

The Rationalization of the Political Field:
Beyond the State- and Society-Centered Theories of Policy Change

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The Cultural Field of Policy Making

Much of the field of political sociology is defined by a confrontation between state- and society-centered theories of policy making. State-centered theories (Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol 1985; Finegold 1995; Orloff, Orloff and Skocpol 1988; Shefter 1994; Skocpol 1979; Skocpol 1992; Skowronek 1982) emphasize the effects of autonomous political actors, institutions, or opportunities on the outcomes of policy-making processes, whereas society-centered approaches (Baldwin 1990; Dahl 1961; Domhoff 1983; Domhoff 1996; Esping-Andersen 1990; Lipset 1963; Moore Jr. 1966) focus on the interests and motivations of collective actors in civil society. Research has benefited greatly from the insights generated by both schools, yet current scholarship suggests that the distinction between state and society can be misleading (Somers 1995).. Increasingly, in their own work, state-centered theorists have come to acknowledge the importance of organized social interests in policy making. At the same time, social movement researchers have come to recognize the necessity for a theory of formal political institutions. The real action, it seems, lies in the interaction between the state and society, where the power of social groups is constrained by organization of political institutions, or where political institutions generate opportunities for popular classes to influence policy through collective social mobilization. Structural Marxists recognize this in the debate over state autonomy (Block 1987; Flacks 1988; O'Connor 1973; Offe 1984; Poulantzas 1973; Therborn 1970), but models remain too wedded to class analysis to fully address the scope of the problem. So far, however, most political sociologists have failed to arrive at an adequate conceptualization of this, the all-too nebulous territory of the "public sphere" or the "political field," where state and society interact.

Existing research on states, elites, and social movements has produced a fairly clear understanding of the policy-making process within any given political field. In capitalist democracies, governmental policies are produced by interactions between state actors with vested interests in winning and maintaining power, on the one hand, and societal actors who pursue their collective interests, usually through institutionalized channels of participation, on the other. Since material and organizational resources are distributed unequally, this process tends to result policies that serve the interests of socioeconomic elites. Elite power is not absolute, however; politicians and bureaucrats possess a degree of autonomy, and under certain conditions they sometimes enact policies that conflict with the interests of at least certain segments of the elite. Representative institutions provide limited opportunities for popular influence, so reform policies are most typically introduced during periods of widespread social mobilization, when the lower classes engage in forms of political activity outside the channels of routine politics. State actors may engage in violent repression or strategies of co-optation in an effort to prevent drastic change, and successful mobilization depends on a fortuitous conjunction of deprivation, resources, and political opportunities. State capacities are also limited, the ability of public officials both to

control social unrest and to introduce effective reform policies depending on a variety of material and organizational factors. In general, the interaction between elites, popular movements, and state actors is conditioned by the structure of existing political institutions, which in turn is transformed as a result of these interactions through the historical process of policy making.

The precise effects of these variables are a matter for empirical determination, but I believe the general contours of the process are fairly well defined by the state of existing research. What is less well understood are the processes that transform the cultural fields on which such games are played out. The strategic interaction of socioeconomic elites, popular social movements, and state actors is conditioned by taken-for-granted assumptions that are embedded in the structure of existing political institutions. Political institutions, in other words, are constituted by practices associated with corresponding forms of discourse and symbolism that are shared by state and social actors alike. The problem of how the interpretive frameworks that social actors use to make sense of their worlds affect political processes and their outcomes was central to the work of Weber (1978), Gramsci (1971), Parsons (Parsons and Shils 1951), and Elias (1994), but it has assumed renewed vigor in the United States since the 1970s with the American sociological reception of the work of European scholars such as Jürgen Habermas (1981; 1987; 1989; 1996), Michel Foucault (1970; 1977; 1978), and Pierre Bourdieu (1984; 1990; 1991). At stake are the implicit assumptions and habitual practices that state and social actors share in regard to the nature of politics, government, society, and the individual. The collective identities of social and political actors (Calhoun 1994; Hunt 1984; Melucci 1985), the frames through which they recognize their interests (Snow et al. 1986), the repertoires they employ when acting on their goals (Clemens 1993; Clemens 1997; Tilly 1995), the types of state power and individual rights that are publicly recognized as legitimate (Bendix 1964; Bendix 1978; Marshall 1963), and the range of different forms of policy design and implementation that are considered appropriate (Dobbin 1994a; Dobbin 1994b; Dryzek 1990) are all defined by collective traditions of political culture. Relative late-comers to the cultural perspective, American political sociologists have grown more sensitive to the symbolic dimension of public affairs, but many recent efforts to “bring culture back in” to the analysis have failed to absorb the insights of European philosophy regarding the epistemological foundations of social power.

