologies or the behavioral effects of aggregated values.

In *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (1984), Lynn Hunt also modified the use of an autonomous cultural explanation. Although she broadened her use of political culture to stress conflict and the role of revolutionary actors, Hunt, like Furet, insisted that social actions and political outcomes are unintelligible without a decoding of the internal systems of political culture and political forms at play in the revolutionary process. Rejecting any analytic subordination of political culture to either class or state formation, Hunt looked beyond ruling elites and the institutions and policies of governing regimes for sources of popular political consciousness, meaning, and action. Subsequently, the ideology of democratic republicanism was not merely a "vehicle for the rise of capitalism, the rule of notables, or the establishment of a strong central state" (Hunt 1989b, p. 2). By exploring such topics as the icons used in local parades, the changed content of the revolutionary calendar, and the way language facilitated the making of new forms of revolutionary address, Hunt's work

expanded the notion of political culture. All of these, according to Hunt, must be seen as political, and politicizing, forms of life--equally important in making sense of the revolutionary process as are classes and the state (Hunt 1984, 1989b).

Hunt explicitly acknowledges, and her work is especially exemplary for it, the many influences on her work in addition to that of semiology. These include Geertz, Durkheim, Tilly, and Marx. Keith Baker (1982, 1990) and Roger Chartier (1987, 1988, 1991), a third generation *Annaliste* historian, also go beyond semiology. Baker and Chartier both deploy Foucault's (1972a,b, 1977) use of autonomous epistemological systems, and Bourdieu's (1977) linkage between cultural representations and structures of power and stratification, and Habermas'(1989) theory of the public sphere13. The effect of this kind of intellectual recombination is the emergence of a powerful interpretation of the cultural origins of the French revolution. Chartier and Baker have turned on its head, for example, the traditional evaluation of the impact of Enlightenment philosophies' on the revolutionary rupture. By challenging the dichotomization between principles and doctrines on the one side and political and social "realities" on the other, they have shown how both literary forms and reading practices combined with practices of sociability and association joined to create a new political culture. Rather than a set of new ideas merely imposed on a public, it is these new cultural forms and practices--and the relations of power and class that they also embodied--which endowed Enlightenment thought with the different sorts of meanings and impact that it actually had. Baker demonstrates the structuring power not of particular ideas but the "field of political discourse, a set of linguistic patterns and relationships that defined possible actions and utterances and gave them meaning" (Baker 1982, p. 212). Bringing together the social and representational worlds through the political culture concept, Chartier shows how these "discursive associations" played a direct part in challenging the authority of the Old Regime--whether through the democratizing impulses of literary sociability or through the emergence of what Habermas has called the new eighteenth-century public sphere" (Chartier 1991).

An Assessment: Structure, Culture, and Action

The renaissance in the political culture concept is less an overcoming of what was problematic in the functionalist approach than it is a creation of a new way of thinking about the acute difficulty of bringing together structural and cultural/meaningful considerations in studies of political phenomena. It has in fact

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13 . On the value of Habermas's "public sphere" for social analysis see Eley (1989, 1990).

been the eclectic appropriation and revisions of both French semiotics and post-structuralism on the one side, and the post-Parsonian and late Durkheimian work of Geertz (1973, 1983) and Bellah (1970, 1980) that has so enriched the new generation of studies of political culture (Alexander 1988b, 1989, 1990; Collins 1981, 1988; Hunt 1984; Wuthnow 1987, 1990). Both the Parsonian and the now popular rational choice approaches to action are problematic since they empirically incorporate culture only to the extent it can be translated into the subjective values residing in people's hearts or "preferences." Any initial impulse toward understanding the nature and content of a political culture is abandoned by this shift into either a systemically- or an ontologically-constituted subjective meaning. By contrast the new political culture concept allows political representations and practices to exist as independent factors in analysis. There is, furthermore, enormous explanatory value in reclaiming cultural systems as autonomous entities. For autonomy in social analysis detaches political culture from "belonging" to either classes or the state; autonomy allows for variable and contested appropriations by different groups. While it is rather obvious that political culture cannot of itself *act*, it can affect. By existing as something apart from either the economy or the state, a political culture will, when *acted upon,* fundamentally shape the outcome, the meaning, and the very course of political action and social processes. An exploration of the impact of legal doctrine and practices is an example revealing of the sociological power of a political culture approach. Instead of approaching the law as a form of social control or social norms, the new political culture model draws attention to the ways that legal cultures intersect with power relations and, thus, contribute mightily to identity-formation (Somers 1986, 1992).

Revisions in the previous political culture concept, therefore represent two dimensions of fundamental change to the analytic category itself: 1) definitional, and 2) causal. In the first case, the post-Parsonians have completely changed the definition of what exactly constitutes a political culture. Instead of a collection of externalized expressions of subjective values, a political culture is now defined as an external system of representations and practices the meaning of which can only be determined in its empirical interaction with other domains of social life. In the second case, the post-Parsonians have challenged the *a priori* causal relationship of a Parsonian model that defined political culture as a set of values emanating from the minds of individuals which were *de facto* products of the social system and its stages of socio-economic development. By contrast, the new political

cultures are not "caused" by the social structure but develop and change on the basis of their own internal rules and processes--as well in historical interaction with other domains of social life.

As the cases above indicate, the results of these dual two changes have been far-reaching for the nature of social and political analysis. When it comes to explaining political outcomes the consequences of these revisions are: 1) a relative abandoning of social structures whether conceived as classes, the state, or stages of development (those allegedly primary domains of social life to which culture was so long subordinated) in favor of explanatory attention focused on previously neglected phenomena such as the conceptual languages of politics, more complex forms of power and empowerment embodied in public and civil associations, the construction of identities through cultural practices rather than "interests," and the rites and rituals of public social life; and 2) an abandoning of the *a priori* causal assumption that (even if they may influence or "mediate" the outcome of social processes) these cultural phenomena are themselves explained by deeper structures and thus primary social determination cannot be attributed to them, in favor of the robust assertion that an equal, indeed co-determining power, must be attributed to both cultures and social structures.

