

PRIVATE TRUTHS, PUBLIC LIES

*The Social Consequences of
Preference Falsification*



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The Significance of Preference Falsification

Imagine that a person in a position to alter your career invites you to a party at his home. When you arrive at the party, the talk of the moment seems to be about the living room's pale neutral colors, the latest trend in interior decoration. The look does not appeal to you, but you would rather not say so, lest your host be hurt. Feeling pressured to say something, you compliment his "sophisticated taste." A while later you find yourself in a conversation on wasteful development projects in Latin America. Someone pompously asserts that under socialism there would be no waste. Although you find the claim preposterous, you let it go unchallenged, to avoid sparking a divisive debate.

With the advancing hour, you get bored and start itching to leave. A voice inside objects that it would be imprudent to be the first to make a move. So you stay on, hoping that somebody else will comment on the late hour and signal a readiness to depart, giving you an opportunity to slip out without becoming the focus of attention. At long last someone stands up to leave, and to your secret delight, the party unravels. Thanking your host for a "marvelous evening," you head for the door, grateful that it was not you who initiated the exodus.

Your evening contained several instances of *preference falsification*, the act of misrepresenting one's genuine wants under perceived social pressures. In admiring the bland decor, remaining silent on Latin America, delaying your departure, and stating that you had a delightful time, you conveyed impressions at odds with your private

thoughts and desires, at least partly to avoid disapproval. On each occasion, you faced a choice between openness and concealment, between self-assertion and social accommodation, between maintaining your integrity and protecting your image. There were always good reasons to opt for insincerity, advantages that outweighed the benefits of being uncompromisingly and assertively truthful.

Preference Falsification as a Specific Form of Lying

Why introduce a complicated term like preference falsification? Wouldn't "lying" do? While always a form of lying, preference falsification is a more specific concept. Consider a person who, as a soldier, followed orders to massacre unarmed civilians. Years later, he denies taking part in the crime. If he was personally opposed to the atrocity, and participated solely to avoid being court-martialed for disobedience, his lie about his involvement does not misrepresent his sentiment toward his victims. Given that he felt no antagonism toward them, he would not be falsifying a preference. Preference falsification aims specifically at manipulating the perceptions others hold about one's motivations or dispositions, as when you complimented your host to make him think that you shared his taste.

Nor is preference falsification synonymous with "self-censorship," the suppression of one's potentially objectionable thoughts. In this instance, preference falsification is the broader concept. Had you merely kept quiet during the discussion about the decor, that would have been self-censorship. In pretending to like it, you went beyond self-censorship. You deliberately projected a contrived opinion.

Two other common terms with which preference falsification has close affinity are "insincerity" and "hypocrisy." I will sometimes use them where the context leaves no room for ambiguity, just as I will refer occasionally to lying. But no such term is sufficiently precise for the topic at hand. What gets falsified may be a preference, one's knowledge, or a value. For analytical clarity, it will often be essential to distinguish among various forms of falsification.

A phrase that captures the meaning of preference falsification exactly is "living a lie." It was developed by East European dissidents during their long winter of communist dictatorship, because they, too, found their existing vocabulary inadequate. To live a lie is to be bur-

dened by one's lie. The source of the burden could be the guilt one suffers for having avoided social responsibility, or the anger one experiences for having failed to live up to one's personal standards, or the resentment one feels for having been induced to suppress one's individuality. Whatever the nature of the discomfort, it shows persistence. Of course, not all lying produces discomfort. The bank teller who pretends to be cooperating with a would-be robber, when she is actually buying time for the police, need not be burdened by her lie. Similarly, if you praise your host's decor only to make him feel good, without any thought of protecting your own reputation, the act is unlikely to weigh on you. You need not have to live with guilt, anger, or resentment, so the lie is not an instance of preference falsification.

If one distinguishing characteristic of preference falsification is that it brings discomfort to the falsifier, another is that it is a response to real or imagined social pressures to convey a particular preference. It is thus distinct from the strategic voting that occurs when, in a secret-ballot election, one votes for candidate *B* because *C*, one's favorite, cannot win. Strategic voting entails preference *manipulation*. But it does not involve preference *falsification*, because in a private polling booth there are no social pressures to accommodate and no social reactions to control.

