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**“Political Culture and the Persistence
of the Inequality”**

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POLITICAL CULTURE AND THE PERSISTENCE OF INEQUALITY

ABSTRACT

A definition of political culture is posited in which the values that regulate reciprocal altruism constitute a normative system that sustains social solidarity and stabilizes inequalities. These values dampen resentment over unequal rewards by justifying status differences and the exclusion of racial, ethnic, and religious groups, among others, from full participation in social life. Inequality is bolstered by conventional modes of moral reasoning that legitimize explanations for inequality that are embedded in law or emanate from authority.

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INTRODUCTION

Inequality is a notoriously complex subject (Rae and Yates, 1981), varying as it does by individual and group, by results, by opportunity, and by the nature of the rewards that exist. Some dimensions of inequality (results, for instance) may contradict others (opportunities), sometimes directly but at other times in subtle, non-intuitive ways. Inequality may be most obvious in the economic realm although this often reinforces political and social inequities. In this paper I will largely give data regarding economic inequality with subsidiary reference to how this condition affects political and social life.

Inequality is not a transient feature. As Vilfredo Pareto long ago documented, inequality exists in every known society although in different ways and to different degrees. (Buchanan, 2002:2) It arises from the interactive nature of social life (i.e., exchange) with built-in tendencies toward self-reinforcement as some individuals become increasingly able to manipulate greater rewards for self-advantage. As a consequence, in every society resources tend to migrate into the hands of a few (Buchanan, 2002:1)

The scholarly output on inequality is voluminous and it is not my purpose to review this literature. Rather, the focus of this paper is on why inequality persists and how this persistence is related to political culture. I will ask why it is that discontent about inequality may exist, but revolutions are rare. In order to make this argument I will first provide brief examples of inequality drawn from China (PRC) and the United States. I will note the extent of inequality and some of the efforts that are being made to ameliorate this condition.

INEQUALITY IN CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES

With a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita of US\$966 China in 2002 ranked 102 out of 163 countries, ahead of Honduras and Bolivia but behind the Philippines (Taiwan was in 29th place with a GDP per capita of \$12,533). It is a society that has seen a reduction in the number of people below the poverty line, from 200 million in 1980 to 70 million in 1995, at the same time that economic inequality has increased dramatically. (Han, 1997:1) The Gini coefficient, a measure of inequality, has risen steadily, from .389 in 1995 to .417 in 2000 (with 0 indicating complete equality and 1 complete inequality). China's level of inequality is now above what is generally considered the international danger level of 0.4.

In terms of financial wealth, excluding the value of home real estate, China had the sixth fastest growth rate in the world for individuals with at least US\$ 1 million in assets. Although still relatively small when compared with the United States (with 2.272 High Net Worth Individuals in 2003) the number of millionaires in China increased 12% in 2003, pushing the national total to 236,000. (Chinadaily, August 27, 2004)

Impressive though the growth rate in millionaires is, signaling, as it does, an increasing concentration of wealth, it is sectoral inequality, especially between urban and rural areas, that is most noteworthy. Indeed, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has averred that the urban-rural gap in China is on a par with Zimbabwe, perhaps the highest in the world. After 20 years of economic reform urban residents earn 2.8 times more than rural people with little real decline in rural poverty since the late 1980s. Urban annual household per capita disposable income increased from 343 yuan in 1978 (the beginning of economic reforms) to 5,854 yuan in 1999, an annual increase of 14.5%.

(Xin, 2002:4) By 2003 the nationwide per capita disposable income had risen to 8,472 yuan while the net income of rural inhabitants was 2,622 yuan. (People's Daily, 2004) Moreover, rural poverty has been exacerbated by the loss of socialist job security and rudimentary health insurance. As a consequence rural incomes in China are only approximately 40% of urban incomes while in most countries (1995) this figure is 66% or more.