It is thus clear that the rejuvenated version of political culture bears little or no resemblance to its predecessor. Not only does the change challenge the traditional answers to the question--what is the "cause" of cultural phenomena as an object of reality--it also points to entirely new ways of analyzing political and social life as a whole. As such, the shift is likely to make it difficult to return to a reductionist conception of culture as an epiphenomenon. At the same time, however, following Jeffrey Alexander's comments about cultural sociology in general, this is also somewhat ironic. It is, after all, Durkheim who is one of the most significant influences on both the new and the Parsonian usages. In the case of the former political culture concept, it was the early Durkheim (*Suicide, Rules of the Sociological Method, The Division of Labour*) while for the latter, it is the Durkheim of the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. (Alexander 1989).14 The

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14 . Alexander (1989, p.159) also reminds us that Parsons' neglect of the later Durkheim's (1965 1912) insistence on the social importance of autonomous cultural systems was not an oversight but an explicit rejection. In light of this common heritage, it should also not be surprising to recognize a slight Parsonian influence on the revived usage. Although a formidable critic as well, Clifford Geertz--one of the three or four most significant influences on the development of the new culture concept--was a student of Parsons who forged his ideas in a simultaneous appropriation and revision of Parsons (1963, 1973). He did this by bringing autonomous meaning to cultural systems and "webs of signification" as such without altogether

wide extension of the Durkheimian understanding of ritual as an autonomous sociological category has been especially influential among American sociologists, and a renewed appreciation of political ritual is probably that which sociologists most commonly associate with the new political culture concept.15 The strength of these analyses is in their taking seriously Durkheim's belief that religious ritual and sacred/profane classifications were general epistemological categories equally applicable to modern social analysis of politics and culture as to primitive religions. A recent collection of sociological studies explaining such a range of concerns from gender relations to mass strikes to Watergate bears this out (Alexander 1988).

At the same time, however, there is a danger in too singular an association of the new political culture concept with ritual alone, indeed in too strong an inclination for cultural sociology to claim an absolute autonomy from social structure, "material life", or economics. *The danger is that this sets up a false dichotomy and risks obscuring what is potentially the greatest promise in the new work--namely, its contribution to the urgent task of abandoning the false distinctions and binary oppositions between culture and society, the ideal and the material, discourse and structure.* The real potential of the new concept is that it could push us to free the categories of social analysis from these fruitless stalemates which have so long divided the social sciences. But the fulfillment of this promise lies in recognizing political culture as a category of epistemology.

Political Culture as Epistemology:
The Further Promise of a Cultural Sociology

The greatest promise of the new political culture concept is in its capacity to actually challenge those standards of knowledge in social science that explain why cultural or so-called "ideal" constructs have consistently found themselves in a position of being dominated by or reduced to those of society. Indeed unless we push forward on this epistemological promise we will risk reproducing the same perduring hierarchy which enabled Parsons, perhaps inadvertently, to devalue cultural analysis in the first place. For the hierarchicalization of the social over the cultural is neither a function of definition nor of causal theory; rather, it is a product of epistemology.

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abandoning Parsons' initial analytic framework. Skocpol (1985) emphasizes but I believe overstates the degree to which Geertz maintained his Parsonianian in her exchange with William Sewell (1985) over the place of culture and ideology in the French revolution.

15 . Thanks to the long-time efforts of Bellah and Tiryakian as well as the more recent ones of, among others, Alexander, Hunt, Swidler, and Wuthnow the importance of Durkheim's religious sociology for cultural analysis in general, and political cultural analysis in particular, is being acknowledged.

Epistemology, of course, rather than a theory of any single object or process is defined by the discipline of philosophy as the theory of knowledge itself. Given that epistemology is defined as a set of *universal* criteria that transcends the particularities of any given theory or phenomenon, it represents the *foundations* of knowledge. Richard Rorty (1979) in his historical treatise on the development of epistemology in Western thought puts it more ironically: "The desire for a theory of knowledge is a desire for constraint--a desire to find 'foundations' to which one might cling, frameworks beyond which one must not stray, objects which impose themselves, representations which cannot be gainsaid" (p.315). Social science epistemology is the theory of how accurate knowledge in the social sciences is constituted. Because the discipline of philosophy has both defined and appointed to itself the role of ultimate adjudicator on questions of knowledge-standards (and thus on the viability of all other disciplines), the epistemological of the social sciences is a critically important topic and all too neglected by sociologists.

But where exactly does the social science epistemologist search for these criteria of certainty? Surely she cannot go out and re-examine the same social phenomena as a sociologist in order to proclaim, as it were, a "second opinion." This would, after all, simply make philosophers into second rate theorists of social life. The object of study and evaluation for the epistemologist making judgments about the standards of social knowledge studies *representations* of reality. Again Rorty: "To *know* is to *represent* accurately what is outside the mind; so *to understand the possibility and nature of knowledge is to understand the way in which the mind is able to construct such representations.* Philosophy's eternal concern is to be a general theory of representations, a theory which will divide culture up into the areas which represent reality well, those which represent it less well, and those which do not represent it at all (despite their pretense of doing so)" (p. 3, my italics).

Accurate knowledge is thus defined not as "reality" but as the best possible *representation* of reality. Ultimately the epistemologists' hope has always been that thorough evaluations of the accuracy of representations will yield a set of universal criteria that can be called upon to reliably constitute social knowledge. These representational criteria for social knowledge, because they are universal and not culture-bound, are considered to be "natural"--that is, scientific. Thus science emerges center stage in the territory of epistemology: the highest standards for representational social knowledge are defined as part of science. Scientific criteria, accordingly, are not valued because they are uniquely "real".

