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POLITICAL CULTURE AND POLITICAL SYMBOLISM: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis

By LOWELL DITTMER*

“POLITICAL Culture” functions as a conceptual umbrella for a wide and apparently heterogeneous range of political issue areas: National character, the impact of collective historical experience on national identity, and the emotional or normative dimensions of the relationship between the state and its citizenry (such as apathy, or a sense of political efficacy), seem to be among the more prominent concerns of the contributors to this literature. Who would deny that such concerns are among the most perpetually fascinating aspects of politics? The quantity and quality of empirical work in this field is impressive and includes at least one acknowledged behavioral classic.¹ Unfortunately, lacking an adequate theoretical grounding, some excellent empirical studies are apt to talk past one another rather than to contribute to the cumulation of generalizable knowledge. Political culture has in fact shown some inclination to become a catch-all term, used to deal with questions of meaning and interpretation of peripheral interest to the discipline, and elusive of objective treatment. The purpose of this paper is to open to discussion the tenability of the existing theoretical underpinnings of political culture, and then to propose a more satisfactory synthesis.

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The three seminal conceptual schemes that deal with subjectively meaningful aspects of politics are political culture, political symbolism, and communication theory. Although all three models are generally concerned with what Marxists term the cultural superstructure of society, each has its own particular strengths and weaknesses. We shall find, for example, that the theoretical discussions of political culture state the general concerns of this literature, but fail to define the empirical variable to be analyzed, with the result that the focus tends to

* I wish to thank Tang Tsou and Bogdan Denitch for their most helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper, which was first presented at the 1976 APSA Convention in Chicago.

¹ Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1963).

drift between micro-analysis and macro-analysis. The literature on political symbolism selects the most fruitful variable for analysis and has many brilliant *aperçus* to contribute to our understanding of the relationship between political appearance and reality, but the analysis proceeds unsystematically, unbalanced by an appreciation of the positive functions of symbolism. The theory of political communication contributes a highly systematic, quantifiable methodology to the field, but thereby begs the question of qualitative meaning. Each of these three approaches contributes important insights to the clarification of the others.

POLITICAL CULTURE

The study of political culture has since its beginnings been in the vanguard of the behavioral revolution in political science. Whereas traditional political science allegedly confined its attention to the formal institutional structure of the state, behaviorist political science would open its doors to consideration of all elements that make up a nation, and to their relationship with the state. The ideological implications of this scientific revolution were broadly democratic, and the methodological implications were innovative: a host of new models and theories were introduced, often drawn by analogy from the hard sciences, and interdisciplinary liaisons were initiated among the various social sciences. Political culture was at the cutting edge of this disciplinary movement, concentrating on the mass of common men who had been neglected in traditional political science, and borrowing both conceptual frameworks and methodological techniques from cultural anthropology, depth psychology, and public opinion research.

Since Gabriel Almond first advanced a definition of political culture, it has been elaborated upon in his own writings and those of Pye and Verba, and has gained virtually unanimous acceptance in the field. Almond defined political culture as "orientation toward politics."² Later, this orientation was specified to include "cognitive orientation, affective orientation, evaluational orientation"; or, more simply, "cognitions, feelings and evaluations."³ Citizens are oriented toward a set of political objects, which are variously defined as: (1) the system in general, inputs, outputs, or the self as an object;⁴ (2) governmental and

² Almond, "Comparative Political Systems," *Journal of Politics*, xviii (August 1956), 391-409.

³ Sidney Verba, "Comparative Political Culture," in Lucian Pye and Sidney Verba, eds., *Political Culture and Political Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1965), 512-61.

⁴ Almond and Verba (fn. 1), 14-15.

other structures in the political system (political identifications, political trust, rules of the game), or one's own political activity (political competence or efficacy);⁵ (3) "the Government, the Regime, and the Political Community."⁶ The content of these orientations has been empirically investigated chiefly as it has become manifest in patterns of participation. The most frequently encountered patterns of participation form yet another triad of "participant, subject, and parochial."⁷

One of the criteria for clear definition is that the concept be distinguished from related concepts; one of the persistent difficulties in the definition of political culture concerns the analytical boundaries between that concept and political psychology on the one hand and political structure on the other. In dealing with the relationship between political culture and political psychology, the simplest and most widely adopted solution has been to equate the former with an aggregate of individual psychological orientations toward politics. In *The Civic Culture*, Almond and Verba modified Almond's earlier definition of political culture to read "*psychological* orientation toward social objects" (emphasis added); they defined the political culture of a nation as "the particular distribution of patterns of orientation toward political objects among the members of the nation."⁸ Lucian Pye, in his introductory essay to *Political Culture and Political Development*, was even more explicit: "[I]t is the problem of aggregation—which involves the adding up of the discoveries of individual psychology in such a manner as to make community-wide behavior understandable in the light of individual actions . . . for which the concept of political culture holds such great promise."⁹ A recent synthesis echoes these notions: "Political culture can be defined in two ways. If we concentrate on the individual, it is psychological, entailing all the important ways in which a person is subjectively oriented toward the essential elements in the political system. The second, 'system level' approach refers to the collective orientation of people toward the basic elements in their political system."¹⁰

It seems fair to conclude that the dominant school of thought on this issue is one of psychological reductionism. Psychological reductionism facilitated the introduction of sophisticated sample survey tech-

⁵ Walter A. Rosenbaum, *Political Culture* (New York: Praeger 1975), 6-7.

⁶ Samuel C. Patterson, "The Political Cultures of the American States," *Journal of Politics*, xxx (February 1968), 187-210.

⁷ Almond and Verba (fn. 1), 21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 14-15. This point is made in Carole Pateman, "Political Culture, Political Structure and Political Change," *British Journal of Political Science*, 1 (July 1971), 291-305.

⁹ Pye and Verba (fn. 3), 9.

¹⁰ Rosenbaum (fn. 5), 4.

niques for the empirical measurement of attitudes. These techniques were useful in showing, *inter alia*, that cultural patterns are not uniformly distributed throughout society: all members of society do not have equal leverage in determining dominant cultural patterns, nor do all groups subscribe to these patterns equally. But methodological convenience alone should not be permitted to define one's theoretical formulations. If the social scientist investigates cultures lacking in Western individualistic traditions (such as much of the Third World) or legal toleration for survey research (such as Communist nations and a growing number of nationalist authoritarian systems), even the methodological advantage evaporates. If political culture can be reduced to the distribution of attitudes among a given population, wherein lies the need for a distinct conceptual framework and line of inquiry? Perhaps understanding a political culture is rather like learning a language: before a frequency distribution of vocabulary usage can make much sense, a basic grasp of the underlying grammatical structure is necessary. In his most recent contribution to the discussion, Pye agrees, using a different metaphor: "The situation is analogous to our ability to say 'something' about what a building will be like from knowledge about what its building elements are like, but to truly 'picture' the building we need also to know the blueprints and the total design."¹¹ Although it is certainly useful—where feasible—to measure the relative assimilation of culture by questioning a sample of individuals, political culture should be conceptualized as an emergent variable, whose properties transcend the sum of its members' belief- and value-systems.

It is partly because of the patent shortcomings of psychological reductionism that the dominant competing tradition in the literature of political culture flirts with global, macro-analytic descriptions of political structure. However, the precise relationship between political culture and political structure has remained as uncertain as it was when Pye defined it in 1968: "If the concept of political culture is to be effectively utilized, it needs to be supplemented with structural analysis, but the difficulty is that political structures can be seen on the one hand as products reflecting the political culture, while on the other hand they are also 'givens' which shape the political culture."¹² The distinction

¹¹ Lucian Pye, "Culture and Political Science: Problems in the Evaluation of the Concept of Political Culture," *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 53 (September 1972), 285-96. Cf. Edward W. Lehman, "On the Concept of Political Culture: A Theoretical Reassessment," *Social Forces*, Vol. 50 (March 1972), 361-70.

¹² Pye, "Political Culture," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, XII (New York: Macmillan and Free Press 1968), 218-25.

between political culture and political structure is perhaps inherently ambiguous, given the definition of the former as “cognitions, feelings, and evaluations” *about* the latter. There is thus a tendency among some writers to slide from one to the other, as Lipset does:

Hence, a working class which has made gains in the economic order will be relatively satisfied, while a middle and upper class which feels threatened in its position of status will react aggressively. It may be contended that in Weimar Germany the majority of the workers were relatively moderate politically because they had secured access to the economic and political orders, while traditional conservative groupings and the middle classes were disposed to accept militant politics in a crisis because their value orientations of elitism and ascription led them to perceive such gains on the part of the workers as a threat to their overall status position and to their sense of “the way things ought to be.”¹³

In this excerpt—from a book in which he attributes greater autonomy to the realm of values than in any of his earlier works—Lipset tends to lapse into “vulgar” Marxism, reducing ideological preferences to social structural variables. If such a reduction were adequate at the level of meaning, we should have no need for the concept of culture—a “sociology of knowledge” would suffice.