China's major cities are predominantly situated along its eastern seaboard. As a consequence, the rural-urban gap masks sharp regional differences. In 1996 the per capita GDP and total GDP of the eastern region were 1.9 times and 5.5 times larger respectively than those of the western region. China's poverty belt is located predominantly in its central region. This area constitutes one-half of China's land mass and is home to 285 million people, equivalent to the population of the United States. The disparities among regions can be noted in differences in rural per capita incomes. While the income of farmers in the Shanghai suburbs averaged 5,596.37 yuan per year, the figure in Guizhou was far lower at 1,374.16 yuan. (People's Daily, 2001)

In general, therefore, China's inequality characteristics are as follows: (1) growing wealth concentration; (2) severe differentiation among regions; (3) peak differentiation between urban and rural areas; and (4) serious internal differentiation within cities and rural areas. Perhaps the most de-stabilizing consequence of these differences is the link between inequality and unlawful or semi-lawful activities. The Chinese people view corruption (conservatively estimated at 13-16% of GDP), especially tax evasion, as the number one factor contributing to social instability. Disproportionate rewards flow especially into the hands of Communist Party members (who have a very

small probability, perhaps 1 in 10, of getting caught). Although the poor and vulnerable have been able to accumulate some wealth, significant wealth accumulation comes from non-economic means such as buying larger and better housing at subsidized prices and receiving substantial gifts and bribes. In this regard Party members and their children have disproportionately benefited. For instance, in 1995 there was a 30% difference in net total wealth between households whose head was a Party member and those without. This difference increased to 37% in 1999. (Xin, 2002)

The United States, although far richer than China, ranking 4th in the world out of 163 countries in terms of GDP per capita (in 2002), is also plagued by significant and increasing inequality. Although real wages have increased, income and wealth inequality have also increased and the wage gap between men and women has widened. Indeed, the net worth of the median American household fell 10% between 1989 and 1997 while the net worth of the top 1% is now 2.4 times the combined worth of the poorest 80% and is higher in the past decade than it was in the previous three decades. In 1995 the Gini coefficient for net worth was 0.87 and for financial wealth it was a staggering 0.94. The last time the United States saw a comparable degree of inequality was in the 1920s, just prior to the Great Depression. (Scott, 2000:29,30) Subsequent to the 1930s new norms of equality were established (the New Deal) but these unraveled in the 1980s and 1990s. In 2003, for example, for the third straight year, the ranks of the poor and those without health insurance grew. (Leonhardt, 2004: on line) Today large numbers of Americans are worse off than their counterparts in other advanced countries, with greater poverty and lower life expectancy. (Krugman, October 20, 2002:7-9)

One might well ask whether a plutocracy is now slowly emerging in America. There is, verifiably, an increasing concentration of income at the top. While the average annual salary (in 1998 dollars) went from \$32,522 in 1970 to \$35,864 in 1999, an increase of approximately 10%, the average real annual compensation of the top CEOs went from 1.3 million US dollars (3.9 times the pay of the average worker) to 37.5 million, more than 1,000 times the pay of ordinary employees. (Krugman, October 20, 2002:1-2) *Business Week* reports that the ratio of top executive to blue collar worker wages was 42:1 in 1980, 326:1 in 1998 and 419:1 in 1999. Over the past 30 years most of the gains to the top 10% went to the top 1% (whose wealth is now greater than the bottom 95%) while 60% of this went to the top 0.1% and half of this to the top 0.01%, a mere 13,000 taxpayers, who have an average income of \$17 million dollars. The aggregate figure for this small group is equal to the income of the 20 million poorest families and 300 times that of average families. (Krugman, October 20, 2002:3)

From the standpoint of equality, these figures are grim. The distribution of wealth, however, would be more equal if race were removed as a factor. According to the United Nations, the net worth of whites in America is 8 times that of blacks and 12 times that of Hispanics. Inequality among the races, of course, is not solely economic, as wide disparities also exist in education, labor force participation and health care, among others.

What are some of the factors that have prompted inequality in America? Three can be adduced. First, tax cuts for those at the top of the U.S. pyramid have clearly abetted increasing wealth. Certainly decreasing or eliminating Estate Taxes is probably the single most significant way to increase inequality. Second, there has been an increase in corporate cronyism with Boards of Directors, who owe their positions (and perquisites)

to CEOs, lavishing increasingly high compensation packages on those same CEOs. Third, there has been an increased cultural emphasis on the virtues of individualism, freedom from government intervention and sturdy self-reliance -- for the poor, who are asked to accept without demur reductions in special treatment. One consequence has been a growing divisiveness and polarization in politics.