Rather, it is because science *is the most respected form of representation*; one that gains its respect precisely by being universal, foundational, and beyond the influence of time, place, and culture.16 But now we have a new question: if science is itself a collection of representations of reality, and truth in science is the universal accuracy of these representations of the real, then what are the criteria epistemologists and scientists use to judge the truth and accuracy of these representations? In other words, if science is the touchstone for social knowledge, what are the foundations of science itself? To know that the criteria are those of universality and transhistoricity is still not enough of an answer. The answer does not lie in assertions of truth and accuracy (universality) but in identifying the actual object of scientific representation which provides us with the criteria for universality and truth, and that object is *nature*. Only nature exists outside of time and space. Only nature escapes the fickleness and fortuitousness of culture and history. Only natural representations are believed to be *discovered*--all other representations are *constructed*. For all the disciplines to which epistemology applies, that which is natural, or which functions according to the laws of nature, serves to supply the criteria for valid scientific representations.

Through a seemingly long argument I have arrived at a very simple truth: Nature and the presumed certainty of its regularities are at the epistemological pinnacle of accurate knowledge of the social world. And, quite naturally, all that is not nature--all that which is constructed--is in an epistemologically inferior position. In this hierarchy is to be found the justification for attributing to culture an inferior capacity to produce knowledge of the social world. This is expressed in research through the hierarchy of problematicization--that is, what is to be the problem-to-be-explained or the question-being-asked? Mainstream philosophy (Popper 1954) has discounted the import of question-formation or that which the philosophers call the "context of discovery" in favor of the "context of justification"; the first is considered mere historical curiosity while the latter is the stuff of science (Reichenbach 1947). Yet *question of which categories are problematized for research is perhaps the most significant epistemological feature of social analysis That which is not problematized is, by definition, "given", or natural, and thus in an epistemologically privileged position to that which is not given, but contingent and historical. In the social sciences, of course, only the*

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16 . This, for example, allows both scientists and philosophers to judge the truth of Greek astronomy. Even though in his time and with his technology Aristotle may have seemed right, our universal representational criteria--science--give us the privilege and the power to make transhistorical judgments about truth.

social structure has achieved the status of a natural object which because it is a
social fact is not problematic..

Herein lies the promise--and, if neglected, the risk--of an epistemological
approach to political culture.   First the risk.   In the eagerness to abandon the
long-reigning determinism of social structure and to assert the autonomy of
culture, much of the new cultural sociology has made a consequential decision to
locate "society" (for example, classes and property) on the one side of analysis, and
culture on the other.   But this separation is a mistake for it "frees" social
structures, both political and economic, from the constitutive power of cultural life
altogether. Some cultural scholars have effectively said "good riddance." Others
indicate that this is simply a truce to allow the two approaches to be "separate but
equal." But nothing could be more self-deluding. In the relationship between
culture and society, separate is not equal. Why not? To define culture as a
separate sphere without simultaneously launching a full-scale epistemological
attack on the hierarchical distinction between structural (read material) and
cultural life *is tantamount to reinforcing the privileged place of the social system*
as a natural object. That is to say, the complete separation of the cultural from
the social leaves the latter as the given, and subjects *only* the cultural to
problematization. Unless we begin *to call into question that which is and is not*
considered a "natural object" we will ultimately endorse the "naturalizing" of
society over culture. This has long been the source of cultural reductionism.

The challenge and the promise facing cultural sociology is, thus, to deploy
the political culture concept as an epistemological category. This can best be
carried out through the development of what I have elsewhere called an "historical
epistemologyy" (Somers 1990,forthcoming a). The task of an historical
epistemology is considerably different from merely asserting the autonomy of
culture. The promise of a cultural epistemology using the political culture concept
is that it launches a "foundational" challenge to the privileging of the very
categories and modes of knowledge that are used to make sense of the social world.
At the most immediate level this entails a rejection of the idea that there exists a
logic of social structure and material life that is not itself politically and culturally
constituted.17 But the deeper challenge, indeed that which is necessary before

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17 .   In addition to the work of the great cultural and economic sociologists and anthropologists
Karl Polanyi (1957), Bourdieu (1884), and Sahlins (1975), there are ample models for how this
analysis can be undertaken in the work of a small but growing body of "social economists" or
economic sociologists who explore the political and social construction of markets and economies
(Block 1989; Block and Somers 1984; DiMaggio 1990; DiMaggio and Zukin 1990; Etzioni 1988;

this first claim will be convincing, is to begin to problematize areas of social life heretofore considered "natural objects" and thus in privileged positions over and above historical, agential and cultural practices. To use political culture as an epistemological category is, moreover, to examine the cultural construction of the *categories* of knowledge and of science which we use to understand culture and society.

Here we would do well to pursue the intellectual resources made available by the rootedness of so much of the new cultural sociology in the later works of Durkheim as well as his students, Mauss() and Halbwachs(). For it was Durkheim18 who foreshadowed Foucault's understanding that there are no "natural objects," no universal categories which only need to be "particularized" in any given historical context: "The first logical categories were social categories; the first classes of things were classes of men, into which these things were integrated," (Durkheim and Mauss 1963 [1903], vol. 2, p. 82). These representational categories are what makes the world accessible to us. Durkheim is not suggesting that there is no reality outside of these representations. His argument is that there is no *knowledge* of that world outside of those categories by which we represent that reality. Thus the world *as we know it* is a product of those representations. This in itself does not challenge the epistemological hierarchy by which culture is reduced to a function of material life. For if it is true, as the philosophers claim, that those representations we call scientific are reflections of nature; and if it is also true that for epistemology only scientific representations are truly "true", then it still follows that since only representations of the structural world have achieved the status of *natural* representations, only *they* will have the status of being Truths.