Given its tendency to merge imperceptibly into definitions of political psychology or political structure, political culture becomes difficult to use as either a dependent or an independent variable in a causal explanation. It is consigned to the role of a residual or intervening variable, whose influence may reinforce an outcome already predictable on the basis of stronger evidence; but it is in no way capable of functioning independently. In most cases the concept is used to explain systemic stability, as if the absence of change required explanation; this use began with Almond and has continued through Easton and most other systems theorists. In a recent study, Donald J. Devine has sought to show how political culture contributes not only to the persistence of systems, but to the stability of regimes.¹⁴ The only source of dynamics of political culture that is considered in any of these representative works is political socialization, which facilitates only intergenerational change.¹⁵ One might conclude from the available empirical studies

¹³ Seymour Martin Lipset, *The First New Nation: The United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday 1967), 269.

¹⁴ Devine, *The Political Culture of the United States: The Influence of Member Values on Regime Maintenance* (Boston: Little, Brown 1972). Cf. David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (New York: John Wiley 1965).

¹⁵ Anthony Wallace, an anthropologist, has proposed a different framework for understanding cultural change, featuring the key concepts of “goal culture” and “transfer

that political culture is profoundly conservative in its policy implications; in fact, this conclusion seems implicit from the outset in the term's ambiguous conceptualization. To the extent that political culture contains elements of political psychology or political structure in its definition, its use to explain change in either of these variables is of course tautological.

POLITICAL SYMBOLISM

In the foregoing discussion of political culture, I have suggested that the chief difficulty is one of fuzzy conceptualization; the variable we are trying to isolate for analysis loses its autonomy to more clearly defined variables on either side. What is it about political culture that is inherently "cultural," resisting reduction either to political structure or to political psychology? I would submit that it is political *symbolism*. Symbols exist independently of human beings and may therefore transmit meanings from person to person despite vast distances of space and time. Although symbols are ultimately dependent for their meaning on fallible human interpretation, human communities do set forth comprehensible and relatively consistent rules of usage to facilitate speed and fidelity of communication. Thus, although the interpretation of symbolism would require some understanding of both social structure and psychology, the symbols themselves may legitimately be assumed to have some degree of autonomy from both; that is what Hegel meant by "objective spirit."¹⁶ Lloyd Warner points to some of the important consequences of this limited autonomy:

When words are written no longer dependent on the immediate organic environment where sounds and silences stimulate meaning in live organisms, powerful new factors enter. Words can go elsewhere, beyond the interpersonal context. Delayed communication between individuals or generations widely separated in space and time, frees words from their immediate controls and they become immortal and autonomous, independent of the social structure and the values and beliefs that produced

culture"; but aside from the work of Chalmers Johnson and Frederic J. Fleron, Jr., this promising conceptualization does not yet seem to have attracted, among political scientists, the attention it deserves. Cf. Chalmers Johnson, "Comparing Communist Nations," in Chalmers Johnson, ed., *Change in Communist Systems* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press 1970), 1-33; and Frederic Fleron and Lou Jean Fleron, "Administrative Theory as Repressive Political Theory: The Communist Experience," *Newsletter on Comparative Studies of Communism*, vi (November 1972), 4-42. *Technology and Communist Culture*, a major conference volume edited by Fleron and embodying his analytical framework, will be published shortly by Praeger.

¹⁶ Ludwig von Bertalanffy, "On the Definition of the Symbol," in Joseph R. Royce, ed., *Psychology and the Symbol* (New York: Random House 1965), 26-72; Alfred North Whitehead, *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect* (New York: Macmillan 1927), 86.

them. As such it acts both as a conservative force, strengthening the hold of the past on the changing present, and as a liberalizing one, freeing the present generation from dependence upon oral transmission of the immediate older generation's interpretations of the sacred tradition.¹⁷

If symbol systems have a coherent internal logic of their own, and a certain historical latitude exists within which this logic can play itself out, the autonomy of symbols is always limited by the imperative that they remain relevant to certain basic human needs. Thus, new attempts at definition are constantly being made, new implications being seen and faced, as the continual intrusion of pragmatic issues into the functions served by symbols creates recurring gaps, modifications, and inconsistencies.¹⁸ But these vagaries should be no more formidable an impediment to the systematic study of political culture than is the idiosyncratic fluctuation of the stock market to econometrics.

It is far easier to propose political symbolism as the most promising unit of analysis for studies of political culture than it is to define the term. Symbolism is one of the essential identifying characteristics of mankind, and its study is of ancient provenance: symbols have been studied from so many different perspectives and for so many different purposes that the term has become even "softer" and more ambiguous than the notion of political culture. It is difficult to define the term either synthetically (that is, by distinguishing it from related concepts) or analytically (that is, by specifying its characteristics).¹⁹ In synthetic definitions, symbols tend to merge with "language" on the one hand and with the substantive "reality" that language represents on the other. Attempts to define the term analytically have produced such a tangled congeries of distinctions that it is difficult to sort them all out: there are public symbols and private symbols; religious symbols, artistic symbols, logical symbols, linguistic symbols, dream symbols; they are used to express or communicate or represent logical relationships, intangible cosmic forces, and repressed drives and feelings.

Underlying all of these definitions is the nominalist insight that appearance may differ from reality, that the relationship between the sign and its referent is conventional rather than natural, and that signs may consequently be detached from their referents. This insight has accompanied the study of political symbolism from the beginning, per-

¹⁷ W. Lloyd Warner, *The Living and the Dead: A Study of the Symbolic Life of Americans* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1959), 216.

¹⁸ Raymond Firth, *Symbols: Public and Private* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press 1973), 426-28.

¹⁹ Cf. Richard Robinson, *Definitions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1950).

mitting it to “de-mystify” the systematic purveyance of illusion and to unmask hypocrisy. Walter Bagehot, although clearly foreshadowed by Machiavelli, was perhaps the first to allude explicitly to this distinction, pointing out that an effective political order has not only an “efficient part” (which formulates programs, administers, and governs), but also a “theatrical” part (which symbolizes certain common traditions and ideals, strengthening the bonds that unite men).²⁰ But the first to make political symbolism the object of concerted scientific analysis was Harold D. Lasswell, who has had a lasting impact on the field. He combined the psychoanalytic discoveries of the functions of dream symbolism and neurotic symptoms to express repressed emotional complexes with the elitist perspective on politics of Mosca and Pareto. In the thoroughly disillusioning picture of politics at which he arrived, symbols were “manipulated” by elites in order to appeal to the unconscious wishes of the masses. (According to what he called the “triple-appeal principle,” elites could pitch their appeal to the id, the ego, or the superego, but in most of Lasswell’s own early work the emphasis was on the id.)²¹ Their purpose was the legitimation of their own maximization of “income, safety and deference.”²² In a sense anticipating Wittgenstein, Lasswell bleakly suggested that political problems could never really be solved, but only *dissolved* through some form of preventive therapy, for he held politics to be essentially a field for the projection of irrational impulses.²³ With Nathan Leites, Daniel Lerner, and other collaborators, Lasswell brought his studies of political symbolism to fruition in the comparative analysis of propaganda during World War II, expanding his rather loose (and always primarily verbal) definition of symbols to initiate the content analysis of political language on a grand scale.²⁴

Lacking Lasswell’s methodological virtuosity but compensating somewhat by a delightfully sarcastic style, Thurman Arnold continued the Lasswellian tradition in his study, *The Symbols of Government*.²⁵ Whereas Lasswell focused on the self-serving manipulation of symbols by individual elites, Arnold pointed out that political institutions were

²⁰ Bagehot, *The English Constitution*, as quoted in Whitney Smith, Jr., “Prolegomena to the Study of Political Symbolism,” Ph.D. diss. (Boston University 1968).

²¹ Lasswell, “The Triple-Appeal Principle: A Contribution of Psychoanalysis to Political and Social Science,” *American Journal of Sociology* xxxvii (January 1932), 528-38.

²² Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How?* (New York: World 1958).

²³ Lasswell, *Psychopathology and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1930), chap. 10, “The Politics of Prevention.”