Has increasing inequality in China and the United States gone unchallenged? Surveys indicate that 100-200 million urban Chinese are dissatisfied with social conditions with 32-36 million being extremely dissatisfied. The Chinese Ministry of Public Security reports that in urban areas at least 30 large scale (500 to 2,000 participants) take place every day as well as 240 medium scale (100 – 500 participants) protests. Some are even larger. Reports indicate that peasants have stormed local government buildings and clashed with the police. By 2002 the number of protests and demonstrations had risen to 700 per day. Grievances typically center on low living standards, high taxation and official corruption. All of this has clearly reached the ear of the government which has responded, without enormous success, by initiating campaigns against corruption and even by formulating a massive plan to move more than 7 million people away from the country's most poverty stricken areas.

In the United States the 2004 Presidential election has seen Democrats focus on the issue of inequality, especially with Vice Presidential candidate John Edwards emphasis on the existence of “two Americas.” Executive malfeasance has been widely and negatively commented upon with high profile trials involving the heads of such corporate giants as Enron and Tyco. Above all, however, there has been a drum beat of criticism in the media about tax cuts that hugely favor the wealthy.

Social criticism notwithstanding it is nevertheless interesting to note the degree to which inequality has increased in China and the United States and the seeming passivity of most of the population in the face of this condition. Why have there been no widespread calls to mount the barricades? Is it just fear of the consequences or do other factors prompt an acceptance of inequality? To get some answers I turn now to a more theoretical exposition regarding the functional imperatives of political cultures and their role in legitimizing inequality.

INEQUALITY AND POLITICAL CULTURES

Political culture has, in the main, aptly been termed an observational science, relying on cultural interpretation in full ethnographic context with an emphasis on case studies and a suspicion about generalizing across cases. (Ross, 1997:42,45) This approach is clearly differentiated from structural analysis where comparison does not end with particularistic description but rather explores how cultural characteristics that fulfill a requisite function vary among societies, how these variations came to exist and how they maintain themselves and change over time. (Lichbach, 1997:256) Why political cultures differ and why they change is attributed to the way that endogenous and exogenous influences alter the form of functional imperatives. Positing functionality rather than ethnography as the defining feature of political cultures requires tracing shared functional attributes back to core antecedents.

Altruism

Self-advantage is clearly a motive that impels all people at some times, often to the extent of cheating to obtain some end. Many studies have explored deceitfulness with perhaps the most famous being the pioneering work of Hartshorne and May. (1928) Clearly it pays at times to cheat, especially when the act is not likely to be discovered, when others won't change their behavior even if cheating occurs and/or when others are prevented in some way from being able to respond adequately.

Paradoxically, altruism, which is defined as behavior "that benefits another creature at the expense of the one carrying it out" is also infused with self-interest. (Blackmore, 1999:147) Altruism is selfish in the sense that it furthers the possibility that one's genes will be passed to the next generation. Not surprisingly, therefore, altruism is most clearly and commonly observed in contexts of high relatedness. In practice a greater willingness to help relatives rather than unrelated others has been widely confirmed. (Irons, 1991:62)

Altruism involves helping and sharing and is associated with friendship, gratitude, sympathy and trust as well as dislike, moralistic aggression and guilt as adaptations that regulate the altruistic system. So widespread are these sentiments that it is reasonable to conclude that the underlying emotional dispositions have important genetic components. (Trivers, 1971:35,45,48) Indeed, the evolutionary origin of altruism is clearly related to a mathematical model of population genetics which states that "if the reduction in survival and reproduction of individuals owing to genes for altruism is more than offset by the increased probability of survival of the group owing to altruism, then altruism genes will rise in frequency throughout the entire population of competing groups." (E.O. Wilson, 1998:65)

“Reciprocal altruism,” says Trivers (1985:48), “is two individuals who trade altruistic acts.” While humans have evolved as egoists, they also have an evolved willingness to incur personal costs in order to cooperate with others. Indeed, strong reciprocity requiring sharing and cooperative effort permeates social life and is found in all societies, although with varying content and strength. (Bowles and Gintis, 1998-99:7) Human beings are highly competitive (in war, sport, business, etc.) but are unique among living creatures in having cooperative strategies that have evolved as a consequence of direct, inter-group competition. Cooperative defense, for example, is based on reciprocity; where it thrived the group flourished, making the habit of cooperation increasingly a part of the human psyche, prompting people to act against their direct interests (e.g., flight) alongside of unrelated others. (Ridley, 1997:182-183) Groups of cooperators thus have a large advantage over groups of selfish individuals. Consequently, in competition between selfish and cooperative groups the selfish one will eventually become extinct (in the absence of conquest) before reverse contamination can take place. A culture of cooperation, then, is thus slowly built up from scratch, in Darwinian fashion, step by step, without explicit instruction.