There is only one means, then, to challenge this hierarchy. If we can show that the very definition of what is and is not foundational *is itself a product of culture*--a "social category" rather than a "social fact" to use Durkheim's words against himself--then we will have overturned the epistemological hierarchy which supports the dominating place of society over culture. Why? Because from this viewpoint *all representations are redefined as social categories rather than natural objects* and thus precludes the *a priori* hierarchy of social science domains. As social constructions equally vulnerable to the variations of culture, the question of

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Zelizer 1983, 1987. In addition, see Hirschman 1986, 1984; Granovetter 1985; Swedberg 1987; Bell and Kristol 1981; McCloskey 1985; Sewell 1980, pp. 10-15). The main body of cultural sociologists would do well to take notice.

18 . Thanks to Val Daniel for pointing out that it was actually Pierce before Durkheim.

whether cultural and structural life are to be equally determinative or non-determinative or partially determinative in any given situation will be just that--a question to be investigated, not an overarching assumption. Be they economies, states, markets, symbolic codes, or identities, no aspect of the social world is more "natural" than any other but are, as Chartier puts it "objectifications [representations] that construct an original figure each time" (Chartier 1982, p. 43).

The work of an historical epistemology is therefore *not to claim that all of reality is an "invention" of discourse*. For once in categorical form all aspects of the social world are equally real dimensions of *social* reality: "Even the highest collective representations have existence and are truly what they are only to the extent that they command acts" (Mauss 1927, quoted in Chartier 1988, p. 6). Rather, the work of historical epistemology is to illuminate the *historicity* of those standards we use to distinguish between what is and is not natural in the first place. Those standards, in other words, are themselves the *cultural products* of social and public activities. The term "historical epistemology" is therefore purposefully oxymoronic. It is intended to challenge the assumption that epistemological standards of knowledge are premised on the certainties of nature. It instead points to a way of practicing social research based on the principle that all of our knowledge, our logics, our theories, indeed our very reasoning practices, are indelibly (although obscurely), marked with the signature of culture and time. They are "history-laden."19 The challenge of a cultural and historical epistemology is neither to discover nor invent but to "genealogize" these cultural histories through an appropriation of their construction, resonance, and contestedness over time.20

An historical epistemology thus allows us to question that which is taken to be a priori or axiomatic in social research: the regularities of nature endow epistemology with the standards to judge the conceptual status of different kinds of knowledge of the cultural and the social. An historical epistemology, by contrast, presumes *that epistemologies are themselves cultural and social.* Linking history to epistemology allows us to question the "primordial" distinctions at the heart of all social theory between nature and culture. In a different context Paul Veyne (another progenitor of the Durkheimian legacy) articulates it this way: "to

19 . This phrase is meant to evoke, but also to escape, the constricting Manichean dichotomy between "theory-laden" versus "empiricist/positivist" conceptions of science and social science that frames the terms of controversy among social theorists and philosophers.
20 . Models for this can be seen in work of Hacking 0, Taylor, and MacIntyre

relate the so-called natural objects to the dated and rare practices that objectivate them and to explain these practices, not on the basis of a single moving force [of nature], but on the basis of all the neighboring practices on which they are anchored" (Veyne 1984 [1971]).

That constellation of "neighboring practices" forms what I call a "knowledge culture" (Somers 1989,1990, forthcoming a). This concept emphasizes the historicity of thinking and reasoning practices. It differs from the approach of a sociology of knowledge in that a knowledge culture does not comprise the surrounding "context" in which theories are born and shaped. Nor does it comprise any *particular* set of beliefs, ideologies, or truths. More important than any single type of truth, a knowledge culture spans the spectrum of what can even be conceived of as possible candidates for being problematized as "true-or-false."[21] A knowledge culture is thus a *conceptual and institutional configuration* of historically-feasible thinking and reasoning practices which themselves comprise the *full* possible *spectrum of conceptual and practical possibilities* of a given historical time and space. The historicity of a knowledge culture is constitutive even to those categories and ways of reasoning that we assume to be presuppositional--indeed natural. The fundamental characteristic of a knowledge culture's conceptual spectrum is that it ultimately delimits what is even conceivable in the realms of knowing and explaining.

What does this have to do with the political culture concept? If honing the foundations of epistemology is a public activity, this activity must be part of a political culture. To say that epistemological foundations are firm by virtue of their given knowledge culture is to define thought, judgment and reason not as a private activity of mind (Descartes) but as a public and social activity. Thus to make sense of, let alone challenge, our inherited standards of knowledge about culture and society requires exploring the political culture in which they thrive. When epistemology is itself revealed to be a product of history we can begin to find the weak parts of its foundation, and criticize them accordingly.

We have now come full circle. I have argued that the conceptual dominance of social over cultural life is a product of the prevailing *social naturalism* of our intellectual world which ranks things that are *natural* over those considered "socially constructed." I have also proposed that any abandonment of the social in

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21 . This notion of the difference between the absolute notion of truth and the historical question of what can be conceived within a given epistemological frame as even a question of "true-or-false" originates in Heidegger (1977).

favor of the cultural is an inadequate and risky way of dislodging the epistemologically inferior place that culture has long had in social theory. Rather than "separate but equal," this strategy merely reinforces the hierarchical position of the social. Now non distracted by any cultural "nagging" the social is freer than ever to dominate "in the last instance" the conceptual landscape.22 The work at hand, by contrast, is to deploy the political culture concept to genealogically explore the course and consequences of social naturalism.

