

Jan-Erik Lane and Svante Ersson
Culture and Politics: A Comparative Approach
(Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2002, 353pp.).

As the authors point out *“During the 1990s culture theory became very topical in political science, reflecting a surge of interest in the politics of ethnicity, religion and civilizations – all of which relate to how people search for identity by adhering to the values of social groups.”* The notion of culture as used by anthropologists is the total distinctive way of life of a group of people. As Linton noted *“The culture of a society is the way of life of its members, the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share, and transmit from generation to generation.”*

Even the more specific concept of “political culture” is very broad. As Lucien Pye states *“Political culture is the set of attitudes, beliefs and sentiments, which give order and meaning to a political process and which provide the underlying assumptions and rules that govern behaviour in the political system... Political culture is thus the manifestation in aggregate form of the psychological and subjective dimensions of politics. A political culture is the product of both the collective history of a political system and the life histories of the members of that system, and thus it is rooted equally in public events and private experiences.”*

How does one analyse values and their impact of decision-making and behaviour using an empirical approach *“inquiring if and how values matter for decisions and real outcomes in politics and society. In particular, we will inquire into whether values matter extrinsically – that is, whether a variation in values or value orientations brings about different social, economic and political outcomes.”*

It is within the family that culture is first developed and maintained both by example and by teaching. The authors analyse the efforts of the French sociologist E. Todd to link socio-cultural attitudes to family structure: patrilineal-matrilineal, authoritarian-egalitarian etc. Todd’s generalizations are suggestive and need to be followed up, but they are too broad, and one finds differences within relatively homogeneous groups such as African clans. Nevertheless, Todd is right to insist on the family’s role in shaping culture and laying the foundation of political culture.

Within the cultural approach to politics, there has been an emphasis on values, and the authors have an important section on “Value Orientations: How Real Are They?” Yet it is very difficult to separate values from social class, geography, historical traditions – all of which make up culture. As the authors conclude *“It may therefore be trivial to conclude that ‘culture matters’ while recognizing that other factors also have an impact on outcomes. ‘Culture matters’ does not mean that only ‘culture matters’. It implies that ‘culture’, covering ethnicity, religion, legacies and values, need to be considered when inquiring into social, political and economic outcomes at different analytical levels.”*

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