Along with strong reciprocity there has also evolved a disposition to punish those who violate group norms. It is surely not accidental that all known societies have a taboo against selfishness. (Ridley, 1997:38) In fact, societies where there are disproportionate numbers of individuals who reciprocate are characterized by an effective policing of norms in a manner that confers group benefits on society’s members. Systems such as these are further characterized by widespread indirect reciprocity, defined as a return from someone other than the recipient of beneficence (i.e., where “a” benefits “b” but

may receive a return from "c"). (Trivers, 1985:389) When norms of indirect reciprocity are widely supported, the system has the quality of a moral order.

The lesson is that while a significant number of people cheat (perhaps 25%) and have self-interested preferences, for most this strategy, while promising at first, comes to be perceived as destructive of the very environment it needs for success. (Axelrod, 1984:117) In contrast, those who reciprocate are more likely to survive and to have children who survive. As iterated prisoner dilemma games and other experiments show, most people do exhibit significant levels of generosity and do share more of what they have than chance alone would predict. They also believe that it is unfair to free ride and that free riders should be punished even when it is costly to do so. (Bowles and Gintis, 1998-1999: 7)

Yet while groups may be cooperative, deceitfulness (hiding information) is ubiquitous. Many signals involve deceit and humans fluctuate between the poles of deception and honesty. It is the quality of altruistic values that they mediate between these extremes. They modify social relations toward fairness in a manner that is to the long-term advantage of genes as well as the groups where these values are prevalent.

Reciprocal altruism that is unfocused, however, is an unstable weapon in the struggle for biological gain. Values that emphasize sharing counteract the ever present tendencies to diffuse altruism that arise because of the costs involved (e.g., providing charity when doing so reduces the resources available for other activities); they provide both a rationale and a focus for altruism backed by an imperative, normative dimension. In doing so they establish the moral perimeter of a community. The development of

moralized values that stipulate the limits of altruistic concern is thus a crucial building block in the formation of a political culture.

The Environment

Environment refers both to the physical and social environment. Of these it is the social environment that is of greatest significance with the physical environment serving primarily as the material base of the altruistic system. Societies clearly differ in important respects depending on geographic location and stage of development (e.g., maritime, continental, tropical, temperate, industrial, agricultural, etc.) but in each and every case it is the social environment that is the basic determinant of the exchange system that exists.

It is how the material resources of a society are distributed that is the crucial characteristic of the social environment. For all of recorded history and in all known contemporary societies distribution, of whatever type, has favored some over others. All known societies have status systems that place a higher regard on some categories of persons. Those favored are universally the recipients of greater rewards, both tangible and intangible. The brute feature of the social environment, in fact, is inequality.

Type and degree of inequality are intimately connected to property rights regimes. This feature of the environment plays a determining role in that a property rights regime defines particular recipients for reward, the type of reward they receive, and the reason for the reward. Comparative studies of economic history (e.g., those in the Marxist tradition) have elaborated the differences among regimes. These inquiries provide information about the categories of persons who are favored and the nature of the rewards

that exist -- material (money, crops, etc.) or social assets such as prestige. Usually the two are combined. The way that rewards are distributed is also related to the nature of property rights regimes.

Environments are thus critical for understanding political culture in that human societies exist in conditions of inequality whose specific nature is determined by property rights regimes. It is the environmental condition of inequality that establishes the framework within which values for altruism and indirect reciprocity are expressed.

Human Agency

It takes no great perceptivity to realize that individuals reason about values differently. Although individual interpretations of reality require that shared cultural forms and symbols be utilized for mutual intelligibility, these interpretations will differ depending on how social reality is interpreted (so-called culture theory) and/or on individual cognitive and emotional sophistication (cognitive development theory). (R.W. Wilson, 2000: 252-255, 260-263) Thus, people will elaborate cultural values in different ways in accordance with how moral rules are interpreted. Despite the fact that individuals share a common discourse, their personal priorities will vary depending on how they conceptualize ends and means (i.e., in terms of the sophistication and elaboration of the values that are employed). Understanding moral rules in the abstract, therefore, is never sufficient for understanding a political culture. How people reason about rules must also be taken into consideration.