Challenges Ahead

In addition to its intended effect—the regulation of others' perceptions—preference falsification may have unintended consequences. When you chose to keep silent on Latin America, you deprived your fellow guests of your personal knowledge. Had you spoken up, you might have influenced how some guests think, or will think, about Latin American development. They might have spread your thoughts to others, thus helping to increase pressure for viable reforms.

The objective of this book is to classify, connect, and explicate the unintended consequences of preference falsification. How, precisely, does preference falsification affect the mechanics of politics? How does it influence the evolution of public opinion? What are its implications for the efficiency of social policies and institutions? To what extent and by what mechanisms does it transform beliefs, ideologies,

and worldviews? Finally, does it facilitate or hinder efforts to predict and control the social order?

As will become clear, some of the most striking effects of preference falsification are, in one sense or another, socially harmful. I argue that preference falsification generates inefficiencies, breeds ignorance and confusion, and conceals social possibilities. Yet preference falsification is not an unmitigated social menace. It can benefit others by suppressing the communication of knowledge that happens to be false. It can harmonize our social interactions by restraining impulses like malice, envy, and prejudice. And further, it can enhance vital social cooperation by silencing minor disagreements of opinion. There are also subtler reasons why it would be incorrect to view preference falsification in a purely negative light. These other reasons will emerge as the argument progresses, although the focus of the book is on explaining the effects of preference falsification rather than on judging them. Much of the discussion has moral implications, some of which receive attention, but I do not aim to provide a comprehensive normative analysis, and certainly not one capable of differentiating conclusively between morally justified and unjustified cases of preference falsification.¹

Religious Dissimulation

One illustration of preference falsification involves movements aimed at fostering religious conformity. Responding to the pressures exerted by such movements, heterodox believers have often sought refuge in dissimulation. The medieval world offers some poignant examples.

Around the time of the Christian reconquest of Spain, the Church launched a persecution campaign against the country's non-Christians. It thus became increasingly unsafe to live in Spain as a practicing Jew or Muslim. Many Jews responded by fleeing abroad. But hundreds of thousands opted instead to accept baptism, resting their decision on a Judaic legal provision that allows dissimulation in times of danger. In those days, conversion was understood to imply a change not just of faith but also of lifestyle. Outwardly, therefore, the ostensible converts began to live as Christians. In the privacy of their homes, however, many continued to practice their ancestral rites, waiting for the day when they could revert to Judaism. Yet for all the precautions

they took, their secret activities attracted attention. The notorious Spanish Inquisition was created to stamp out the secret practice of Judaism, which came to be known as Marranism.² Marranism is a form of preference falsification.

Around the time that Judaism slipped underground in Spain, Catholicism was under attack in England, where laws had been passed to make Protestantism the sole legitimate religion. Many Catholic believers started attending Protestant services, but as an act of political precaution rather than of religious faith. Some Catholic authorities encouraged the practice, arguing that dissimulation is sometimes essential for self-preservation. Others, including the pope, declared the practice of conformism illicit. One anticonformist writer suggested that Catholics who went to “false congregations” were endangering the very survival of Catholicism.³

Underlying this dispute among Catholic leaders is a disagreement concerning the dynamic consequences of preference falsification. In the proconformist view, preference falsification can go on indefinitely without altering the preferences being suppressed; word leaves the heart intact. In the anticonformist view, the effects of preference falsification outlive the forces behind it; word transforms the heart. The former view sanctifies accommodation. It suggests that a dissimulator may wait patiently for the danger to pass, without any weakening, no matter how long the wait, of his desire to return to the fold. By contrast, the latter view demands active resistance. Because dissimulation may give way to genuine conversion, it carries the risk of annihilation. The intuition behind the anticonformist view happens to be correct, though the risk may vary. This argument will be developed in later chapters.