²⁴ Lasswell, Leites, and others, *Language of Politics: Studies in Quantitative Semantics* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press 1949).

²⁵ Arnold, *The Symbols of Government* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World 1962).

organized around symbolic self-justifications, and were “apt to go to pieces out of sheer lack of self-confidence if their philosophical assumptions are attacked, just as a devout individual may suffer if he loses faith in his religion.” In other words, Arnold began to blur Lasswell’s sharp contrast between elite rationality in pursuit of self-interest and mass irrationality by suggesting that symbols serve integrative and legitimating functions of positive value to the entire organization.

Although willing to concede that symbols serve positive functions for the association, Arnold saw little chance that they could transcend this bounded context and serve similar functions for the political community as a whole. Perhaps influenced by group theory, Arnold perceived the private association as a rational entity, but the political system as an irrational congeries of mutually inconsistent ideals. Rational reform in this context became self-defeating—liable to find itself “twisted and warped” by contradictory ideals: “A people will never accept an institution that does not symbolize for them the simultaneously inconsistent notions to which they are at various times emotionally responsive.” With the words “emotionally responsive,” Arnold betrayed his lingering allegiance to the notion of an irrational mass, moved neither by self-interest nor by public interest, but by “the chance of association or temperament that makes them emotionally responsive to one set of symbols or another.” Thus, despite his departure from Lasswell’s elitism for a more organic conception of the function of symbols at the subsystem level, Arnold wound up embracing Lasswell’s irrationality at the system level: “Almost all human conduct is symbolic. . . . The symbols are everywhere inconsistent. Society is generally more interested in standing on the sidelines and watching itself go by in a whole series of different uniforms than it is in practical objectives.”²⁶

Undoubtedly the best contemporary analysis of political symbolism has been provided by Murray Edelman, who continues in his writings to explain discrepancies between the actual practice of politics and the way it should rationally function by referring to the susceptibility of the masses and the self-interest of the elites in political symbolism. Although he introduces some interesting new ideas from symbolic interactionism (such as the notion of dramaturgy), Edelman presents no central theory or network of hypotheses, following rather in the tradition of the iconoclastic essays by Lasswell and Arnold. His most influential work shows how political symbolism contributes to mass

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 219, 17.

quiescence by responding to the unconscious needs of political supplicants with appropriate symbolic reassurances while omitting any tangible changes in patterns of resource allocation.²⁷ He seems to agree with Lasswell and Arnold that political problems are inherently insoluble, pointing out that demands for reform fill all sorts of cognitive and emotional needs for would-be reformers; even if reforms are achieved, these needs will be reinforced by the publicity rather than satisfied by the reform; paradoxically, demands will increase.²⁸ Adopting Sapir's distinction between condensation symbols (which function to express unconscious wishes and feelings) and symbols of reference (which refer to empirical objects), Edelman contends that condensation symbols predominate in campaign oratory and mass protest, whereas referential symbols prevail in direct negotiations between interest groups and administrators. Thus we see reincarnated the Lasswellian distinction between acute susceptibility to irrational appeals (condensation symbols) among the mass electorate, and the rational, self-interested use of language (referential symbols) among elites.²⁹

Perhaps the main conceptual difficulty in Edelman's analytical schema is the lack of any clear distinction between symbolism and substantive political action: not only is campaign rhetoric considered "symbolism," but marking a ballot is a "symbolic ritual," and attribution of success or failure to public officials is a "myth" (for they are but pawns in the hands of vast social forces); even the passage of reform legislation is primarily a "symbolic" act designed to reassure people by inflating the rhetorical portions of the bill without really reforming anything. What, then, is the empirical status of symbolism? Edelman defines myth as "a widely held belief based upon social cues rather than upon observation of the world,"³⁰ as if "social cues" were somehow otherworldly or did not require observation. The underlying assumption is that political symbolism is "empty"—an assumption that coincides with Edelman's focus on resource allocation as the central reality of politics. But, as Froman points out, the impermeable distinction drawn by

²⁷ Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (5th ed.; Urbana: University of Illinois Press 1972).

²⁸ Edelman, *Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal and Quiescence* (New York: Academic Press 1971), 12-31.

²⁹ Considerable evidence suggests, however, that condensation symbols may play as large a role in negotiations among small elite groups as in manipulating mass audiences; witness the long dispute over the shape of the table in the Paris peace talks between Washington and Hanoi, for example. Published transcripts of the Watergate tapes reveal an obsession with condensation symbols among elites that defied all attempts to manipulate them rationally.

³⁰ Murray Edelman, *The State as a Provider of Symbolic Outputs* (Madison: Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Papers, University of Wisconsin, August 1973), 16.

Edelman between symbolic and material benefits is not really tenable.³¹ Politics must serve many other important functions as well, such as mobilizing and integrating the political community. Symbolism is vital here, and indeed, redistribution would be pointless without it: witness the political vulnerability of certain transfer payments (such as welfare) relative to others (such as defense), primarily because the former lack cogent legitimating symbolism. Politicians can and have used condensation symbols to mobilize and integrate groups under circumstances in which there were few material resources to be allocated—for instance, regeneration of the Chinese Communist Party in the desiccated wilderness of Yenan, or the migration of American intellectuals to the South to participate in the civil rights movement.³² To view symbols as an empty substitute for material gains seems somehow to misunderstand the motives of those who pursue them. This is related to an additional point: like Lasswell, Edelman uses a one-way causal analysis to depict a circulation of symbols in which the elites pull the wires and the masses dance. The rise of student power and antiwar and other protest movements in the West in the 1960's suggests that this is an oversimplification, however, and that symbols may be co-opted by the masses for their own purposes. Finally, Edelman devotes surprisingly little attention to the actual content of the symbols, and to how this content changes under different circumstances; his focus is on the actors, and on the way they use symbols to pursue their interests. The result is a tendency toward the psychological reduction of symbolism rather than toward according it pride of place in the analytical framework.

To summarize: the conceptual advantages of political symbolism seem in many ways tailor-made to compensate for the weaknesses of current conceptions of political culture. Most importantly, political symbolism provides an empirical variable to be analyzed (i.e., symbols) which is closely related to both political psychology and political structure, but has a degree of autonomy from either. Because political symbols may vary independently, the internal dynamics of political culture become accessible to analysis, freed from the prevailing assumptions that political culture functions primarily to reinforce the status quo and to minimize intrasystem conflict. On the other hand, the analysis of political symbolism has suffered from ambiguous definition, both

³¹ Lewis A. Froman, Jr., "The Categorization of Policy Contents," in Austin Ranney, ed., *Political Science and Public Policy* (Chicago: Markham 1968), 41-52.

³² Mayer N. Zald, "Politics and Symbols: A Review Article," *Sociological Quarterly*, VII (Winter 1966), 85-91.

because of the failure to distinguish symbols from language or political structure, and the failure to sort out the various distinctions among different types of symbols. The elitist methodological perspective of the early students of symbolism has biased the literature toward a one-way causal analysis of symbol flow, disregarding feedback channels and the co-optation of symbols by the masses. This perspective has also led to an overestimation of the rationality of elites and the irrationality of the masses in the pursuit of their respective interests. The distributive focus that has accompanied this perspective ("Who gets what, when, how?") discounts the mobilizational and integrative functions of symbolism and cynically regards symbols as bogus tokens of substantial resources. Finally, in the preoccupation with the way symbols are used, surprisingly little attention has been paid to an analysis of the symbols themselves—their contents, systemic interrelationships, and transformation over time under different political conditions. Many of the conceptual shortcomings of political symbolism may be traced to the lack of any systematic conception of the symbolic process. For this we turn now to the theory of political communication.

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Just as political symbolism seems admirably suited to compensate for some of the conceptual inadequacies of political culture, recent developments in communication theory may resolve some of the difficulties raised in our discussion of political symbolism. Communication theory is derived from cybernetics, and perhaps its most vigorous and influential proponent in political science is Karl Deutsch. Deutsch has used communication theory primarily to analyze the process of integration, at both the national and the international (i.e., regional) levels.³³ His basic premises are derived from the neofunctionalist notions of Mitrany and others, but his analytical framework is far more refined in its theoretical elaboration, and is expressly designed to be empirically verifiable. The basic notion is that integration within a given network will proceed in direct relation to the frequency of communications within that network.