In all modern societies a majority reason in a conventional (versus egoistic or principled) manner. Those who think in this way give moral priority to the dictates of

authority figures or to social rules (e.g., laws). There is a tendency to stigmatize as asocial those who reason in a self-centered (egoistic) manner and to perceive principled thinkers, who hold that internalized ethical values trump the law or the dictates of authority, as potentially deviant. The consequence is an embedded conservatism regarding social arrangements. Criticisms of inequality, therefore, occur in a “sticky” environment where conventional reasoning gives priority to the existing normative order.

THE FUNCTIONAL ATTRIBUTES OF POLITICAL CULTURES

While cultural variation is essential for interpreting differences among societies, all cultural systems are related by descent. The process whereby each has evolved to its present form is an algorithmic one, at the very least for the technological aspects of culture. (Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman, 1981:340,366) Hence, despite significant differences, there is a fundamental relatedness among political cultures. This makes it possible to identify shared functional attributes and to trace how these manifest themselves in different societies over time.

A political culture is a normative system backed by regulatory powers that is adhered to by two or more individuals, and that is transmitted from one generation to the next via teaching and imitation. Political cultures coordinate unequal relationships within groups, be that society a band, tribe, or the modern state, by articulating rules that serve as the glue for social solidarity while simultaneously justifying, stabilizing and moralizing on-going inequalities. (R.W. Wilson, 1992) These rules, broadly termed compliance ideologies, can be disaggregated as status rules (rules that define and justify vertical differentiation within groups) and rules for inclusion and exclusion (rules that

define and justify horizontal differentiation among groups). The rules of compliance ideologies stipulate the reasons for different levels of reward and the degree of consideration that is owed to various persons (men versus women, for example). Once widely accepted as morally legitimate, these rules then become the glue that binds the members of society together, thereby fulfilling an integrative role. (Ross, 1997:42,45)

While in modern societies that are formally and complexly organized these rules may be formulated as law, they differ only in degree from the more informal (but still obligatory) mandates of earlier societies. These are core features of political cultures that in real-life contexts are elaborated in various forms (i.e., how means are linked to goals, how social differences are maintained, how solidarity is insured, etc.). They incorporate many subsidiary areas of thought in legal culture, public policy, political rhetoric, dissident literature, etc.

Political cultures have evolved, in part, from a need to justify unequal rewards in a context of widespread, but not uniform, indirect reciprocity. Indeed, because reciprocity is often a short-term event, cultures are mechanisms for the institutionalization of extended, albeit selective, reciprocity. The larger the group the more important it is to have cultural rules (i.e., moral standards) that regulate competition and harmonize the distribution of rewards. In this sense morality is ultimately self-serving and the evolution of reciprocal altruism, on which it is based, exists to force others to behave in ways that benefit the individual by strengthening norms of social solidarity. The line of causality is as follows: (1) individuals seek to fulfill their own interests; (2) interests are furthered by cooperation; (3) the mechanisms of cooperation

are direct and indirect reciprocity; and (4) rules are guidelines for institutionalizing imperfect reciprocity (i.e., inequality). (Alexander, 1987:81)

Political cultures reduce the transaction costs associated with negotiating rewards. In that sense they “determine an essential part of economic life.” (Sigmund, Fehr and Nowak, 2002:87) Values associated with individualism, for example, when utilized to underwrite a property rights regime, provide justifications for enhanced rewards for those with entrepreneurial talent that concomitantly legitimize fewer rewards for those who are less talented in this regard. To the degree that these values are touted as essential for the maintenance of economic, social and political relations, they become the moral underpinning for social solidarity. In like manner, values that grant leaders the right to interpret community standards, as is the case in religious autocracies or secular ideological systems, marginalize those who wish to follow an individual plan for their lives. A property rights regime that rewards those who are community spokespersons provides, at the same time, a moral justification for excluding those who by taste or social designation are unwilling to comply. Social solidarity for the majority becomes social ostracism, or worse, for those who are branded as deviant.