Unfortunately, the research on political culture is haunted by two misleading tendencies advanced by some of its earlier proponents. The first tendency conflates political culture with a societal consensus on shared norms and values, downplaying the salience of conflicts over cultural frames within national societies, and treats culture as an overarching source of social integration or regulation (Almond 1989; Almond and Verba 1989). The second tendency regard cultural values as either epiphenomenal expressions of underlying material interests or instrumental means used

by social actors to strategically to manipulate opponents and engineer consent (Mann 1986; Skocpol 1994; Snow et al. 1986). The deficiencies of these conceptions contributed to the dismissal of cultural analysis in earlier state- and society-centered research. More recent work, however, suggest that the interaction of state and society is played out on a cultural field which, though it possesses a distinctive logic of its own apart from social and political forces, can be reduced neither to a coherent body of collective values nor to a reflection of the material interests of distinct social groups or classes (Archer 1996; Brubaker 1992; Calhoun 1993; Ellingson 1995; Ely 1992; Gorski 1993; Sewell Jr. 1985; Sewell Jr. 1992; Somers 1993; Spillman 1995; Wuthnow 1989). The new conception of political culture attempts to reconcile two seemingly contradictory properties. On the one hand, political culture is not regarded as an autonomous, independent determinant of social action, but is treated as something that is produced by specific actors, or better yet, by the members of specific organizations, with distinctive interests and identities. On the other hand, the producers of culture are seen to operate with a range of possible strategic goals and collective identities that are conditioned by the cultural frames they adopt. Thus, in the new conception, political culture is treated as both the explicans and the explicandum of social action. Needless to say, this is a distinctly unsatisfactory philosophical standpoint for explanatory analysis, raising fundamental issues pertaining to the validity of interpretive methods in the social sciences.

Political culture specialists have not yet clarified this ambiguity, but the problem is central to the work of the most influential contemporary European theorists of the late twentieth century. Although Foucault never resolves the question of whether social action is completely determined by epistemological frameworks of power or “discipline,” or tells us how, exactly, individuals engage in forms of resistance to power within those frameworks, he is preoccupied with finding a method (if not a theory) that can encompass both aspects of the relationship between knowledge and power simultaneously. Likewise, Bourdieu’s theory of the *habitus* attempts to deal with the perplexities of a concept of social action that is simultaneously regulated by cultural norms, yet which also provides actors with the resources or capacities to improvise strategies that are not completely specified by the system of normative integration. Similarly, Habermas describes how social actors who operate within a given cultural system can reconstruct their own normative orientations by questioning the validity of taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of the social world through communicative action. Although the differences between their respective approaches are not easily reconciled, it is significant that all of these theorists point to the necessity of a theory of culture which operates on both sides of the “structure-agency” dichotomy.

I am not going to offer a solution to this problem here. Instead, I want to argue that the duality of structure and agency is inherent in the logic of the political field itself. In other words, the relationship between interpretive

understanding and explanatory analysis is not only a methodological problem for the sociological observer, but also an ontological property of the discourse and practice of social actors themselves. To the extent that the cultural field of politics conditions the interaction between state and social actors in the policy-making process, the strategic choices made by the actors are constrained by cultural orientations informed by interpretive and strategic orientations. To the extent that actors manipulate cultural symbols to achieve their goals, these orientations supply the major resources for their efforts. Moreover, the relative emphasis on each orientation is empirically variable in ways that correspond to conventional notions of political development. To state the matter most crudely, the “rationalization” of politics—the emergence of “modern” out of “traditional” forms of governance—is constituted by a shift in the political field from interpretive toward explanatory policy orientations.

The rise of the modern state and modern social welfare and regulatory policies is closely associated with a “disenchantment” of the political world. With the elaboration of new objectifying dispositions and disciplinary technologies, the interpretive sphere of public life has been colonized by the empirical. The shift is associated with two broad historical trends since the nineteenth century: (1) the power of courts and legislatures has declined in favor of public administration and professional associations, and (2) the importance of elections and the influence of political parties has given way to a politics of strategic bargaining among interest groups or corporatist associations (Campbell 1995; Eldersveld 1982; Fabricant 1952; Furner 1993; Keller 1977; McCormick 1986; McGerr 1986; Silbey 1985; Skowronek 1982). In the nineteenth century United States, for example, government policies were enacted into law by legislators, who were elected as the members of political parties, and these laws were subject to judicial review and interpretation by the courts. These officials possessed comparatively little empirical knowledge of the actual conditions which the policies they enacted and applied were intended to address; instead, they made their decisions mainly on the basis of allegiance to the abstract normative principles upheld by their parties or prescribed in the constitution. Today, in contrast, although the same formal procedures are in place, the actual influence of legislators in the process of drafting laws and judges (and juries) in making legal decisions has declined considerably, along with the power of party politicians. As the moral grounds of legal and political judgement have disintegrated, legislators and judges have come to rely on the expertise of civil servants and professionals employed by societal interest-groups with direct empirical knowledge of the policy issues at stake. Moreover, legislative and judicial institutions have delegated substantial powers of regulation and arbitration, as well as enforcement and implementation, to executive bureaucracies, which apply empirical methods of analysis to regulate and control the activity of individuals and groups in society. In short, the empirical technologies of discipline have been introduced into new areas of public life, and social groups with practical

interests at stake have developed new techniques of influence, resulting in what Habermas described in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* as an “interpenetration” of state and society. All these developments have been closely related to the rise of empirical social science, the professionalization of the public sector occupations, and the rise of what Bourdieu refers to as the new “state nobility.”