Communication theory has at least three advantages over the two approaches we have examined. First, Deutsch and other systems theo-

³³ Deutsch and others, *Political Community in the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1968); Deutsch, *The Nerves of Government: Models of Political Communication and Control* (New York: Free Press 1965); Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication: An Inquiry into the Foundations of Nationality* (2nd ed.; Cambridge: M.I.T. Press 1966).

rists have dealt with the integrative, mobilizational, and legitimating functions of communication that have been most neglected by students of political symbolism, thereby relieving their own work of the mordant and sometimes excessive cynicism apparent in the writings of the latter. Second, thanks to its more precise definition of key variables, communication theory lends itself more readily to quantifiability than do either political culture or political symbolism. Quantitative analysis reveals new and significant dimensions of the cultural superstructure: for instance, it facilitates comparisons among variables within the communication network and registers the dynamics of the system over time. Third, with its emphasis on channels and flow of communications, communication theory should obviate the propensity for a one-way causal analysis of flow that disregards feedback or mass-initiated messages.

In order to perceive more clearly the logical implications and methodological weaknesses of communication theory, it may be useful to look at the premises of information theory, from which it is derived. According to information theory, any communication system consists of: (1) at least one *code* to regulate the use of symbols (that is, an indication of the modalities of their codification, decodification, and interpretation); and (2) a set of conditions that permit such operations (that is, the presence of at least one transmitter, one receiver, one channel, and a context). The prime variable in the system is *information*, which in information theory has nothing to do with the content of what is said, but with the number of alternatives available. "Information" is not what *is* said, but what *can* be said—the number of possible choices in the selection of a message. Through binary disjunction it is possible to break every message into an endless number of possible binary choices. The basic unit of information is the bit, or binary digit, which consists of one choice between two equally probable possibilities. "Information" is thus a statistical characteristic of the source of the message, describing the range of choices available in its construction. The less information there is, the easier the communication. A "code" is designed to ease communication by imposing a probability system upon the random probabilities of the sending system, and thereby limiting the amount of information contained. (For example, in the English language a code stipulates that the letters "str" must be followed by a vowel, not by a consonant.) The code transforms an infinite reality into finite units that are relevant to communication among interested parties: it changes information into meaningful messages. Among human beings, several codes may function simultaneously: at the basic level a

denotative code may translate events into a series of signals, and one or more connotative codes may then translate those signals into subjectively meaningful interpretations. (For instance, "The Martians have landed" = "We must flee/negotiate/attack!") Political culture would from this perspective be considered as a system of connotations codified to interpret a denotative system of messages.³⁴

Perhaps the most serious problem with communication theory in its current political science formulations is the lack of an adequate concept of a code. In the absence of any such criterion to sort data into relevant categories of meaning, information is broken into quantifiable atomic units (messages), its speed and direction are measured, and the code appears *inferentially* as an epiphenomenon of the emerging pattern of message flow. Yet, how can meaning be inferred from a flow pattern the constituent units of which have no intrinsic meaning? *Ex nihilo nihil fit!* In seeking to determine whether political integration is positively associated with the frequency of intrasystem communication, it may be relevant to ascertain whether the messages are friendly or hostile, for example; but Deutsch is unable to do so without a code. This code must obviously *precede* rather than result from his analysis; hence, communication theory offers little assistance. Communication theory assumes that the meaning of symbols is exhausted in their patterned interrelationships, and is unable to explain the power of symbols that appear with the same meaning in different cultures.³⁵ Whereas students of political symbolism may be too cynical in their sharp juxtaposition of symbols and substantive policies, communication theorists evade the issue by declining any interpretation that goes beyond quantifiable linguistic appearances.

THE SYSTEM OF POLITICAL CULTURE

We must now try to rise to the challenge implied in our criticisms of previous approaches and propose a constructive alternative. If it is to be a satisfactory synthesis, this alternative should incorporate the advantages of the three analytical schemas discussed above while avoiding their salient weaknesses. The system I propose will address the basic concerns articulated in the literature of political culture while endeavoring to define the empirical unit of analysis more precisely. This unit of analysis will be adopted from the literature of political

³⁴ Umberto Eco, *Einfuehrung in die Semiotic*, trans. by Juergen Trabant (Munich: Wilhelm Fink 1972), 35, 52-53, and throughout; Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, *Linguistics and Economics* (The Hague: Mouton 1975), 10.

³⁵ Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon Books 1970).

symbolism—divorced, however, from the accompanying assumptions that symbolism is empty. As in communication theory, symbolism will be analyzed within a comprehensive theoretical framework, but one that will include its linguistic as well as its communicative dimensions.

I suggest that political culture may best be understood as a *semiological system*. Semiology (or semiotics) is the science concerned with the systematic analysis of meanings. The model I shall outline was inspired by the work of a number of logicians, cultural anthropologists, and structural linguists ranging from Charles Morris to Roland Barthes. Modesty is certainly appropriate at this state in its formulation, and criticisms or suggestions for improvement are more than welcome. In the first subsection, I shall delineate the analytical boundaries dividing the system of political culture from its environment. In the second subsection, I shall specify the basic components of the system and show how they relate to one another.

POLITICAL CULTURE REDEFINED

A semiological approach to the analysis of political culture returns the field to a primary focus on symbols. Political culture is a system of political symbols, and this system nests within a more inclusive system that we might term “political communication.” It may facilitate our attempt to define the system of political culture to outline first the system of political communication as a whole and then to indicate the boundary that distinguishes political culture from the rest of political communication.

The political communication system consists, first of all, of the components of communication theory that have already been discussed: codes, transmitters, channels, and so forth. In addition to these communicative variables, it consists of certain linguistic categories designed to deal with those questions of meaning that have heretofore been neglected in communication theory: *signs*, which are usually words (but may be signals, symbols, symptoms, artifacts, clues, etc.) referring to something else; *referents* (sometimes called designata), which are the “something else” referred to; and *significations* (or designations), which are definitions of the signs and their referents that apply to the generic signs’ type or class. Any semiological system comprises this combination of communicative and linguistic variables and their interrelationships, which may be used to define the political system simply by restricting the field of reference. But it would not define political culture specifically—at least not political culture narrowly and precisely conceived (i.e., as we conceive it). How may political culture be dis-

tinguished from the political communication system in which it nests?

In previous attempts to define political culture we noted a tendency to conflate the term with the political cultures it subjectively describes, with the political psychology that perceives those structures, or with the political language that distortedly registers and conveys the structures so perceived. We may already claim to have differentiated political culture from political structure or political psychology by focusing on political symbols, which mediate between the two and function with some degree of autonomy. Now the question concerns the difference between political symbols and political language. Our first gambit might be to assert that political symbols include *more* than language: symbols may include emblems, icons (e.g., flags, totems, coins), graphic artifacts (statues, paintings), or concrete entities (Jerusalem, the Kremlin). But in the final analysis, verbal symbols are more comprehensive than nonverbal symbols. It cannot be demonstrated that nonverbal symbols are invariably derivative from verbal symbols, but they may in every case be reduced to them. Systems of nonverbal symbols can signify, and on a large scale, but never autonomously: other signs enjoy the status of systems only insofar as they pass through the relay of language, which extracts their meanings (in the form of a nomenclature) and names their referents.³⁶

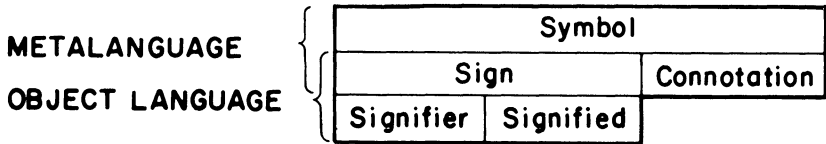
The argument here is that political symbolism is *less* than political language, just as political culture is less than politics. Political symbolism is embedded in political communication, but analytically distinct from it. Political symbolism has two specific properties distinguishing it from other political language: its metalinguistic property, and its connotative property.