Property rights are never independent of the moral rules that justify status differences and differential treatment for various categories of persons. A property rights regime that favors an individualistic ethic is one that gives preeminence to negative rights (and associated obligations). Negative rights honor “freedom from,” the right of individuals to be free from undue interference in their lives, especially by authority. Where a communitarian ethic is favored the category of right that is honored is termed positive, or “freedom to.” This category of right permits people to share in the rewards of

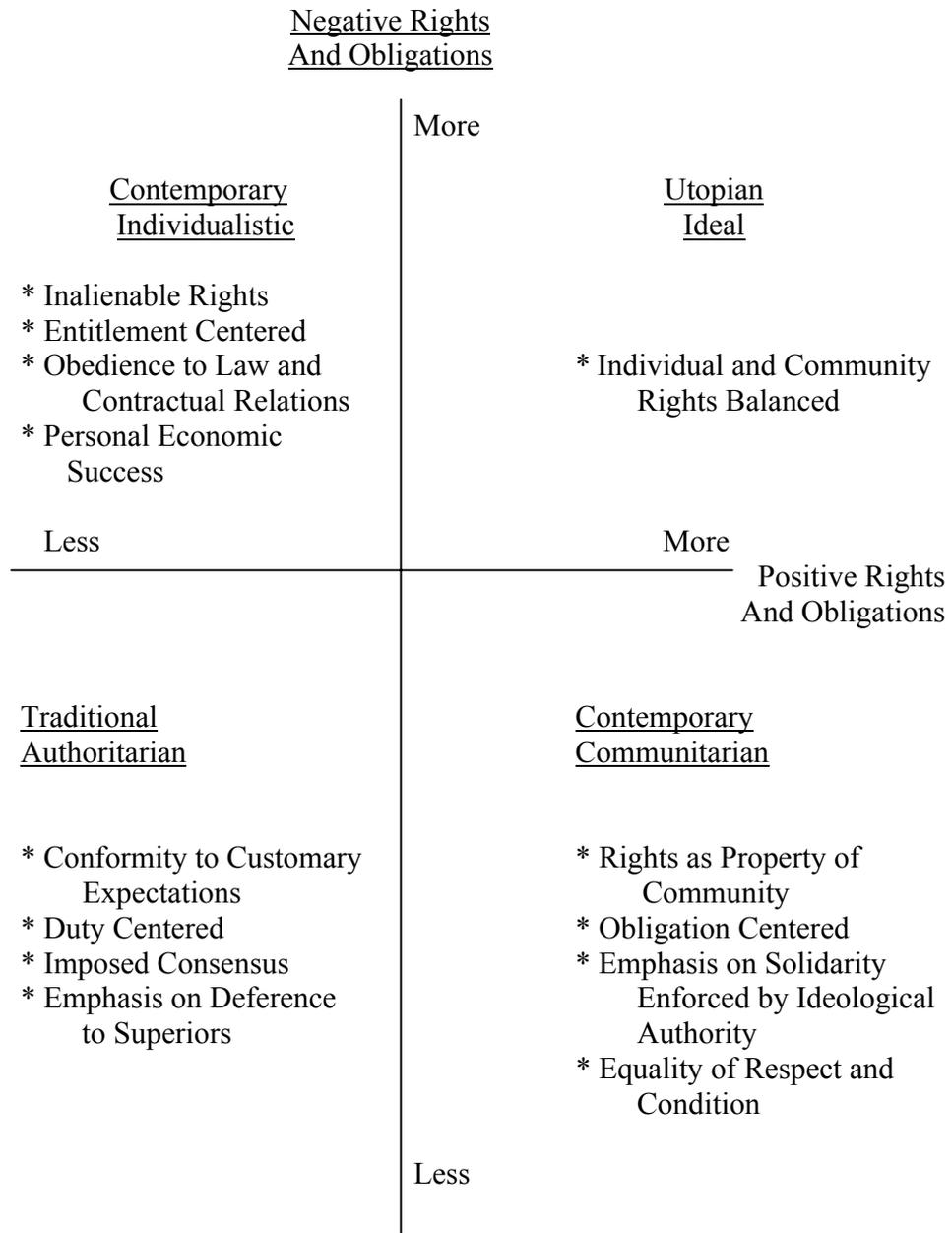
society. The critical question in either case is who controls property, especially its disposition.

While there are wide variations depending on particular environmental constraints these two ideal types define the ends of a continuum on which the political cultures of societies have been and are organized. In practice there is an admixture (more noteworthy at some levels than at others, e.g., the family) although always a “strain” in one direction or the other. This tendency derives from the antithetical nature of these rights. Both sets of rights provide a moral justification for status inequalities but do so in ways that define as deviant the very features that are stipulated as morally praiseworthy in the alternate system. There is in practice, however, always a tension between the different moral interpretations that fuels questioning of the justifications for inequality contained in prevailing views about property.