A final case of religious dissimulation comes from Islam. The Sunni caliphs of the Umayyad dynasty, who began ruling the Arab empire in the late seventh century from Damascus, made it a test of Islamic devotion to insult the founders of Shi'ism. Seeing that failure to pass the test could bring great hardship, even death, the Shi'is adopted the *taqiya* doctrine, which permitted them to conceal their heterodoxy under danger, as long as they preserved it in their own hearts and minds.⁴ Although the doctrine predates Islam, its justification was taken to be a verse in the Qur'an: “Whether ye conceal what is in your hearts or reveal it, Allah knows it.”⁵

Every classical work of Shi'i jurisprudence stresses that *taqiya* is legitimate only under conditions of grave emergency. Over time, however, the doctrine turned into a license for general political apathy. Modern Shi'i leaders, seeing *taqiya* as a barrier to revolutionary activism, have insisted that it was never meant to rationalize passivity in the face of unjust government.⁶ Significantly, the Ayatollah Khomeini, the mastermind of Iran's Islamic Revolution, launched his struggle by declaring: "The time for *taqiya* is over. Now is the time for us to stand up and proclaim the things we believe in."⁷

The modern opposition to *taqiya* highlights another theme of the book: preference falsification as a barrier to social change. Where the anticonformist writers of Catholicism saw preference falsification as an agent of transformation, contemporary Shi'i writers have considered it a source of rigidity. These two positions are by no means incompatible. Depending on various factors to be specified later, preference falsification can fuel either change or continuity.

Veiling and Its Discontents

To consider a related possibility, let us move to modern Turkey. Turkish civil libertarians, including Westernized intellectuals and self-styled progressives, reject the notion that no one should be concerned when a woman covers her head in public settings. Many favor the prohibition of veiling. The freedom to veil—a freedom taken for granted in most parts of the world—is defended primarily by Islamic fundamentalists, who tend to define individual liberties narrowly and consider modern society too permissive. Fundamentalists argue that the freedom to veil is a basic human right.

Where everyone is acting out of character, it behooves one to look for complicating factors. The complication here is a widespread perception that the freedom to veil is self-negating. Indeed, both fundamentalists and their opponents recognize that veiling on the part of some women would generate pressures to conform on those wishing to remain unveiled. Everyone senses that some veiled women would accuse their unveiled peers of breaking an ostensible religious law, prompting the latter to falsify their preferences in an effort to gain acceptance and respect. There is broad agreement, therefore, that Tur-

key's choice with regard to veiling is not between freedom and compulsion but, rather, between one kind of compulsion and another. Under the circumstances, civil libertarians reject the freedom to veil in order to safeguard a more precious freedom, the freedom not to veil. For their part, the fundamentalists accept the freedom not to veil, because they expect the freedom to veil to extinguish it.

As with any festering national controversy, the contending arguments are more complex and more varied than this brief account makes them seem. There are libertarians who consider the freedom to veil a basic right, and there are fundamentalists who are loath to permit the breaching of what they regard as divine law. It is significant, however, that within each camp disagreements reflect differences over the power of conformist motives. For instance, Westernized intellectuals who support the freedom to veil generally believe that the social pressures on nonveilers are unlikely to become irresistible.

An analogous controversy concerns the practice of secularism. Although secularism ordinarily entails the separation of religion from the affairs of state, in Turkey it has meant, ever since Atatürk's reforms of the 1920s, the control of religion, if not its suppression. A major justification for religious regulation has been the suspicion that Islam is incompatible with democracy. If Islam's social power were unchecked, many leaders have thought, it would drive reformist, modernist discourse underground, with fatal consequences for the country's ongoing transformation.⁸ As in the veiling issue, proponents of liberal democracy have found themselves opposing religious liberties precisely to protect liberties they value more, like freedom of the press.

These Turkish controversies raise the possibility that encouraging one form of preference falsification may be the price of preventing some other form. This possibility will receive attention in chapters ahead. We shall see that it makes groups equate full freedom with their own annihilation, thinking that if they do not suppress others, others will suppress them.