The distinctive *metalinguistic* property of symbols is that they function simultaneously as apparent "object language" and actual "meta-language"; that is, they seem to denote a specific empirical event, but actually they refer to a series of signs which in turn refer to a category of events.³⁷ For example, Franklin Roosevelt's slogan, "priming the pump," refers *prima facie* to a simple farm chore, but it also functions as a concept referring to a wide range of social and economic policies. The selection of a word from everyday language endows the symbol with an appearance of familiarity, enabling members of the mass public to relate on a more intimate level to a remote, complex, and seemingly irrelevant event. A symbol may thus integrate an indefinite series of

³⁶ Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill & Wang 1967), 10.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 58 ff.

signs into a meaningful synthesis while retaining the illusion of concrete reality peculiar to words in everyday language. The fact that symbols are removed from empirical experience by one or more levels of abstraction makes it possible for them to condense a great deal of meaning into a highly economical communicative vehicle without reducing the meaning at one level to the meaning at another, inasmuch as the symbol remains multivalent or "polysemic."³⁸ The ambiguous metalinguistic character of the symbol may be depicted as follows:³⁹



The *connotative* property of the symbol refers to its capability to represent and convey emotion. This is significant in the light of our assumption that the quintessence of political culture concerns how people *feel* about politics. The amount of information a voter may assimilate is relevant perhaps to an assessment of his intelligence, or to a study of the effectiveness of the mass media and other agencies of civic education, but utterly irrelevant to political culture precisely defined. For example, from the fact that a person is ill-informed one cannot necessarily infer that he is "apathetic" (many assassins are ill-informed in an objective sense); nor can one infer that a person will be a "good citizen" from the fact that he is well-informed (many political scientists neglect to vote).

As poets have known intuitively for centuries, it is through symbolism, through the imagery and metaphor that T. S. Eliot called "objective correlatives" that man has best been able to express his feelings. Feelings cannot really be expressed convincingly in formal propositions, and to proceed under the illusion that they can is to invite the dilemma of "other minds" that has plagued certain recent British philosophers. As soon as the human mind ceases to be disinterested and becomes aware of its own feelings, it begins to gaze at the world with "interest," and the desire is engendered to create metaphor rather than to describe

³⁸ Paul Ricoeur uses this term to refer to the symbol's propensity to evoke numerous associations. See his "Creativity in Language: Word, Polysemy, Metaphor," in Erwin Straus, ed., *Language and Language Disturbances* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press 1974), 49-72.

³⁹ With certain terminological modifications, this figure was adapted from Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," in *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (New York: Hill & Wang 1972), 109-59.

objectively.⁴⁰ Once created, a symbol may succeed in bringing into focus the emotions implicit in the shared experiences of many others, as a result of which it will become the depository of their emotions as well.⁴¹

To the degree that a symbol succeeds in becoming a depository of widespread interest and feeling, it can incite prolonged public controversy, mobilize demonstrations of support or protest, and otherwise influence social behavior. For example, in the late 1960's the ABM became a controversial public symbol. The object language referred to a highly sophisticated weapons system and involved various arcane issues of American deterrence and defense strategy that rarely sustain such interest. But the symbol also had certain emotional connotations, touching upon feelings of anxiety about possible unemployment in the defense industry, and perhaps raising at a deeper level the question of the appropriate response to the inherently uncertain prospect of sudden death in a nuclear holocaust. As a symbol among the mass public, the ABM tended to become detached from the technical details of its possible disposition and performance (which could not readily be assimilated by a mass audience), and to be discussed primarily in terms of its connotations. Among the better-educated sectors of the public, the very vividness and urgency of its connotations sustained interest in the technical details of the weapons system and its place in overall deterrence strategy. Thus an argument may be publicly elaborated, at various levels of sophistication (depending on the intelligence of the participants), for as long as the emotional connotations of the generating symbol continue to sustain it. Once a public argument becomes detached from its emotional animus, it is likely to become empty rhetoric, a mere "conceit."⁴² Unless it has meanwhile become attached to extrasymbolic supports, the argument then dies of irrelevance. The Chinese contend that Marxism-Leninism has become little more than a conceit in the Soviet Union—an allegation that Soviet officialdom naturally disputes. The possibility illustrates the point, however, that even empty rhetoric may continue to hold sway for an indefinite period on the strength of its public prestige, the interest that

⁴⁰ Peter Munz, *When the Golden Bough Breaks: Structuralism or Typology?* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1973), 60. See also Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in Geertz, ed., *Myth, Symbol and Culture* (New York: Norton 1971), 1-39.

⁴¹ Abner Cohen, "Political Anthropology: The Analysis of the Symbolism of Power Relations," *Man*, iv (June 1969), 215-36.

⁴² Michael Walzer, "On the Role of Symbolism in Political Thought," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 82 (June 1967), 191-205.

the various organizations it has sired have vested in perpetuating it, and the absence of a compelling challenge.

Although we have argued that it forms the heart of political culture, the connotative content of language has rarely been analyzed by political scientists—(or by linguists or attitude psychologists, for that matter). The usual assumption is that it is “subjective,” and therefore too dependent upon the individual speaker and context to allow for generalization. However, the emotional connotations of symbols are surely not entirely subjective, or they could not be perceived by their readers or hearers; naturally, one cannot predict the listener’s reaction on the basis of the connotative implications of a symbol, but neither can one predict his reaction to its informational content. Let us concede that there are some connotations that are limited to specific contexts and speakers; on the other hand, there are also some connotations that are as objective and context-free as the symbol’s conceptual content. These are socially binding connotations, on which a skilled speaker can rely to evoke the same feelings in the listener that he himself has (or is assumed to have) when he invokes the symbol. It is on the basis of this emotional mutuality, based on common apprehension of a symbol, that the *steering* capabilities of political symbolism are realized.⁴³

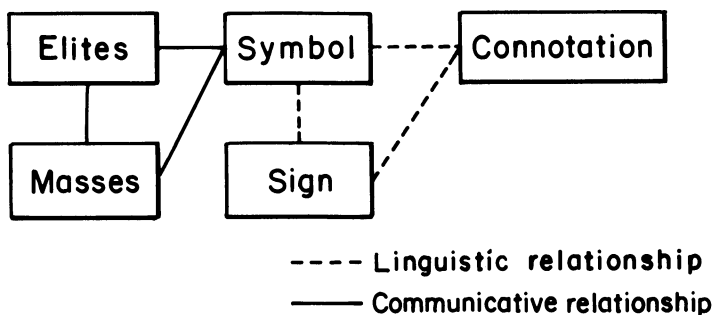
THE SYSTEM

We have suggested that the basic unit of analysis in studies of political culture is the symbol. Symbols are metalinguistically ambiguous units in that they are parts of the object language that function at the level of metalanguage, providing for typological elaboration of many realms of human experience on the basis of specific criteria of association. It is through symbolism that people express, convey, and clarify their feelings and values. Having thus distinguished political symbolism from other political language on the basis of its linguistic properties, let us introduce the communicative components of the political culture system, and then go on to specify the conceivable relationships among linguistic and communicative variables in the system.

The communicators in the political culture system may be divided into two categories—masses and elites. They are defined solely in terms of their communicative functions: elites manipulate symbols, while masses interpret symbols and respond more or less accordingly, depending on the skills of the elites and on whether their interests coincide. It is not necessarily assumed that elites control other values, such as

⁴³ Walther Dieckmann, *Sprache in der Politik: Einführung in die Pragmatik und Semantik der politischen Sprache* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter 1969), 75 ff.

wealth or even power. Special interest groups are irrelevant to the political *culture* system unless they participate in the manipulation of symbols (in which case they become elites); they normally operate *within* (or at the margins of) the political culture and by grace of its tolerance. Elites and masses relate to one another through symbols, as illustrated in this figure:



This system of political culture may be analyzed on the basis of three semiological relationships obtaining among its variables: pragmatics, semantics, and syntactics.⁴⁴ *Pragmatics* refers to the relationship between masses and elites, as mediated through symbols. From the pragmatic perspective, the symbol has meaning *for someone*: attention is focused on the speaker's intention to express or communicate meaning and on the reactions of the hearer. The *semantic* relationship abstracts from specific communication events and seeks to characterize the relationship between the symbol and the political reality to which it refers; it is thus basically concerned with the relationship between symbol and sign, and the typological elaboration of signs. *Syntactics* consists of the formal relationship among signs, as abstracted from the communication event, the speaker, the listener, and the referent; it is of particular importance in projecting the connotations of the symbol. In our analysis of the political culture system, we shall proceed from the pragmatic to the semantic to the syntactic, in progressive abstraction from the "real" communication event.

Pragmatics

We have noted that pragmatics focuses on the speaker's intentions to express or communicate something to someone, and on the reactions

⁴⁴ Charles W. Morris, *Signs, Language and Behavior* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall 1950); and Morris, "Foundations of the Theory of Signs," in Otto Neurath and others, eds., *Foundations of the Unity of Science*, I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1971), 77-139.

of the listener. Perhaps the chief difference between political symbolism and religious or literary symbolism is that the former is more obviously "pragmatic"—that is, closely tied to immediate human needs and desires. Linguists usually ignore pragmatics because it brings psychological questions into play, as already noted; such questions are unavoidable in political science, which is after all primarily concerned with the function of language in influencing behavior.