Utilizing a four cell, two dimensional space, selected core features of these ideal political cultures can be specified according to the relative salience of a particular category of right and obligation. Figure 1 (about here) sets forth these specifications. Using this general framework as a guide the ethnographic features of particular societies can then be classified and compared.

Figure 1

**RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS
Ideal Property Rights Regimes**



There are two routes from traditional, authoritarian political cultures (see Figure 1). Change is toward either a contemporary individualistic or communitarian pattern. As ideal types these two political cultures have status rules and rules for inclusion/exclusion that are markedly different. (R.W. Wilson, 1997:489-493) They stipulate inequality

differently with rules that are enforced by sharply divergent political and economic systems. Pressures exist for change toward an ideal, utopian type but entrenched interests associated with the maintenance of particular property rights regimes impede such movement. A strain toward change, however, is inherent.

PERVERSIONS OF POLITICAL CULTURES

If modal forms of reasoning about moral rules vary with levels of socio-economic development, a fact strongly supported by the literature, it follows that conceptions of how to incorporate values of direct and indirect reciprocity into social life will vary depending on the historical period. (Snarey, 1985) In traditional societies religious and political power coalesced in support of moralized values that mandated dutiful, unquestioning obedience on the part of subordinates (see Figure 1). As material accumulation proceeded, values regulating reciprocity shifted from obedience under threat of punishment to a conception of mutually held rights. Historically what transpired was a change from a conception of society as an ordered hierarchy with proportionate degrees of reciprocity among persons determined by one's role to a conception of society as composed of equal members with an equal claim to reciprocity. The underpinning of this transformation was a shift in the nature of the values governing moral obligation, from inhering in particular social roles to inhering in an abstract concept of personhood. The value for moral reciprocity based on the fundamental equivalence of persons was articulated as a universal right. Protecting these, meaning protecting the right to equal consideration, was then said to be obligatory for each and every person. The principle of a universal and equal right to moral consideration, in turn, reinforced the value that

stressed the inherent equality of persons. This belief, in turn, became the basis for the demand by heretofore deprived groups to participate equally in social life. What emerged, fitfully, is the complex of values that underlie modern political cultures.

In many parts of the globe full consideration of others is still largely confined to special categories of persons. The exclusion of women from participation in social life is widespread. So also is religious discrimination and racial prejudice. Age-old propensities to suppress others who follow different customs or who speak different languages continue to flourish. The disabilities that are inflicted range from grudging accommodation to mild ostracism, to the deprivation of civil and social rights, to expulsion, to murder. They are manifested within societies by restricted access to social rewards or glass ceilings, by geographic separation (separate quarters or enclaves for different groups), by communal violence (e.g., pogroms), by class warfare (the Cultural Revolution or, earlier, The Reign of Terror), by ethnic cleansing, and, in the extreme but least likely eventuality, by genocide (e.g., the Holocaust).

Moralized values justify why coercive power, material possessions and ideological authority are distributed unequally among individuals and groups. A moral injunction of this type contains precepts (e.g., status rules and rules for inclusion and exclusion) that can be elaborated differently depending on social context. The values that gird political cultures all share the characteristic of moral “oughtness” yet may differ sharply in content depending on their rigidity, degree of exclusivity and the type of rights and obligations that are predominantly honored. (R.W. Wilson, 1997)

In general cultural systems last beyond the lifetimes of individuals. People are born into groups who share a culture and, for most of recorded history, they die without

any appreciable change in the normative order. It should not be supposed, however, that because the life spans of individuals and those of cultures differ markedly, that there is no interactive effect. For social solidarity to exist, that is, for individuals to optimize indirect reciprocity in accordance with moral rules that are widely understood and accepted, the internal consistency of the values that inform these rules must be roughly homologous with those held by individuals. However, because people differ in their cognitive ability, the conceptual sophistication of the moral system (e.g., comprehensibility, inclusiveness, abstractness, etc.) need not be isomorphic with that of any person. Development at either the social or individual level is conditioned to a great extent by development at the other. The possibilities for growth that are available to individuals are clearly enhanced when the moral system provides explanations that challenge less sophisticated ideas about reality (e.g., the reasons for inequality). In like manner, under appropriate conditions (most notably when normative dissension is marked), some individuals may, often at no little peril to themselves, articulate a new vision of the moral order. In both domains, therefore, there is a “strain” for more sophisticated value orientations, once in existence, to supplant less developed conceptions in related areas. These contradictions are a frequent source of tension and a powerful stimulus to cultural change.