Naturalism Unhinged: the Political Culture of Social Science Knowledge

The challenge facing the political culture concept is not new. It dates to the late eighteenth-century when social naturalism first began to emerge as epistemologically supreme. Before that time social thinkers (including Adam Smith) believed society and its productive sphere to be regulated by distinctly *human* characteristics--specifically laws and cultural codes. In a line of thought that can be traced to Aristotle, Smith premised his social and economic theory on the distinction between humans and beasts--*only the practices of humans could serve as the template for analyzing society and social regularities*. He explicitly excluded biological, physical and geographical factors from the realm of legitimate social explanation.23 All of this changed when Malthus and Ricardo discovered the grim reality of social naturalism. As in all social discoveries they discovered the "natural object" of society-as-naturally regulated through the lens of an extraordinary new conceptual grid that would henceforth revolutionize social thought. That grid was an apocryphal allegory about a "society" of goats and dogs on a desert island living in perfect harmony with each other. Counter to prevailing political wisdom, however, the harmonious balance resulted from the *absence* of any state, legal system, or culturally imposed rules. Dubbed the "theorem of the goats and dogs," the allegory was widely popularized by the eighteenth-century statesman/policy-thinker William Townsend in his ponderous public exhortations to repeal Poor Relief for English paupers (1977 [1786]). Townsend's "society" was of course a naturalistic fantasia; "natural laws" were free to harmoniously organize the island *solely* because there were no *unnatural* shackles of laws and cultural constraints.

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22 . Famous phrase from Althusserian reading of Marxism; actually a letter from Engels regarding the relationship between the mode of production and everything else.
23 . This requires a greater stress in the case of Smith: the mistakes of the Physiocrats had alerted him to the dangers of confusing physical nature with man's nature; political economy had to be a human science dealing with that which was "natural to man, not to Nature" (Polanyi 1957, p. 112). And see especially Hont and Ignatieff (1983).

Desperate to understand what they saw was ravaging overpopulation, hunger, and skyrocketing Poor Law taxes, Malthus and Ricardo seized upon the theorem as the answer for nineteenth-century English society. However grim the implications in retrospect, it came as a form of epistemological *liberation* to learn that the laws of society were as *inexorable* as the laws of beasts and nature: "The principle of gravitation is not more certain than the tendency of such laws to change wealth and vigor into misery and weakness..." The political and theoretical implications were clear: Ignore these laws and ineluctably "all classes should be infected with the plague of universal poverty" (Ricardo 1929, p. 86). The birth of the social sciences was heralded in this "naturalistic moment" when the parsimony of social naturalism provided conceptual emancipation from worldly problems. But it would be wrong to mistake this for an empirical "disembedding" of the economy from society 24. Instead this was an epistemological revolution; through the blending of nature and society the social world suddenly gained epistemological privilege over the political, the cultural, even the legal. All else was relatively powerless in contrast to the gravitational force of nature. Thus, whether conceived as the artifacts of social interaction or as multiple societal meanings, culture--the "non-natural" and the human--lost its epistemological power to the natural.25

One important aspect of this revolutionary change bears especially upon cultural sociology and the political culture concept. In this epistemological transposition of naturalism into society *only one substantive sphere of the social world achieved the privileged status of being conflated with the regularities of nature--namely the economy.* Thanks to the central intellectual role of Ricardo, Malthus, and of course Adam Smith, in defining the new social sciences (and who were less than critically adopted by Marx and Durkheim) the parallel domain in the social world to the natural one of scientific knowledge became the material self-regulating world of markets and the economy. Only the latter's laws are

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24 . Indeed I do not believe it actually did (Somers, 1990)

25 . The clearest exemplar of this relationship of social naturalism to the cultural is in scientific knowledge itself. We know that the traditional epistemological stance towards scientific knowledge is that it is knowledge that is *discovered*, not constructed. Knowledge that is discovered is seen to be *natural* and *abstract*, that is foundational and above the historicity and contingency of cultural change. Scientific change--the accumulation of knowledge--is of course facilitated by human action (laboratory experiments, for example). But according to this naturalistic epistemology scientific change reflects only our cumulative knowledge *about* the natural world-- not the natural object itselfwhich operates on its own natural laws. To say that knowledge changes, from this view, is merely to say that *discovery* is cumulative, not that its changes are socially *constituted*.

believed to be *discovered*, not constructed, and thus endowing the economy with the privileged conceptual status of a natural object. As in scientific knowledge, the categories of economic science were capable of greater and greater degrees of abstraction, a far distance from the historicity and contingency of the cultural world.26

The natural "laws of society," now perceived to be the epistemological categories through which the social world could be known, were thus in one consequential swoop *conflated with what were in fact merely contemporary ideals about the naturalism of market processes*. The conceptual boundary collapsed between society--previously conceived in terms of actual social relationships (laws, politics, association; Bossy 1982; Williams 1976,pp.243-47)--and the newly naturalized economy. Normative nineteenth-century political beliefs about economics were, with the abstract notion of "the social", flattened into one and the same level of foundational knowledge. As a result each became identified with the characteristics of the other: "the social" as an abstract epistemological category lost its cultural, public, and associational meaning and instead absorbed the contemporary theory of the natural economy by in effect becoming little more than an elaboration of the theory of a self-regulating market. And the economy in turn absorbed and came to reflect the new epistemology of "the social" by receiving the privileged epistemological status of a natural object. Its assumed foundationalism meant that it was only possible to truly understand economic processes by abstracting them from the concreteness of any particular historical context. The particularities of context--cultural, political, legal, religious, and so on--were to be *bracketed* in order to achieve a certain epistemological purity of economic analysis. Only then could foundational economic laws be discerned.