In the present model, the actors whose intentions are relevant are the elites and the masses. To simplify, for the purpose of analyzing the most basic political contingencies, let us assume for the moment that the masses' possible intentions may be adequately characterized as "opposition" or "support," and that the elites' intentions may be characterized as "symbolic enhancement" of opposition or support. Several possible motives for these diverging intentions have been discussed in the literature: the most important and politically relevant ones appear to be *relative deprivation*, for the masses (relative either to an earlier time or to another social reference group), and *status incongruence*, for elites. The chief difference between the two is the more inclusive scope of the former: masses may feel some status incongruence (particularly in cases of racial or ethnic discrimination), but are more apt to feel materially deprived, as status is higher on the normal hierarchy of values. Elites—having in most cases achieved relative material satisfaction—desire status, which is associated with political power and (in institutionalized systems) official position. Thus the basic political cleavage among the masses is between the deprived and the satisfied; among the elites it is between the candidates for office and the incumbents. The conceivable intentions of masses and elites combine to form four basic contingencies:

ELITE INTENTIONS

		Enhance Opposition	Enhance Support
MASS INTENTIONS	Oppose	1	2
	Support	3	4

1. When there is a mood of opposition among the masses that coincides with a desire among candidate elites to enhance opposition, the conditions exist for a sharp vertical cleavage (between a coalition of opposing elites and masses, and a coalition of supportive elites and masses), and possibly for civil war or a revolution; the outcome is

dependent upon the relative strength and skill of the opposing coalition vis-à-vis the incumbents. This potentially explosive situation is most easily (and most commonly) defused by co-opting opposing elites into positions of incumbency, thereby transforming the situation into contingency 2.

2. When there is a mood of opposition among the masses that coincides with a consensual desire by the elite to subdue opposition and enhance support, the conditions exist for a sharp horizontal cleavage between the elite and the masses. This situation may occasionally result in an anarchist uprising or a *Jacquerie*. More frequently, elites manage to use appropriate techniques of symbol manipulation (such as scapegoating, or turning the blame for the aggrieving situation against the protesters and mobilizing an anti-protest, pro-“normalcy” movement) to dissipate mass protest.

3. Where there is a mood of mass satisfaction that coincides with an elite’s desire to enhance opposition, there may be one of two outcomes. Either the incumbents will mute the opposition candidates, or the latter will succeed in using appropriate techniques of symbol manipulation to activate latent cleavages among the masses, thereby transforming the situation into contingency 1.

4. When there is a mood of mass satisfaction that coincides with a consensual desire to enhance support (rare, indeed, except in contingency tables), conditions exist for a sense of elite unity and mass quiescence, which may be further consolidated through the use of appropriate techniques of symbol manipulation.

The basic objective of symbol manipulation is the same for incumbent and candidate elites: both have an interest in fostering a sense of *identification* between themselves and the collectivity they mean to represent. The process of political identification involves generalization from objective perception to subjective wish-fulfilment:⁴⁵ from the perception of visible similarities between the identifier and his object of identification, the identifier allows himself to infer the existence of various invisible but desired similarities. A candidate member of the elite must try to appeal to both aspects of identification. He must manifest those aspects of the self that are *perceptibly similar* to a maximum number of people. (To do this, he⁴⁶ will wear Polish T-shirts, eat blintzes,

⁴⁵ Ezra Stotland and Max L. Hillmer, “Identification, Authoritarian Defensiveness, and Self-Esteem,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 64 (1962), 334-42.

⁴⁶ Although “he” will be used throughout these abstract formulations for the sake of simplicity and succinctness, I do not wish to imply that all political actors are male.

attend churches, don construction helmets, and generally try to appear all things to all men. For the sake of simplicity, we shall call this activity “mass” identification.) Simultaneously, he must display those characteristics that a maximum number of people will *desire to appropriate*—wealth, happiness, intelligence, beauty, courage, charm, power—all of the qualities that distinguish him as a member of the elite. We shall call this activity “elitist” identification. While seeking to meet the conflicting requirements for fostering identification, he must also try to disqualify or render implausible his rival’s attempts to do the same.

Because of their differing structural positions, the incumbent and the candidate dispose of different symbolic resources and liabilities, and are therefore apt to employ different manipulative techniques. An incumbent finds it easier to foster elitist identification, simply because he is already a member of the elite. To capitalize on this advantage, he may attempt to enhance the status of the collectivity he represents, and emphasize the indissoluble linkage between the office he holds and the high status and great power of that collectivity, alluding frequently to his own competence as an incumbent and deriding his opponent’s inexperience.⁴⁷ The potential liability of the incumbent’s position is that an overemphasis on his elite characteristics and an underemphasis on the common characteristics that facilitate mass identification may provoke envy and resentment. The strengths and weaknesses of the candidate are the exact obverse: he usually has greater difficulty establishing his leadership qualities and fostering elitist identification, but finds it much easier to identify with the masses. The candidate may capitalize on this by temporarily recanting his elite status and adopting numerous popular but mutually incompatible or otherwise impractical positions, taking advantage of the incumbent’s relative inability to identify with the masses by promulgating a symbolism of *distinction*: incumbents are estranged from the masses by an insurmountable distinction, and their elite qualities are but the fruit of the exploitation of the masses. During the Chinese Cultural Revolution of 1966–1968, for instance, the traditional symbolic polarities of ghosts versus men, appearance versus reality, dark versus light, and filth versus purity were evoked to dramatize the distinction between elites and masses;

⁴⁷ Occasionally, of course, a candidate will retain his commitment to the symbols of opposition even after he wins incumbency. This seems a politically irrational (and therefore perhaps heroic) strategy, however, since he thereby jeopardizes his relations with other members of the elite and his privileged access to the symbols of legitimacy. In the same sense, it is irrational for a candidate to defend the status quo.

the metaphors of “frames,” “shackles,” and “fortress” suggested the rigidity and invidious character of this barrier.⁴⁸ By symbolically enhancing this sense of elite estrangement, a candidate may proceed to impugn an incumbent’s record without risking insult to the constituency whose support he hopes to win; by mitigating this distinction and promoting his identification with the symbols of community (“draping himself in the flag”), an incumbent may succeed in equating criticism of himself with criticism of the group he represents.

“Symbolic enhancement” refers to the loss of distance between actor and symbol, with the result that symbols acquire a greatly enhanced capability to influence behavior. Elites seek to enhance their symbolism by “framing” it—that is, by altering its outer and inner setting. Outer framing consists of using ritual ceremonies and consecrated forums to isolate language from its immediate practical-life interests and transform it into something entirely different in nature—more impressive, strong, and grandiose. Inner framing consists of the use of a specialized or prestigious vocabulary, rhythmic cadence, or emphatic physical gestures to endow linguistic symbols with added power and dignity.⁴⁹

Because it heightens the pragmatic efficacy of symbols, it is in the interest of incumbent elites to institutionalize “framing” within a context they can control, and thereby consolidate their authority. When the ceremonies used to frame language become institutionalized within an ongoing organizational vehicle, “ritualization” occurs. Ritualization involves insulating the symbol system as much as possible from unpredictable external events that might falsify it, and encapsulating it within a community of believers. Within this bounded context, shared belief in the symbols facilitates control and makes possible a predictable social order—thereby consensually validating that shared belief and providing a pretext to punish any violators of the consensus. Differential knowledge of the symbols may comprise a basis for stratification within the community, with a permanent staff of specialists being set up to develop and perpetuate the symbol system. By strictly subordinating individual to community, and emotional impulse to ceremonial decorum, ritualization defines the nature of the internal opposition it generates. Such opposition then takes the form of broad social movements that celebrate the expression of emotional spontaneity, seek to

⁴⁸ Dittmer, “Thought Reform and Cultural Revolution: An Analysis of the Symbolism of Chinese Polemics,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 71 (March 1977).