State- and society-centered theorists have not accounted for these broad historical trends. Theda Skocpol (1992), for example, argues that the American welfare state assumed a “maternalist” path of development because the early social policies that benefited veterans were too closely associated with the nineteenth-century party machines that came under attack by political reformers in the progressive era, but she fails to explain why the progressives challenged the power of the party bosses in the first place. Similarly, G. William Domhoff (1996), who criticizes Skocpol’s state-centered perspectives, demonstrates the influence of societal elites on progressive and New Deal social policy but does not explain why such policies were enacted only in the twentieth century, when state policy was equally dominated by a power elite in preceding decades. Both of these authors have drawn attention to important issues but leave some of the most fundamental questions about political development unexamined. In the following section, I will try to outline an approach to empirical inquiry that addresses these issues by examining two episodes of popular social mobilization and reform-oriented policy making in California history. This sketch will of necessity be very brief, but I would like to suggest how the theoretical perspective I have outlined could be applied in empirical research.

Explaining Reform Outcomes in California Political History

The state constitutional convention of 1879 and the legislative sessions of 1911-1913 were arguably the most important episodes of reform-oriented policy making in the history of California. In both cases, political insurgents challenged the dominance of established political elites and succeeded in having a wide variety of new government policies enacted into law. Yet these two reform episodes had very different consequences for state building in California. The statutes enacted under the 1879 constitution produced relatively little in the way of expanded administrative capacities, and the policy reforms they encompassed were largely ineffective. In contrast, the laws enacted in the legislative sessions of 1911 and 1913 created a wide variety of new agencies and expanded many existing ones, greatly increasing both the scale and scope of state government administration. Moreover, these reforms were far more effective at protecting the working class, regulating large corporations, and facilitating public investment in infrastructure. The policy reforms of 1911-13 laid the foundations for the modern welfare state in California, whereas the constitutional reforms of 1879 had little impact on the development of state government.

The enactment of the state constitution of 1879 followed years of economic depression and social unrest (Bean 1978; Cross 1935; Delmatier, McIntosh and Waters 1970; Olin Jr. 1981; Rolle 1963; Selvin 1975). In agricultural counties, small farmers fought monopolistic railroad transportation rates and exorbitant water charges by joining local associations affiliated with the national Granger movement. In San Francisco and other cities, although the depression undermined trade union organizing, members of the urban working class campaigned to exclude Chinese immigrants from California. The most successful of the radical working-class organizations was the Workingmen's Party of California. Led by a self-educated Irishman named Denis Kearney, the WPC engaged in a protracted series of mass public demonstrations in the summer of 1877, denouncing the rule of "capitalists" and "monopolists" and demanding an end to Chinese immigration. In the following year, the Workingmen embarked on an electoral strategy, capturing 10 seats in the State Senate and 16 in the Assembly, along with six of the seven positions on the State Supreme Court, including the office of chief justice.¹ The Workingmen's Party of California also elected roughly a third of the delegates to the state constitutional convention of 1878-79.² The final composition of the convention was 78 Nonpartisan, 51 Workingmen, 11 Republican, 10 Democrat, and 2 Independent. After the convention finished its labors, the Workingmen and the Grangers, along with a New Constitution Party composed of some Democrats and Republicans, campaigned for ratification. Banks, the railroad, large manufacturers, and mining companies joined the more conservative members of the Republican party in opposing it, but voters approved the new constitution in May 7, 1879, by a vote of 77,959 to 67,134.

Observers later condemned the Constitution of 1879 as a dismal failure. Many of the reforms that it introduced—most notably the anti-Chinese measures—violated federal law or the U.S. Constitution and were overruled by the courts. Some, like the prohibition against lobbying, proved to be unworkable in practice. And others, such as the reorganization of the judiciary, simply didn't have much of an impact on social conditions. A new commission established to regulate the state's much despised Southern Pacific Railroad Company was judged to be such a weak and ineffective agency that some observers referred to it as the "Southern Pacific Literary Bureau" (Starr 1985: 200). Even the tax reforms and restrictions on corporations were only marginally successful at creating a more equitable distribution

¹ This was the height of the Workingmen's electoral success. The party's fortunes soured the following year, as internal dissension wracked the leadership group and members deserted for the Democratic and Greenback Labor parties. The Workingmen's Party was defeated in municipal elections in San Francisco, Oakland, Sacramento, and San Jose in 1880, and it disappeared from California politics after 1881.