This was the political culture which decisively shaped the growth of the social sciences. A silent collusion among the disciplines--and here American sociology is especially guilty--has long reinforced the epistemological naturalism of economics (Ross 1991, Zald 1992).27 Its foundational claims elevated the study of

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26 . This does not mean that economies don't change--any more than it means this about scientific knowledge. But as in science economic transformations may be facilitated by social action--policy decisions, stock market activities, even revolutions--but these interventions *are not constitutive* to the laws of the market; they are what economists call "impairments." This doesn't mean that they always impair market functioning; they may help it. The impairment refers to impairing the abstract natural model of the market. For this reason, in studying economies-- that is, in discovering laws--these impairments are bracketed as exogenous.

27 . Sociologists did not have to agree with the individualistic rational actor premises (an ontological argument about the nature of the economy) to collude in this. Although a fraction of sociologists (economic sociology) have always challenged the premises of the autonomous market-

markets to the role of "queen of the social sciences." In the new field of sociology, theories of economic systems and markets became the given base-line on which further research was only to build, not to question. This was not merely a matter of disciplinary turf. It was an acceptance of social naturalism: that which was natural could only be studied for its causal impact on the rest of society, rather than in itself be the subject of problematization. Since I have proposed that the question of what can or cannot be problematized for research may perhaps be the most significant epistemological feature of social analysis, this was a consequential and substantial collusion within the political culture itself. Since culture, politics, and law were now understood to be historical creations, their relative standing diminished precisely because they were subjected to investigation. Social science knowledge became synonymous with exploring the social world from the foundational grounds of the economy. *The "social" and the "economic" conflated into the only certainties of social knowledge.*

Political Culture and the Denaturing of Property

So far I have demonstrated that the political culture concept can greatly enlarge our consciousness of the contingent and historical character of all epistemology. But there is more. For if epistemology is a product of history, there must have been rival epistemologies of how to understand the social world. Why one epistemology wins out over another is, therefore, an historical and political question rather than a scientific one.

One such rival view involves property, citizenship and rights-formation. It is not surprising that the concept of property, widely believed to be the driving force of socio-economic development and conflict, is also at the heart of social naturalism. Townsend's allegory once again will help illustrate its foundational place. In it he makes explicit the correlation between property, naturalism, and social equilibrium. Because his "society" had been freed from the shackles of government and law, the "natural" population would consist of only two "races"-- property owners and labourers. Since the propertyless would be driven to labour not by laws but by natural hunger, *production* would be self-regulating. By contrast, historically-constructed laws would be needed *only* to protect the propertied from the potential *theft* of the propertyless(Townsend 1979 [1786]). The relationship of property to society became not only foundational and natural;

—what Polanyi called the "economistic fallacy"--unlike in the area of knowledge and science, sociologists have not challenged the epistemological premises which define how and which areas are eligible for problematization in the first place.

but, metaphorically, biological. Although its crudity has been long surpassed, the fable still highlights the *conceptual link* between property and political rights. In other words, with the inexorable force of nature, property is foundational--a natural, even biological, force; political forms are cultural constructions which either interfere with the regularities of nature (as in the case of state regulations such as the Poor Laws) or which are the necessary effect of that same natural force (as in the need for laws to protect property).

Theories of citizenship--one of the most significant dimensions of a political culture--are among the casualties of this original conceptual transformation of the link between nature and culture. Otherwise dissimilar theories converge on a single presupposition concerning citizenship: citizenship, the historically contingent cultural subject of study is the effect; changing property relations, the foundational natural object, are the cause. In natural rights theories, for example, (of both the right and the left) civil liberties emerge as a right attached to the property created by autonomous labour--what has since been called the "workmanship ideal" (Tully 1980). In more sociological theories such as T. H. Marshall's (1950), he explains the expansion of citizenship by the processes of class formation and the changing nature of property relations at the heart of this dynamic.

As an example of the power of the political culture concept I will take a different kind of look at the meaning of property and its relationship to citizenship. Using T.H. Marshall as a point of reference is especially pertinent. Not only is it a classic of sociology, it also represents prevailing social science theories of the developmental relationship between property and modern political culture.28 In Marshall's theory citizenship is a product of the emergence of property relations. Any early expressions of rights were impeded by status inequalities of feudalism and its lack of private property. Only the emergence of individualism and property necessary to and promoted by capitalism enabled the initial "take-off" of what he labeled civil citizenship rights. Furthermore the needs of newly privatized property owners (landed gentry) for free labour and bourgeois demands for mobile property set the motor in gear for the movement toward civil rights. Subsequent contradictions between property relations and the exclusions and inequalities of the class system kept the engine going. Political citizenship was a product of the nineteenth-century ascendancy of industrial property owners--the middle class, while social citizenship came in the twentieth century with the power of the

28 . See aslo Bendix (1964); Tilly (1990a, 1990b); Giddens (1985); Barbalet (1988); Turner (1986). For an important exception see Walzer (1970, 1982).

working class. Marshall thus analyzes citizenship-formation as ultimately stemming from the revolutionary transformations consequent to individual property relations--each right a product of the developmental logic of private property and its social consequences.

In my counter-scenario of rights-formation, property is also deeply significant. But in my argument property is not a natural object or an independent variable whose effect can be particularized over time. In the context of political culture I will describe below, property is a cultural product. Property signified not a "thing" to be owned, but a set of membership relations to which one gained the right to be attached (Somers 1986, forthcoming b). To understand the extent of this radical inversion in assumptions I will briefly summarize the broad contours of my research.

The *institutional* roots of Marshall's three-fold conception of citizenship were neither in the transition to capitalism, nor in the birth of class society, but in the legal revolutions of medieval England, the formation of medieval urban political cultures, and the national public sphere. Only the English public sphere, alone among Western countries, appropriated from below and extended throughout the land the political culture and legal conventions of the medieval cities and (to a lesser extent) the public villages which had their own non-feudal legal cultures and social practices. As a result, the public sphere came to reflect the political culture of the city "writ-large" in which remedies of procedural justice (civil citizenship) ensuring personal liberty coexisted with both national regulatory and redistributive statutes (social citizenship) as well as legal doctrines which commanded community participation (political citizenship) in the administration of law. To fully situate these claims, let me turn to an exploration of urban political culture.