⁴⁹ Toshihiko Izutsu, *Language and Magic: Studies in the Magical Functions of Speech* (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Philological Studies, 1956) 37, 117.

level symbolic distinctions, publicize all esoteric communication, and inaugurate a utopian *communitas*.⁵⁰ The student movement of the late 1960's in the democratic West manifested these tendencies.⁵¹

Semantics

The semantic relationship between symbol and referent is often loose, but never altogether arbitrary (as it is in symbolic logic or algebra, wherein x may equal any number, depending on the value of the other terms in the equation).⁵² Forming the core of the symbol's meta-linguistic or conceptual meaning is the empirical meaning of the original sign; the symbol may embrace an indefinite series of other signs only insofar as they are in some way associated with that core meaning. For example, "New Frontier" refers *as a sign* to a wilderness area on the outskirts of civilization; as a *symbol* it refers to a range of policies and policy makers ("New Frontiersmen") allegedly characterized by their fresh, innovative approach to problems. The fact that the original referent supplies the symbol's core meaning accounts for the fact that certain symbols seem to have similar meanings in many different contexts and even in different cultures, such as the use of the wind or breath to symbolize the spirit, or the use of the sky to symbolize transcendence, power, and immutability. The symbolism of height and depth is frequently used to represent hierarchy in all its many manifestations (bowing, kneeling, ascending a throne, social climbing); and the sun has long been a symbol of authority, because it reveals itself at the same time it reveals other things, eternally sending forth emanations of its substance that reach vast distances and nourish the recipients without perceptibly diminishing its own splendor.⁵³ Although the

⁵⁰ Douglas (fn. 35), 8, 14, 19, 73, and throughout; Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine 1969), 94-95. For a discussion of the progressive aspects of ritual, see James L. Peacock, *Rites of Modernization: Symbolic and Social Aspects of Indonesian Proletarian Drama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1968).

⁵¹ Barbara G. Myerhoff, "The Revolution as Trip: Symbol and Paradox," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, No. 395 (May 1971), 105-17; Aristide R. Zolberg, "Moments of Madness," *Politics and Society*, II (Winter 1972), 183-209.

⁵² David Schneider, in *American Kinship: A Cultural Account* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall 1968), argues that "A symbol is something that stands for something else where there is no necessary or intrinsic relationship between the symbol and that which it symbolizes." But it seems to me that his own book can be used to demonstrate a "necessary" and involuntary aspect of American kinship and a clear metaphorical association between this aspect and the "voluntary" aspects of kinship.

⁵³ Edwin Bevan, *Symbolism and Belief* (Fort Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press 1938), 134 and throughout; Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. by Rosemary Sheed (New York: Sheed and Ward 1958).

symbolism of political corruption and guilt remains to be systematically investigated, Ricoeur has traced the Judeo-Christian concept of evil to the symbolism of contagion, of a stain or blemish, of missing the mark, of wandering astray, of being uprooted.⁵⁴

Informed by the meaning of the original sign, a symbol may then be extended to an indefinite series of new signs on the basis of their association with that core meaning. Modern research in structural linguistics suggests that there may be only two basic principles of association in the formation of symbols: metonymy and metaphor.⁵⁵ *Metonymy* is a relationship based on the substitution of *contiguous* elements, as in synecdochy, or *pars pro toto*: the launching of the first Sputnik symbolically dramatized Soviet technological advancement; the dog, Checkers, became a symbol of the legitimate private appropriation of campaign funds; the Watergate tapes a symbol of widespread corruption in government. *Metaphor* is a relationship based on the substitution of *similar* elements, as in the concept of a "deal" in "Square Deal," "New Deal," and "Fair Deal"; or the Bolshevik (and Black Panther) clenched-fist salute as a symbol of aggressive determination. In political symbolism, both processes are continually operative; careful observation may reveal that preference is given to one or the other, depending on cultural patterns, personality, or style.⁵⁶

Symbols are accorded central status in a political culture according to their ability to order and illuminate experience: it is in the metaphoric cross-referencing of domains that culture is integrated, providing us with the sensation of wholeness.⁵⁷ Those symbols capable of elaborating relationships among a wide range of diverse cultural experiences are referred to as "key symbols." According to Ortner, key symbols may have elaborating power in two modes: they may have conceptual elaborating power, in which case they are valued for their capacity to conceptualize the order of the world; or they may have action-elaborating power, in which case they are valued for their ability to imply clear-cut modes of action appropriate to a particular political culture. Ortner calls symbols with conceptual elaborating power "root metaphors"; elaborating symbols that imply culturally appropriate actions

⁵⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. by Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper and Row 1967).

⁵⁵ A seminal article was Roman Jakobson, "The Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," in Jakobson, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton 1956), 55-82.

⁵⁶ Cf. Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Anthony Wilden (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press 1968).

⁵⁷ James W. Fernandez, "Persuasions and Performances: Of the Best in Every Body . . . and the Metaphors of Everyman," in Geertz (fn. 40), 39-61.

for various contingencies are “key scenarios.”⁵⁸ (It should be noted that both are analytical distinctions that are empirically intertwined.) The human body functions as a root metaphor for many cultures,⁵⁹ and of course the body’s sexual modalities have acquired great conceptual elaborating power in the West since Freud. In politics, the scale (balance of power), and now the computer (input-output, feedback, etc.) have become root metaphors. A key scenario in American political culture would be the myth of the log cabin, which formulates popular conceptions of political success and suggests means for achieving it in the face of seemingly insuperable obstacles. In contemporary China, the key scenario of peasant revolution is articulated in the “Thought of Mao Tse-tung”; the Chairman introduced the notion that this scenario should be re-enacted periodically (as in the Cultural Revolution) in order to enhance its current relevance through ritual.

When a symbol is applied to new signs, it must be dissociated from its original context and become assimilated to the particular contexts of its users.⁶⁰ As a result, the core meaning of a widely used symbol tends to atrophy and become reduced to a cliché. The mass media have accelerated this process of inflationary devaluation, steadily reducing the typical symbol’s life span. Actors and politicians and other performers who seek to symbolize and influence mass moods can prolong their symbolic relevance beyond that of nonhuman symbols by self-consciously readjusting their public images, sometimes at the price of some disruption of their private lives and sense of identity.

Syntactics

Syntactics consists of the formal analysis of the internal organization of symbols in a symbol system. Analysis of the syntactic arrangement of symbols is particularly valuable for the light it casts upon the (perhaps unconscious) feeling-state of the communicator:⁶¹ whereas the denotative content of symbolism is expressed semantically, its connotative content tends to be conveyed by its syntax. Two aspects of syntactic arrangement are worth particular attention: narrative arrangements of plots, and logical relationships among themes.

Symbols with a clear plot structure, serving a practical argument and

⁵⁸ Sherry B. Ortner, “On Key Symbols,” *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 75 (October 1973), 133⁸-47.

⁵⁹ Douglas (fn. 35).

⁶⁰ Robert J. Pranger, *Action, Symbolism and Order* (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press 1968), 157.

⁶¹ Edward Stankiewicz, “Problems of Emotive Language,” in Thomas A. Sebeok and others, eds., *Approaches to Semiotics* (The Hague: Mouton 1964), 239-65.

appealing to a perennial or historically recurring constituency are termed "political myths." Each type of political myth has its own epic hero and typical episodes; for example, the leitmotifs of epic heroism include the birth and death of the hero, tested heroism, descent into the underworld, and encounters with various antiheroes: the trickster, the punished wanderer, the unpromising hero.⁶² There are foundation myths and eschatological myths, racist myths, and national revolutionary myths; common to all is a demand for a morally coherent world.⁶³ Surprisingly enough, the plots of recorded myth seem to be more finite than the plots of empirical history, although history is limited by human experience and myth only by human imagination. The reason probably has to do with the fact that myth is not free fantasy but a socially useful formula: the forms of myth are limited by their applicability in a structured political context, and in the course of history the variety of political structures that have emerged is small and recurrent.⁶⁴

The efficacy of a political myth in practical argument depends upon its being accepted as true; it is accepted as true if it explains the experiences of those to whom it is addressed and justifies the purposes they are pursuing. If a myth achieves widespread credibility, it can serve many positive functions in a political system: it can link the hero to a community, legitimize power, establish moral consensus, and limit meaningful alternatives for action, thus establishing a range of predictability for society. Due to their relative immunity from public challenge, myths can preserve customs and rituals, initiate youth into the community through various rites of passage, and confer culturally valid criteria for social stratification and leadership recruitment. But a political myth has certain distinct drawbacks as well: for example, it tends to be extremely antipragmatic, reducing adaptability to crises by foreclosing many alternatives as immoral.⁶⁵ And just as the power of some is symbolically enhanced, others will be placed at a severe rhetorical disadvantage. The dynamics of public debate in any community are structured by the fabric of the prevailing myth system,⁶⁶ and the number

⁶² Gilbert Morris Cuthbertson, *Political Myth and Epic* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press 1975), 101-02.

⁶³ Henry Tudor, *Political Myth* (New York: Praeger 1972), 91.