² They would have won an even larger share of representation had the Republican and Democratic party leaders not joined forces behind opposing "nonpartisan" tickets in many local districts throughout California. In addition to the 120 district seats, moreover, the state legislature created 32 "at-large" seats, which were filled entirely by Nonpartisan candidates.

of wealth. On the whole, the new constitution had little effect on the conditions that had spurred popular discontent in the 1870s. In the words of the famous nineteenth-century historian, Hubert Howe Bancroft,

The new constitution was framed to make the rich pay their share of taxation, to control corporations, to correct the revenue system, and to equalize the rights of the people altogether. In each of these designs it failed. But it also failed to check the advancement of the state, which, purely by its resources, climate, and generally favorable conditions for comfort and wealth, progressed in spite of political thunderings (Bancroft 1888b).

The reforms of the progressive era were enacted by legislators affiliated with an insurgent “progressive” faction of the Republican party in California (Deverell and Sitton 1994; Mowry 1951; Olin Jr. 1968). The reform movement had gained strength at the municipal level around the turn of the century, winning new city charters in San Francisco in 1898 and Los Angeles in 1902, but it was not until 1910 that the progressives gained control of the state Republican party convention and went on to win the governor’s office. Once in power, the progressives enacted a broad reform program encompassing a wide variety of policy areas, including electoral law, government administration and finance, railroad and utility regulation, protection for the working class, public education, and natural resource conservation. The parties were originally men’s clubs, but the progressives adopted a woman suffrage law in 1911, making California the sixth state in the nation to give women the right to vote. They also enacted a law providing for direct legislation, giving California voters the ballot initiative, referendum, and recall in state elections. Other electoral reforms strengthened the Australian ballot and the primary system and put the election of judges, school board members, and county officials on a nonpartisan basis. Finally, the progressive legislature adopted a “cross-filing” law, which permitted candidates to run in the primary races of more than one party simultaneously without party identification.³ In addition, the progressive legislature created a State Civil Service Commission and placed various agencies, bureaus, and commissions that had grown up in previous decades under the authority of a State Board of Control. A new railroad commission, reorganized in 1913 as the California Public Utility Commission, was given new powers to regulate all public utility companies, including telephone, water, gas, and electric companies, as well as the state’s railroad monopoly. In addition, a number of new agencies were created to protect members of the working-class : an Industrial Accident Commission to administer a new system of mandatory workmen’s compensation insurance and inspect and regulate safety at places of employment; an Industrial Welfare Commission to set a minimum wage, maximum hours, and standards for working conditions for women and children in many industries; and a Commission on Immigration and Housing was established to investigate

³ The cross filing law was not only enacted as a measure against party politics, but also served the interests of progressives in California, who wanted to support Roosevelt’s 1912 Presidential campaign as members of the national Progressive party while retaining their influence in the state Republican party.

and regulate the living conditions in rural migratory labor camps, where large numbers of immigrants endured grossly inadequate sanitation and water supplies. Other reforms were introduced in such areas as public education, public health, and resource conservation.

These two episodes had very different consequences for the institutional development of California state government.⁴ As seen in Table 1, the reforms of the 1879 constitution produced relatively little growth in state government as compared with the legislative sessions of 1911 and 1913. Some 40 new state government organizations were founded in the 1910s, as compared with only 11 in the 1880s. The rapid growth after 1920 suggests that the progressive years were not only a period of expansion in the public bureaucracy but also constituted a point of departure for a new trajectory in state building. Table 2 shows the growth in state government revenues and expenditures, as measured in real (1967) expenditures per capita. Between 1880 and 1890, real expenditures increased from \$1.4 to \$1.8 per capita, but state government expenditures grew from \$2.2 to \$15.2 per capita between 1910 and 1920. Although this financial growth slowed somewhat in the 1920s, in contrast to the continued organizational growth, state government spending never again returned to the low spending levels of the nineteenth century.⁵

What explains the different institutional consequences of the two reform episodes? Why did the reforms of 1879 produce so little in the way of expanded state capacities, as compared to the progressive reforms of 1911-13? The society-centered and state-centered literature in political sociology both suggest possible explanations. First, it is possible that the variation in state building can be explained by the mobilization of social or economic classes. Research in the Marxist tradition suggests that the creation of public social welfare programs is a result of the growth and political mobilization of the working class, which exerts its influence in the political system in order to obtain protections from capitalist exploitation in the labor market. It is true that the California progressives enacted a number of reforms designed to aid and protect wage-earners, especially women, children, and migratory laborers, and that these reforms contributed to the growth of state government after 1910. The problem is that the working class also played a central role in enacting the new state constitution in 1879. Even though they did not win a majority of seats, the Workingmen's Party of California gained a significant share of power at the convention, succeeded at writing a number of labor-oriented reforms into the new constitution, and campaigned vigorously for ratification, evidently regarding the