In popular lore, medieval cities are most renowned for having been a refuge for personal liberty in an age of arbitrary feudal power and insecurity (Harding 1980,pp.442-47; Smith 1963; Bloch 1961, vol. 1; Black 1984, pp. 39, 42). "A year and a day" was the customary amount of "city-air" an escaped serf needed to gain freedom from a manorial lord. But equally important was not this negative liberty of the freed serf but the positive liberty of citizenship rights to which a surprising number of the population laid claim. Not just elites and bourgeois merchants, but numerous artisans as well "possessed" the freedom of the city and hence the rights of citizenship--the right to law (civil), the right to participate (political), and the right to livelihood (social). This freedom, moreover, was a form of property; it was

possessed by those who held rights to its claim. Clearly this was not the kind of freedom and property described by Marshall. The hallmark of these urban "freedoms" were their rooting in the property of *membership*.29 How did this property develop and why did so many urban working people have relatively extensive rights long before the "proper" natural/structural cause?

The answer lies in the place of the guild in the urban political culture.30 In a process of struggle lasting almost half a century, guilds battled local elites of merchants and authorities and eventually won both official recognition and notable power in local governance. The triumph occurred in 1319 by Royal Charter under King Edward II: all "inhabitants to be admitted [into the freedom] shall be of some *mistery*..."; anyone seeking to obtain the freedom who did not belong to a guild "shall then only be admitted with full assent of the commonality assembled" (cited in Rappaport 1989, p.31). In translation that meant that to become a citizen one had to enter into or "possess" the "freedom" of the town or city. Yet entry to the freedom and thus to citizenship *could only be achieved through membership in a guild* (the *mistery*). Thus was forged a mighty bond between guild membership and citizenship. It was not the division of labour or the mode of production that shaped artisanal rights and created this political culture. Rather it was the political culture of the guild which gave artisans' access to the public sphere of citizenship. In order to make sense of this it is necessary to reconstruct the practices and institutions of that political culture, its civil rules and codes of membership.31 For therein lay its power.

In a city or a town more was required for a skilled artisan to ply the trade than knowledge and a technical skill. To practice the "arte and mystery" of a craft required guild membership. Only members of a guild could legally practice their craft in a town, but guild membership in turn required the possession of a crucial kind of property--the property of an apprenticeship.32 Apprenticeship, of course, is generally thought of as period of training for a skill, but the meaning of an apprenticeship was not primarily in its technical training. Seven years was the standard time required to serve as an apprentice but at the end of the service the artisan did not "leave" behind the apprenticeship for it only in part represented

29 . London is of course the most outstanding case.
30 . On guilds see Thrupp (1963); Brentano (1963); Abrams and Wrigley (1977); Wrigley (1987); Reynolds (1977); Corfield ; Black (1984); Rappaport (1989, 1988); Nussdorfer (1988); Bossenga (1988); Nightengale (1989).
31 . The merchant Guild preceded the crafts guild, but the latter (composed of masters and journeymen) became far more important.
32 . On apprenticeship, see especially Lipson (1920, vol. I, chap. VIII).

the journeyman's training and investment of time. More significantly the credential of an apprenticeship signified the new "ownership" of a set of social and political relations and connections, a guaranteed place in a deep culture of attachments, as well as all the rights and obligations consequent to those attachments. The apprenticeship now became the artisan's "property"--a permanent credential belonging to the artisan endowing benefits as long as these were exercised within the guild. This was not mobile property that attached to the individual crafts person.33 The property acquired during an apprenticeship was in fact the property of social membership.

The key to this relational conception of property is in the medieval word for skill, which is "*mistery*" (as in the 'arte and mistery of weaving'). One reason skill was a *mistery* was because knowledge of a craft was viewed as a specialized and symbolic secret that should take time and trust to acquire (*O.E.D.*. 1933, vol. x, pp. 815-16).34 But *mistery* had another meaning and use that prevailed over the first: a *mistery* was also the medieval word for the craft guild itself, the social body, the fellowship, the corporate and instituted group (*O.E.D.* 1933, vol. x, pp. 815-16; Brentano 1963, p. cxxxii). Unlike the word skill which is singular and individual, *mistery* was simultaneously individual and corporate. To possess the *mistery* was to simultaneously "possess" knowledge and membership.35 In modern social science and economics skill is defined as "human capital"--a technical capacity which endows economic power to an individual. But in the political culture of the guild an "unskilled" worker was not defined as such because he or she was technically incompetent. *Indeed, through a wide array of illegal practices many "unskilled" workers in fact were technically trained.* The definition of an "unskilled","dishonorable", and "illegal" worker was to work without the property of an apprenticeship, that is, to work without a *mistery*, without honor, without the bounds and the bonds of association and without the political culture of membership. The attachments of membership, not training or ability alone, conferred legality and the property of skill.36

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33 . Tramping, one of the most important forms of labour migration, was contained within social membership networks, see Leeson (1983).

34 . In ancient Greece, the craftsmen were, like priests and doctors, believed to possess some secret power, see Godelier (1980).

35 . For various references to "mystery," "mistery," "misterium," "misterium artis," or "mestera, misteria, from ministerium," as the collective body of the craft guild (rather than the skill itself) see Hibbert (1963,p. 210); Berman (1983, p. 391); Reynolds (1977, p. 165); Black (1984, p. 14); Leeson (1983, p. 26).

36 . On illegal shops as unapprenticed ones, see Lipson (1931, vol. ii, p. 41).