While particular political cultural values may exist for long periods of time, therefore, they are nevertheless amenable to change. The reason for this is inherent in all political cultures. Tendencies in societies to articulate moralized codes, designed to bolster social solidarity and thus serve the interests of everyone, simultaneously justify status rules and rules for inclusion and exclusion that act explicitly against the interests of

some and clearly in the interests of others. How this occurs is largely an unconscious process although it may be amenable to deliberate manipulation at the margins. Inclusion and exclusion are thus complimentary aspects of values that explain and justify why some groups (i.e., categories of persons) are more favored than others. They are complimentary in the sense that explanations for inclusion are simultaneously explanations for why others are excluded. These explanations are supplanted only when they are challenged by alternate values that justify inclusion and exclusion (i.e., inequality) differently.

Inequality is generally related to some form of discrepancy between the actual distribution of rights and obligations in a society and what people believe that distribution should be. A great part of the answer as to why inequality may become an end in itself (although frequently rationalized in terms of the public interest) has to do with the nature of leadership within dominant organizational forms. Privilege becomes centered on an inner elite with a concomitant tendency toward elite domination and the extension of inequality in terms of status and material reward. Rewards tend to be steeply accented and to cluster near the top. Inequality itself is part of the way that societies define the authority that is attached to different social roles.

The consequence of these tendencies is that inequality is an accepted part of social life. Yet considerable tension and competition may exist. People are affronted by authority that is perceived as personally corrupt (e.g., some CEOs in the United States or Party cadres in China) or who conspire with others to pervert the ends of an organization toward the goal of enhancing rewards for an inner elite (collusion between Boards of Directors and CEOs in the United States and cronyism accompanied by bribes between

Party leaders and new business elites in China). The most serious and potentially damaging form of inequality is when a widespread perception develops that there is a progressive systemic failure to uphold the values associated with what people believe are appropriate norms of behavior (i.e., some generally accepted mix of negative and positive rights and associated obligations). One reason for the revulsion in China against the excesses associated with the Cultural Revolution was the belief that communitarian values had been pushed to such an extreme that violence had become sanctioned as a way to enforce political inequality. In the contemporary period the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction and many individuals, including Party cadres, are exercising a new-found individualism for personal gain although bedrock social values remain communitarian. In analogous fashion the emphasis on negative rights in the United States (e.g., individualism) has been pushed to such an extreme that community rights are being seriously violated. There has been a re-introduction of the extremes associated with the gilded age (c.1870-1898). Recent efforts to repeal the Estate Tax bode well to perpetuate a new class of wealth. In these cases when the values that gird a prevailing status system are challenged by values that justify inequalities differently, the stage is set for cultural change.

CONCLUSION

The tendencies in modern political cultures toward ever widening circles of direct and indirect reciprocity are retarded by the inequalities embedded in property rights regimes. Within organizations (e.g., bureaucracies) the differential rewards associated with levels of hierarchy serve as markers for those who are entitled, increasingly toward

the top, to provide direction to others. Given demands for the efficient realization of specified goals (profit, victory, etc.) the maintenance of hierarchy is self justifying and resistant to modification. The legitimization of inequality is thus powerfully bolstered by social structures that provide differential rewards. (Presthus, 1978)

Modern societies use a differential emphasis on negative or positive rights to provide a moral justification for the rewards that go to leadership. In this sense the moral virtues that serve as the glue for social solidarity are also justifications for why some in society should have enhanced rewards and others less. Inequality, then, is built into the very fabric of the moral values, the political culture, that regulate inter-hierarchical relations.

Yet this alone does not completely explain why inequality persists. Because inequality is inextricably entwined with justifications for social solidarity, it is unquestioned by those who reason in a conventional manner. Such individuals accept the dictates of authority or the laws of society as having preeminent moral worth. Since most people in modern societies reason this way, there is an inherent bias for the majority to accept inequality, even glaring inequality, as morally legitimate. The reasons for the persistence of inequality, then, are not only social structural, they are also deeply rooted in the way that people reason about inequality.

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