⁴ Conclusions about the relative effectiveness of the reforms enacted in the two episodes cannot be drawn with as much certainty. Historians generally seem to agree that, despite their shortcoming, the progressive reforms were far more effective and lasting than those of 1879. The "effectiveness" of state policy is a notoriously difficult concept to operationalize, however, and the consequences of the policy reforms enacted in each episode would need to be examined systematically to make firm conclusions on this point.

constitution as a creature of their own making. Small farmers were arguably even more successful than the workingmen. Represented by a substantial number of delegates from rural counties, the Grangers wrote laws such as mortgage and tax reform and the mandate for a state railroad commission into the new constitution. As we have seen, however, despite the successful mobilization of these popular classes, however, the enactment of the new constitution did not bring about a significant growth in state governmental capacities.

The power-elite argument is also not as good as it appears at first sight. The progressive movement was composed primarily of middle-class, university-educated lawyers, journalists, and businessmen. Of the fifteen men who attended the founding meeting of the Lincoln Roosevelt League in Los Angeles in May, 1907, for example, there were present eight journalists, four lawyers, two businessmen, and a physician (Starr 1985: 235). The problem here is that very little to distinguish the progressives from their conservative opponents in the Republican party, who were also businessmen, lawyers, and journalists. Business elites who ran agricultural, commercial, or industrial enterprises may have been somewhat more strongly represented among conservatives, but the ranks of conservative or regular Republicans included but many publishers and lawyers as well.⁶ Of course, the progressives also crusaded against urban machine politicians, but the leadership of these organizations was very often drawn from the middle-class as well. San Francisco political boss Abraham Ruef, for example, was the son of a successful Jewish businessman who graduated from the University of California and the Hastings College of Law before being admitted to the bar in 1886. The fact is, the crusade against political corruption forced reformers to confront the political influence of business elites in the Republican party as well as the machine politicians who controlled blocks of urban working-class voters (Hyde 1994; McCormick 1981).

The observed pattern of state growth might also be explained by changes in the institutional organization of the polity. A number of different factors are included under the rubric of the “state” in the state-centered literature, but three explanatory factors are widely proposed: the self-interest of public officials, formal legal or constitutional structures, and the concept of “political opportunity.” However, these explanations do not hold up either. First, it does not appear that the growth of California state government can be attributed to the power of government officials with a vested interest in expanding their own budgetary resources and career opportunities. This hypothesis must contend with

⁵ . Only a little of this state growth can be attributed directly to the First World War, since there were only minor military expenditures in the state budget and all the the figures are adjusted for inflation.

⁶ Chester Rowell, who was perhaps the progressives’ leading intellectual, edited a daily newspaper, the Fresno *Republican*; but so, too, did Michael de Young, the conservative editor of the San Francisco *Chronicle*. Hiram Johnson ran his own very successful law practice in San Francisco before joining the graft prosecution in 1906 as an assistant to Francis J.

the fact that the growth of California state government occurred almost entirely in the executive branch. Table 3 shows how the distribution of total spending among the various branches of state government changed over time.

Administrative expenditures constituted a relatively large percentage of total spending in 1852, but legislative and judicial shares were equally significant. Policy-oriented spending amounted to only about 12 percent of total spending in 1852.⁷ While the share of total spending on legislative, judicial, and executive overhead costs declined steadily over subsequent decades, spending on substantive, policy-oriented state programs absorbed an increasing share, reaching 86 percent of the total by 1900. The policy-oriented share began to fall again after 1900, but this loss was absorbed by increases in bond payments and miscellaneous expenditures, not legislative, judicial, or overhead costs. The legislative and judicial branches of government were far more powerful than the state's puny corps of executive officials in the 1850s, yet neither legislators nor judges succeeded in increasing the resources allocated to their offices in later decades. If the power-of-officials hypothesis is valid, it is necessary to explain why judges and legislators—the most powerful officials in the 1850s—were unable to increase their resources in the subsequent decades.

It also does not appear that the growth of California state government can be attributed to changes in formal law, at least not voting rights. Although residency requirements did limit the voting population to more stable heads of households, the majority of working-class and white ethnic males already had the franchise in California as early as the 1850s. Nor can the extension of the franchise to non-whites or women explain the growth of California state government. California's African American population was very small and exercised a negligible influence in state politics. Chinese immigrants were more numerous, but they were denied citizenship in California even after the enactment of the Fourteenth Amendment. Women were not given the vote in California until 1911, so they were not in a position to influence state policy through electoral mobilization until after that year. Even when they did receive voting rights, moreover, women's voting behavior differed little from that of white male voters on most issues. Women's participation in politics was of course not limited to voting in the late nineteenth century. Women were active in a wide variety of clubs and interest groups outside the party system, campaigning on various social reform issues as well as for women's suffrage. Since they were formally excluded from voting, however, it is difficult to see how this could support the argument that woman suffrage can explain the growth of state government. Some important electoral reforms *did* pave the way for the rise of the progressive movement. The direct primary law of 1909, for example, enabled the progressive insurgents to take over the Republican party, formerly controlled by machine politicians, and place their

Heney; but Samuel Shortridge, a conservative republican who defeated Johnson in a race for the U.S. Senate in 1920, was also a practicing lawyer.

candidates on the Republican ticket in 1910. The Australian (secret) ballot, adopted in 1891, was another important electoral reform that loosened the hold of machine politicians over the electoral process. The impact of these laws suggests that changes in formal, legal structures were not irrelevant. However, it remains unclear, on purely theoretical grounds, whether these reforms were independent causes of state growth, or whether they were effects of more fundamental social or political processes.

