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7

Disseminating Culture

THIS CHAPTER deals with the fundamental question of how we become who we are through our interactions with others. The immediate origin of this chapter is similar to the motivation of the previous chapter: a desire to understand how nations emerge. In the previous chapter, I focused on threats and wars as mechanisms for the development of new political actors from the competition and collaboration of more elementary political actors. This time I wanted to study the even more fundamental process of how communities evolve in the first place. It seemed to me that a key part of the process was the development of enough shared culture so that a group of people could work well together. I recognized that in modern times, governments themselves promote culture through powerful mechanisms such as universal schooling and the regulation of mass media. But I was primarily interested in how the dissemination of culture works below and indeed before the activities of powerful governments.[1] How do people come to share enough in the way of language, habits, beliefs, and values that they can build the basis of common institutions such as effective government?

The approach I took was to model social influence: the way people tend to change each other in the very process of interaction. My academic interest in social influence dates back twenty years to my concern with how people try to persuade each other, especially in foreign policy argumentation. In that context I compared and contrasted styles of British, German, and Japanese leaders in terms of the pattern of causal beliefs they espoused while trying to persuade others to adapt their own preferred policies (Axelrod 1976 and 1977a). I also had a long-standing interest in how the separate parts of a person's belief and value system more or less fit together. This was an interest that goes back to my very first publication, which was on the structure of public opinion on policy issues (Axelrod 1967; see also Axelrod 1973 and 1977b).

In fact, my interest in social influence dates back even further than the beginning of my academic career. I distinctly remember an assignment I got when I was fourteen years old. The city council of our town, Evans-

[1] I do not use the more common term *diffusion of culture* because in anthropology that term has taken on connotations about the spread of supposedly "superior" (or at least attractive) Western culture.

ton, Illinois, was considering a proposal to cross-train the police officers and firefighters. My teacher asked us to write about whether it was a good idea or not. The plan certainly seemed like a good idea to me because the police would learn some additional first aid skills to use if they were the first on the scene of a fire, and the firefighters would learn some crowd control techniques to use if *they* happened to be the first on the scene. I called the local fire station to see what the people there thought. The man who answered the phone told me, "I don't know much about it, but we're all against it down here." I was not sure just why they were all against it (probably job security), but the response made a deep impression on me: it was possible to have an opinion based upon social influence rather than independent analysis. Moreover, one could be quite comfortable with this method of arriving at opinions. As I thought about it, I realized the firefighter I had talked to was perhaps more sensible than I first thought. In many circumstances, reliance on social influence could be a quite sensible way to reach an opinion.

The present model of social influence is the simplest model in this volume, and perhaps the most ambitious. It is the simplest in the sense that its basic mechanism follows a simple rule that leaves no room for strategic choice. It is strictly adaptive in style. It is also the simplest in that the entire description of the context and the dynamics of the model can be stated in two or three sentences. It is the most ambitious model in this volume in that it deals with how our very identities are shaped: who we are affects whom we interact with, and whom we interact with shapes who we become.

Besides being the simplest and most ambitious model in the volume, it is also the most surprising and the most controversial. It is the most surprising in that when I simulated a population with my model, my expectations were wrong as often as they were right, even though I was the one who designed the model. In addition, one of the key results was so counterintuitive that at first I thought it must have been due to a programming error. But it was not.[2] The model is the most controversial in that I have had the most trouble getting it published. I first sent it to the *American Political Science Review,* where one reviewer said about the model, "It is one that political scientists were educated to hate. No one makes choices. No one seeks to influence anyone else. Change has no costs, politically or economically. Cultural change occurs all-together in a community, with no leaders or laggards. In sum, politics are absent."

Nevertheless, that reviewer was "enchanted" by the manuscript and urged its publication. The other two reviewers thought the manuscript

[2] Appendix A provides an independent replication of this model and confirms its key results.

needed more politics, and urged either substantial revisions or submission to a journal in another field. I chose the latter course. I made a variety of corrections and clarifications suggested by the reviewers, and sent it to the *American Sociological Review.*

The *American Sociological Review* had no trouble seeing the paper as proper sociology. The deputy editor who was assigned the manuscript wrote, "This is one of the more interesting simulation papers I have read," but "I am not very enthusiastic overall about these types of papers." The reviewers all thought the paper had real promise (each with his or her own set of proposed revisions), and the deputy editor's summary was "I suggest we should honor the reviewers' advice: to invite a revise and resubmit."

Because the deputy editor was not enthusiastic about simulation in general, I decided that it would be difficult to convince her to accept the paper as long as the reviewers retained any qualms at all. Therefore I decided to send it elsewhere.

My third try was the *Journal of Conflict Resolution,* known for its interdisciplinary range. This time, one reviewer was completely positive and the other asked only that I expand the model to include cultural drift. With the editor's encouragement, I gave this a try but found that the results were so complicated that I felt unable to give a coherent account of them. Therefore I proposed including a brief description of the difficulties of dealing with cultural drift, and leaving their solution for future research. The editor agreed, and accepted the paper with this addition to the section on "Extensions of the Model." The moral of the story, I suppose, is that persistence pays.

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