The property of apprenticeship and skill was therefore a form of *cultural capital*. It was a social and cultural "*mistery*," not a technical secret or individual attribute. At the end of the service, the crafts-person (now a journeyman) was taken through a public ceremony in which he or she swore by oath to follow the guild's rules and obligations.37 With that oath the artisan was entitled and obligated to the connections and the powers embodied in the property of apprenticeship. This included citizenship, livelihood, employment, mutual aid, religious life, social organizations--indeed an entire cradle to grave culture, as well as the mandate to participate in public ceremonial processions and "mistery plays" which affirmed the political identity of membership (Adams-Phythian 1976, pp. 106-07).

The property of cultural membership thus turned out to be the key to the city. But the relationality of the guild's political culture hardly resembles the ideal typicality of a gemeinschaft world. Rather, the purpose of the property of membership was precisely to provide the foundations for independence and personal liberties. The prominent emphasis among artisans on independence and autonomy suggests the importance of distinguishing the normative from the institutional conception of rights. The right to the freedom of practicing one's skill, as well as that of citizenship, achieved the goal of individual empowerment. But this empowerment only had viability when rooted in the institutional foundations of attachments and membership. Only the possession of membership allowed for individual empowerment and the meaningful exercise of rights. Creating a public sphere as in part the city writ-large did not automatically confer these citizenship rights on all people, or to the same effect. But among "the people" those included and excluded (including gender exclusion) were based less on class divisions or land ownership than on the political contingencies and power of membership.

One of the results of this approach is a revised conception of property. The classical paradigm considers property to be a matter of ownership derived from autonomous labour; as such it is conceived in terms of a relationship between individual persons and things--whether the thing is land or the fruits of labour. Conversely, the absence of material property is correlated with proletarianization and powerlessness. But a deeper exploration into its political culture reveals that

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37 . On the number of women in guilds, see L. Smith (1963), Levi Fox ( ); Leeson (1983, p.27-8). On oaths and obligations, see Prothero, p. 37; Thrupp, pp. 184, 232-33; Hibbert (vol. III, pp. 157-229, p. 210); Leeson (,passim).

38 . For the strongest evidence on this point, see Black (1984, passim), as well as the numerous guild documents collected in T. Smith (1963).

property was not a "thing." Rather a property (propriety=one's own relations) was a network of relationships among persons, and between persons, institutions, and the larger public sphere. It was not property that caused citizenship; it was the political culture of membership that produced property and the rights of property were expressed through the cultural capital of membership rights. Property could take the form of land, the house, or most importantly, of skill. But regardless of its form, its meaning was relational. The rights of property in effect only existed within the context of relationships and the political culture of which they were a part. . Beginning in the seventeenth century, this relational concept of property was forced to compete with a newly developed idea of liberty based solely on the individual rights of property produced from autonomous labour. Since then these Lockean ideas of natural rights have dominated the social history of politics. But not only did the former public conception of rights and freedom prove remarkably robust in its competition with Locke's ideas; arguably, it was more significant in shaping modern popular conceptions of and claims to citizenship.

Conclusion

I have developed in this paper the argument that Parsons' original move to endow significance to culture was a tremendous advance in the social sciences. Only in his rejection of culture as a means to *sociological knowledge* did he inadvertently contribute to the subsequent reduction of cultural meaning to social systemic determination. The new political culture concept, by contrast, militantly has staked its claim on the autonomy of culture from society. But herein lie the pit-falls as well as the potential of the new approach. As important as has been this revival and revision of the once moribund concept, it reproduces some of the same problems of the previous one--especially the worrisome binary opposition between culture and society. Cultural studies have too often simply turned away from the economic and social to explore the cultural as an autonomous separate sphere. While this no longer be reduces political culture to a function of the social system, it is also a very risky strategy. For in the social science categories in which we currently work, as long as the social retains its epistemological

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39 . For several influential discussions of property see Pocock (1985a, 1985b); Tully (1980); Dickinson (1977).
40 . This is fully developed in Somers (1986, and forthcoming b).

association with naturalism, and culture with history, *separate will not be equal.*41

In an essay criticizing the approach to *mentalites* characteristic of his own *Annaliste* background, Roger Chartier argues that the ways we classify and represent the social world are themselves the "constituents of social reality....Instruments of power, the stakes of struggles as fundamental as economic struggles, the systems of classification or images of social order are all transformers of this very order; by modifying the demands...attached to some position or another; by shifting the frontiers between groups...even by bringing into existence new groups or new classes...[they are] a reality as real as the concreteness of the relations within a society" (Chartier 1982, p. 41-42).42

The real challenge facing the new political culture concept is thus in its capacity as an epistemological tool to move us beyond the society versus culture dichotomy supported by both the old and the new versions of the term. It enables us to challenge what is and is not *axiomatic* in social analysis, the privileging of certain spheres over others, and the presuppositional insulation of the social from the kind of historical and epistemological problematization characteristic of every other sphere of society. That which we consider natural, material, and foundational--property, for example--takes on an entirely different meaning when the embeddedness of *all* spheres of social knowledge within time and space is emphasized. The greatest contribution, then, of the new political culture concept is not that it can give us new and improved explanations, but that it can give us new questions. This alone will reorient us as to what it is we ought to be asking in the first place.43

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41 . This is often reinforced even among cultural theorists by the use of such terms as "extra-economic", "non-economic", or the "relative autonomy from the economy of culture". This language simply underlines the degree to which economic processes continue to be treated as the natural base-line of social analysis.

42 . In this formulation Chartier explicitly acknowledges the influence of Bourdieu, see for example (1982 p. 41).

43 . In Somers (1989,forthcoming) I have pursued in greater detail the impact on the social sciences of the neglect of the study of question-formation and problematization.

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