Finally, there is the question of whether the growth of California state government was caused by “political opportunities” (Kriesi et al. 1992; McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1996) This concept is difficult to operationalize,⁸ but one approach is to identify the existence of such opportunities with divisions within the political elite. The party establishment was indeed divided in the 1900s. Progressive Republicans joined Democratic politicians, working-class radicals, and agrarian populists to oppose conservative republicans and the Southern Pacific Railroad Company. In 1912 many of these dissidents joined a national Progressive party to support the Presidential campaign of Theodore Roosevelt.⁹ At the same time, in San Francisco, a Union Labor party sapped much of the Democratic party’s traditional working class-base. Yet, the growth of state government cannot be directly attributed to a popular insurgency of radicals mobilizing from below. Most of the small farmers who had supported the populist movement in the 1890s had returned to the Republican party. Trade unions battled employers in the streets but abstained from electoral mobilization. The Socialist party followed an electoral strategy, but socialist voters only sapped the strength of the progressives, without enacting major reforms of their own. The state-building policy reforms of the progressive era were enacted by one faction of a divided political elite, not by insurgents taking advantage of perceived or real political opportunities associated with the division.

Moreover, the party elite in California was also divided in the period leading up to the enactment of the new state constitution in 1879. After the Civil War, the Democrats regained power by campaigning on anti-monopoly and anti-Chinese platforms. The Republicans were quick to realize that a change was needed in their own program, however, and in 1871 they elected a new governor, Newton Booth, a patrician anti-monopolist. The more conservative Republicans objected to Booth radicalism, and Booth and his followers split off from the regular Republican party to

⁷ The figure is 27 percent if bonds and miscellaneous expenditures are included in this category.

⁸ The measurement of political opportunity suffers from the same general methodological issues as the measurement of power—a subject of considerable debate among political sociologists in the 1960s and 1970s. It is unclear, for example, whether political opportunities should be said to exist in the form of “potential” opportunities or only “actual” opportunities, i.e., insofar as subordinate actors actually take advantage of them. If the existence of “potential opportunities” is recognized, the problem is how to measure these empirically without referring to the outcomes of political struggles.

form a People's Independent Party, also known as the "Dolly Vardens."¹⁰ After the Dolly Vardens achieved significant victories in county elections, four different parties presented tickets to voters in 1875: Republicans, Democrats, Independents, and Taxpayers. This proliferation of minor parties is an indication of how divided the political elite was in California just prior to the rise of the Workingmen's Party of California. As we have seen, however, the rise of the Workingmen and did not result in a substantial growth in state government capacities.

The Transformation of the Cultural Field

The alternative perspective I would like to put forward here emphasizes changes in the cultural field that structured the interactions among societal elites, popular movements, and public officials during these reform episodes. Working-class and agrarian movements in both 1879 and 1910 took advantage of divisions within the political elite to press for new social policies, and in both instances, a faction of the party elite ultimately sided with the popular movements to enact moderate versions of the policies they advocated. However, the cultural orientations of the actors had shifted between these two episodes in certain important respects.

Policy-making in 1879 was still grounded in the political discourse of "republican liberalism" (Ethington 1994). Drawing on Lockean social contract theory (Locke 1952), the civic republicanism of Montesquieu (1949) and Blackstone's philosophy of the common law (Blackstone 1950), this language presupposed the existence of natural law, an absolute normative order or a set of fixed and invariant moral principles that governed the conduct of human action in the world. As a taken-for-granted, transcendental standard against which the validity of human or civil law could be judged, natural law was accessible only through interpretive inquiry aimed at understanding the meaning of ideas. It was not an empirical phenomenon susceptible to comparative analysis and technical control. In the discourse of nineteenth-century politics, citizens and especially public officials might be motivated by lust, greed, or other passions, but it was believed that upholding the natural law of moral conduct would simultaneously promote the public good, ensure justice, and enable individuals to pursue their private interests on a basis of equality. An example of this kind of thinking can be drawn from an address published in the state's leading newspapers by the delegates of the 1849 constitutional convention, appealing to the voter to ratify the proposed state charter:

Acknowledging the great fundamental principles that all political power is inherent in the people, and that government is an institution for the protection, security, and benefit of the people, the

⁹ California progressives were more reluctant to form a Progressive party organization at the state level, since they already controlled the Republican party. For this reason, a state Progressive party was not created until 1916.