⁶⁴ Cuthbertson (fn. 62), 102. For a good example of the analysis of mythical plot, see Terence S. Turner, "Oedipus: Time and Structure in Narrative Form," in Robert F. Spencer, ed., *Forms of Symbolic Action: American Ethnological Society Proceedings* (Seattle: University of Washington Press 1970).

⁶⁵ Cuthbertson (fn. 62), 156-211.

⁶⁶ Martin E. Spencer, "Politics and Rhetorics," *Social Research*, xxxvii (Winter 1970), 597-624.

of pluralistic systems in which public challenge of sanctioned myths is permitted is small.

Levi-Strauss has been among the first to suggest that there is an internal logic (structure) underlying the surface plots of a series of myths, endowing them with a common but not immediately obvious meaning. To identify this latent structure of meaning, he breaks the plot into the shortest possible sentences (themes). He then notes similarities among the various thematic elements and sorts them into separate bundles on that basis. These bundles always come in pairs of opposites, reflecting (according to Levi-Strauss) the innate tendency of the human mind to think in binary oppositions, like a digital computer. The pairs of opposites can then be collected into several conceptual schemes according to their subject matter (that is, cosmological, economic, and so forth). Conceptual schemes and their interrelationships can be expressed in a diagram or a series of diagrams that will represent the global structure of the myth, which will in turn make its meaning clear. For example, Levi-Strauss's structural interpretation of the Oedipus myth is that it is an attempt to reconcile the belief that man sprang from the earth with the knowledge that men are born of their parents. The myth mediates between these incompatible views by suggesting that they are related in a way comparable to the relationship between overestimating and underestimating the importance of blood ties. The myth thus provides a logical model capable of overcoming an unwelcome contradiction, progressing from an awareness of this contradiction to its eventual resolution.⁶⁷ Edelman has sought to employ structuralist techniques in the analysis of current political controversies, suggesting that we find a pair of opposing myths for the conflicting beliefs that define our attitudes toward social problems.⁶⁸ For example, he cites two conflicting myths concerning American welfare policies: one blames the indigent for their own plight, while the other holds the authorities accountable.⁶⁹

Turner's analysis of the internal structure of the myth or symbol seems to be a logical development of Levi-Strauss's: like the latter, he holds that key symbols in a culture have an inherent bipolar structure.

⁶⁷ Cf. Claude Levi-Strauss, *Totemism* (Boston: Beacon Press 1963); Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books 1963); and Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1966). For a clear exposition, see Howard Gardner, *The Quest for Mind: Piaget, Levi-Strauss, and the Structuralist Movement* (New York: Knopf 1973).

⁶⁸ Note, however, that Edelman shifts his focus from the myth, which is not an immediately obvious source of contradictions, to the public polemic, which is.

⁶⁹ Murray Edelman, *Language and Social Problems* (Madison: Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Papers, University of Wisconsin, June 1974), 4, 5.

Yet he takes the analysis further by attempting to determine the emotional and evaluative connotations of the two poles: he finds that each key symbol has an "ideological pole" and a "sensory pole."⁷⁰ The former makes an appeal to the principles of moral and social order, the latter to human desire and feeling, even of a "gross, frank and physiological order." Turner's underlying assumption is that human emotion toward the political order is inherently ambivalent, and that effective symbolism excites this ambivalence. Just as, for Levi-Strauss, the myth provides a logical model to overcome unwelcome contradictions, for Turner the ritual provides a resolution of the ambivalent bipolarity between higher aspirations and baser appetites: "Powerful drives and emotions associated with human physiology, especially with the physiology of reproduction, are divested in the ritual process of their anti-social quality and attached to components of the normative order, energizing the latter with a borrowed vitality, and thus making the Durkheimian 'obligatory' desirable."⁷¹ Although Turner suggests that ritual resolution of symbolic bipolarity permits cathartic expression to participants while mitigating the more overt elements of hostility, my own research indicates that the contradictions inherent in such opposing symbols will become manifest in the process of mobilization unless extrasymbolic constraints are imposed.⁷²

CONCLUSION

I have presented critical appraisals of several attempts by political scientists to deal with the cultural superstructure of society, and proposed an outline of an alternative theory of political culture based on a semiological conception of communication. At this point it seems appropriate to review the central criticisms of previous approaches in order to determine whether my system constitutes an improvement.

Many of the criticisms were focused on problems of conceptualization. I have attempted to show that the prevailing definition of political culture has tended to blur its conceptual boundaries with political structure on the one side and with political psychology on the other. The reason is that the field of political culture was conceived in terms of the subjective perception of an objective political reality, omitting

⁷⁰ Turner (fn. 50), 52; Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press 1974), 37 ff.; Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press 1967), 19-47. Turner erroneously refers to a *semantic* bipolarity, apparently assuming that the "ideological" and "sensory" properties inhere in the objects themselves rather than in the emotional predispositions of the subjects involved.

⁷¹ Turner (fn. 50), 52.

⁷² Dittmer (fn. 48).

any intervening variable. As a result, there has been a tendency to assume an approximate equivalence between structure and psychology (except for abrupt structural transitions or abnormal psychology), thereby unduly discounting the potential for intrasystem conflict or systemic change. The missing intervening variable was provided by students of political symbolism, who used their discovery of the distinction between symbol and substance to illuminate the conflicts of interest underlying a euphemistic symbolic facade. But lacking any systematic conception of the symbolic process, they allowed certain oversimplifications to creep into their conceptualizations; for instance, the assumptions that whatever did not involve redistribution of goods and services was "symbolic," and that symbolism was "empty," having no other function than to masquerade as goods and services. By blurring the distinction between symbols and political reality, these analysts could then arrive at the deeply cynical position that much of politics was in fact shadow rather than substance, and that anyone who sought reform might be better advised to seek a psychiatrist. The opposite conceptual error was committed by those who introduced communication theory to political science: while the political symbolists tended to confuse symbol and reality, the political communication theorists tended to conflate symbols with words. This usually led to some form of quantitative content analysis, which frequently tended to discount the qualitative content of the symbols.

My conceptualization adopts the symbol as the central variable in the political culture system. I ascribe to symbols the requisite autonomy to sustain an independent subdiscipline dedicated to their analysis. The distinction between symbol and reality is an empirical variable rather than an assumed constant; it will probably vary in approximate correlation with the extrasemantic functions served by the symbol. The distinction between symbol and language is made with the help of the concept of metalanguage: symbols serve as metalinguistic categories while still appearing to be part of the object language. The assumption that elites use language more rationally than the masses has been abandoned; not so the assumption that elites exercise a dominant influence on political communication. I have introduced to the analysis the connotative and pragmatic aspects of symbolism most frequently neglected by students of political symbolism. All of the foregoing was attempted within a conceptual framework that relates relevant communicative and linguistic variables to one another within a comprehensive semiological system. Yet this system is not assumed to incline toward any particular equilibrium or steady state: indeed, conflict

among incongruent symbolic formulations is assumed, providing the internal dynamic of the system.

I am aware that the alleged theoretical superiority of a semiological systems approach remains moot until its utility is tested in empirical applications. How may such an approach be applied? Survey research should still play an integral role in any country that permits this form of investigation, for direct questionnaires probably remain the most effective means of determining the nature of the pragmatic relationship between masses and elites.⁷³ But the heart of any analysis should obviously focus on the symbols themselves, beginning with the key symbols. Social anthropologists have developed useful techniques for identifying key symbols in a political culture. One method involves analyzing the political system for its underlying value orientations, hierarchical patterns, attitudes toward authority, and so forth, and then searching for some figure or image that seems to define, in relatively pure form, the underlying sentiments.⁷⁴ A more recent and probably superior approach begins by identifying those objects in a particular political culture that seem to attract special interest, and then proceeds to analyze these objects for their meanings: Why do the participants consider them so important? In which different contexts, which different action situations, which different guises, do they appear? How are they elaborated to relate various phenomena in the political culture? What cultural restrictions, rules, or sanctions surround them? Which groups use them, for what purposes, and how do other groups react?⁷⁵ Once the key symbols of a political culture have been identified, they can be placed within the semiological framework outlined above for systematic analysis of their linguistic and communicative relationships. And once the qualitative structure of a given symbol system has been established, quantitative measurement of the relationships among its variables should become feasible as well as theoretically interesting.

⁷³ That would include such obvious questions as mass reaction to changes in political symbol structure. See, for instance, G. Cleveland Wilhoit, "Political Symbol Shifts in Crisis News," *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, XIII (May 1969), 313-19.

⁷⁴ Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1946).

⁷⁵ Ortner (fn. 58).