¹⁰ The reference is to a then-fashionable multi-colored dress pattern, signifying the heterogeneous composition of the People's Independent Party.

Constitution presented for your consideration is intended only to give such organic powers to the several departments of the proposed government as shall be necessary for its efficient administration; and while it is believed *no* power has been given which is not thus essentially necessary, the Convention deem individual rights, as well as public liberty, are amply secured by the people, still retaining not only the great conservative power of free choice and election of all officers, agents, and representatives, but the inalienable right to alter or reform their government, whenever the public good may require (California Constitutional Convention 1850).

Policy making predicated on this kind of discourse assumed that the rule of law, legal protections for the rights of individuals, and legal restrictions on the powers of elected officials were adequate to protect the good of the people so long as the law conformed to the moral principles of justice. Of course, Californians deeply distrusted their lawmakers. They sought to anchor the validity of the law in popular sovereignty. Political parties and the constitution were the vehicles they used to exercise their collective will. In public demonstrations of collective solidarity enacting nationalist patriotic rituals, the people conferred their own authority on the party leaders, whose mastery of the discourse of republican liberalism marked them as especially qualified to interpret the moral principles of justice and equality on which the republic had been founded. In addition, individual rights were protected by the Constitution, although by 1849, when California was founded, the state judges who interpreted and applied constitutional law were also popularly elected. In either case, the validity of the law was not grounded in empirical determinations of social policy, but in a shared commitment to moral principles sustained through the reproduction of collective partisan or national identity.

Even when the principles of republican liberty were most severely tested by practical experience, radicals in the 1870s continued to adhere to a natural-law orientation toward policy making. The Workingmen's Party of California blamed the problems of the working class on wealthy capitalists and the Chinese, who conspired to "degrade" the condition of the workingman both economically and morally. They had only the most faint understanding of a "capitalist system" operating apart from the moral behavior of individual businessmen. Their principal demand was for new *laws* to recognize the *natural rights* of the workingmen. In a manifesto published in San Francisco *Chronicle*, for example, Denis Kearney asked his fellow workingmen what they can do about the harsh conditions of the 1870s. "We can vote our friends into all the offices of the state," he replied. "We can send our representatives to Washington. We can use all legitimate means to convince our countrymen of the our misfortunes and ask them to vote the moon-eyes nuisance [the Chinese] out of the country." But Kearney acknowledged that this strategy might not succeed since Congress is "manipulated by thieves, speculators, land grabbers, bloated bondholders, railroad magnates, and shoddy aristocrats—a golden lobby dictating its proceedings." Therefore, the workingmen, he insisted, had a right "to take their own affairs into their own hands and meet fraud with force."

[T]he workingmen know their rights, and know, also, how to maintain them, and mean to do it. The reign of bloated knaves is over. The people are about to take their own affairs into their own hands, and they will not be stayed either by 'Citizen,' vigilantes, state militia, nor United States troops. The people make these things, and can set them aside. The American citizen has a right to express himself as he pleases, as he thinks, and to arm himself as he will, and when organized and strong enough, who shall make him afraid? There is none [cited in Davis, 1893 #554: 368].

Similarly, the agrarian reformers of the 1870s sought to rectify social problems through the enactment of legislation that would better secure the rights of individuals within a natural-law framework of state policy. Consider, for example, this extract from an address from Newton Booth, the leader of the People's Independent Party, in 1873:

In the name of Justice we demand that the people shall be allowed to do their own voting, unintimidated by menace; and that their votes shall be fairly counted. We demand that the laws shall be made and executed for the general benefit of all, and not for special interests. We demand the just and equitable payment of taxes. We demand free access to the courts, and that that brutal rule of action which wantonly ruins any private suitor who seeks legal redress against the [railroad] company's wrongs shall be abrogated. We demand that fares and freights shall be regulated by law, so that they shall be uniform and just; and that the company shall not discriminate against persons or places. . . (Booth 1894)

The interpretive, natural-law orientation of these early reformers was gradually transformed, as people lost faith in moral principles as a basis for social policy. A new kind of discourse began to take hold in the late nineteenth century. One of the earliest examples, Henry George's treatise on the causes of poverty, *Progress and Poverty* (1879), is drawn from the same period as the Workingmen's party, but at the time of its publication it was only beginning to receive public recognition. "It must be within the province of political economy to give such an answer [to the question of poverty]," George writes.

For political economy is not a set of dogmas. It is the explanation of a certain set of facts. It is the science which, in the sequence of certain phenomena, seeks to trace mutual relations and to identify cause and effect, just as the physical sciences seek to do in other sets of phenomena. It lays its foundations upon firm ground. The premises from which it makes its deductions are truths which have the highest sanctions; axioms which we all recognize, upon which we safely base the reasoning and actions of everyday life, and which may be reduced to the metaphysical expression of the physical law that motion seeks the line of least resistance. . . [George, 1966 #427: 11-12.

Stanford university professor Edward A. Ross provides another illustration of this discourse in his sociological treatise, *Social Control* (1901). Ross was not a radical socialist, but a university professor who preached a peculiar kind of social Darwinism. A leading figure in the emerging profession of sociology, he argued that social problems could not be solved merely by strengthening the moral instincts of individuals:

Like the hypothesis that storks bring babies, the theory that the moral instincts beget control has a distressing lack of finality. But how the mystery lights up when we reach the idea of *society*,—a something distinct from a bunch of persons! For we can regard this society as a living thing, actuated, like all the higher creatures, by the instinct of self-preservation. Social control, then, appears as one of the ways in which this living thing seeks to keep itself alive and well (Ross 1970: 67).

The new perspective was not just a kind of socialism. It stemmed from a general revival of empiricism as applied to human affairs, and it appeared throughout the United States in various intellectual doctrines, including those of Marxism, social Darwinism, American pragmatism, legal realism, radical political economy, political science, and sociology (Buenker 1988; Fine 1956; Harp 1995; Kesselman 1979; Kloppenberg 1986; Ross 1991; Tariello Jr. 1982; White 1957). The fundamental assumption behind this new outlook was that no eternal, absolute set of moral principles existed which could guarantee justice or the common good. Society was not regarded as a collection of autonomous moral subjects so much as a material process subject to scientific control. In the social philosophy of the new intellectuals and policy reformers, the design of legislation did not rest on the realization of an ideal system of normative order, but on the application of principles of scientific investigation, management, and planning to the organization of material conditions and relations (Katznelson 1996; Kirschner 1986; Lacey and Furner 1993; Melvin 1987; Rueschemeyer and Skocpol 1996). Only an empirical science such as political economy or sociology could secure the public good, in this view, because social problems such as poverty, vice, and inequality did not arise merely from the moral failure of individuals to conform to the principles of natural law. Nor could they be attributed to poorly designed formal legal institutions, which failed to uphold the true principles of natural law. On the contrary, the social conditions of modern, industrial society had come to be regarded as the products of a distinctive kind of social or economic *system*—an organic entity that functions according to material laws which can be grasped only from an empirical perspective. A systematic analysis of these laws revealed social processes or mechanisms operating to secure and perpetuate a system of class domination. And in order to create or restore the conditions for a good society, it was deemed necessary to control or regulate that system through “scientific” methods of analysis, planning, and administration.

The leading California progressives—men like Hiram Johnson or Chester Rowell—mixed the language of republican liberalism with references to the importance of nonpartisan, scientific administration. They spoke of individual rights and particularly of civic virtue and the public good, but they also advocated policy solutions that encompassed the formation of administrative organizations staffed by scientifically trained professionals. Reformers like Bellamy and Ross were far “ahead” of the progressives in championing an empiricist or “scientific” approach to social problems. The progressives were, after all, party politicians. They did not pioneer a new paradigm, but staked out the middle ground in the struggle between radicals and conservatives over the cultural framework of politics and government.

Nevertheless, the discourse of empirical science transformed the cultural field of state-society interactions by lending legitimacy to the claims of those who possessed specialized technical knowledge of social problems. This included not only professionals employed within the administrative departments of the executive branch, but also experts on the staffs of all the various social groups with stakes in any given policy issue. Consequently, in place of the old policy making process, which was dominated by the electoral choices of individuals and the judgements of elected legislators, a new method developed in the late nineteenth century and was institutionalized in the progressive era. The stakeholders in any given policy were brought together to help draft legislation, which was designed to embody their practical, empirical knowledge of problems. At the same time, the members of official state commissions charged with investigating social problems were selected on the basis of technical mastery rather than partisan loyalty, and these agencies were given new powers of rulemaking, arbitration, and enforcement. The various state agencies, bureaus, and commissions that were created during this period interacted with the social organizations with stakes in the policy fields under their respective jurisdictions, whether cooperatively or antagonistically, on a cultural field defined by the validity of the empirical methods. Eventually, even the courts adopted a more empirical orientation, bringing experts in to testify on matters that judges were incompetent to understand.

None of this explains why or how the empirical orientation toward policy successfully colonized the interpretive sphere of public life. I have not been able to explore the problem of causality in this paper. This would require returning to the issue of whether the cultural field is a cause or an effect of social action, which I have studiously avoided here. In conclusion, however, I would like to suggest that this is where political sociologists should direct their attention. The debate between state- and society-centered perspectives has grown stale, but much of the insightful work on political culture remains devoid of explanatory value. The most important outstanding problem, I suggest, is how to explain changes in the cultural field that structures the interaction between state- and social actors. So far, there has been little work on this problem in political sociology.

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