Outing

In the United States, a controversy over the morality of "outing" closeted homosexuals illustrates further fears and political responses that will figure prominently in later discussions. In mid-1991, the gay-

rights group Queer Nation held a press conference to announce that a senior official of the Department of Defense was a homosexual. Shortly thereafter, the *Advocate*, a gay magazine, ran a story on the official. The magazine defended its action by pointing to the Pentagon's own policy of outing gays in uniform and then discharging them. The covertly homosexual official had promoted the policy, alleged the *Advocate*; he had encouraged and helped implement discrimination against gays. Around the same time, another gay group, OutPost, covered New York with posters featuring the faces of movie stars, allegedly closeted homosexuals. The posters were inscribed "Absolutely Queer."⁹

Most newspapers refused to name the "outed" celebrities. People have a right, they maintained, to keep information about their private lives private. The gay community split. Some gays opposed outing as an infringement on the right to privacy. Others defended it as a social necessity. Though agreeing that people have a fundamental right to make their own sexual choices, the latter group insisted that individuals also have a duty to be truthful about their sexual identity, regardless of the possible personal costs. They argued that homosexuals wearing a mask of heterosexuality contribute to the oppression of fellow homosexuals by making homosexuality a badge of shame.

The debate in the gay community is about the freedom to be a *closeted* homosexual. One side grants individual homosexuals the right to falsify their sexual preferences; the other sees such preference falsification as a threat to the agenda of eradicating antihomosexual prejudice. There is also an intermediate position, which distinguishes between the "passive closet" and the "active closet." The passively closeted homosexual simply practices homosexuality discreetly, hoping to escape detection. The actively closeted homosexual tries to cover up his homosexuality through actions designed to make him appear heterosexual, as when a gay actor makes a point of being seen with promiscuous women, or when a gay official champions antihomosexual regulations.¹⁰ The intermediate position endorses the outing of closeted homosexuals only if they are consciously benefiting from activities directly harmful to gays.¹¹

This is not our first encounter with the notion that preference falsification may have socially deleterious spillover effects. We saw that it fueled bans against religious dissimulation. The new point is that

the manifestations of preference falsification include punishing people whose views and needs one shares. The logic is simple. Talk being cheap, anyone can claim to be against this lifestyle or that political platform. An effective way of making such a claim credible is to participate in efforts to punish those from whom one is seeking dissociation. A closeted homosexual may become a gay basher to allay suspicions about his own private life. As the argument unfolds, we shall see that such hypocrisy is a universal, and often successful, tactic of self-protection and self-promotion.

Gay activists have long claimed that *most* gay Americans remain closeted, resting their case on the famous 1948 survey of Alfred Kinsey. As many as 10 percent of the men in Kinsey's sample reported being more or less exclusively homosexual during the preceding three years. Professional researchers of sexual behavior have regarded the sample as unrepresentative, in that it contained disproportionate numbers of sex offenders, prisoners, and recruits from Kinsey's own lectures.¹² Still, the figure slipped into the media as a settled fact—until 1993, that is, when the Battelle Human Affairs Research Center released one of the most rigorous studies ever of male sexual behavior. According to the Battelle study, only 1.1 percent of American men are exclusively homosexual, with another 1.2 percent having had homosexual sex during the past decade. Gay activists refused to give up the 10 percent figure. Even as scholars pointed out that the Battelle figures are consistent with findings from other countries, activists rushed to discredit the new study. The gay quarterly *10 Percent* announced that it would not change its name.¹³

If the gay lobby finds the Battelle study unacceptable and refuses to concede the flaws of the Kinsey survey, the reason is that it has a vested interest in the perception that homosexuals form a huge, if mostly invisible, voting bloc—just as opponents of gay rights have a vested interest in making the numerical significance of homosexuality seem vastly overstated. The gay lobby's ability to advance its objectives depends substantially on the perceived share of Americans who are overtly or covertly gay. Further on we shall see that it is a common political practice to claim that the support for one's cause is mostly hidden. Reformers and revolutionaries of every stripe have asserted that they enjoy the sympathy of a covert majority.



Leaks and Trial Balloons

A person weighing the probable consequences of an action often has reliable information to go on. For instance, a closeted lesbian in small-town America might know with near certainty that if she steps out she will face harassment. In some contexts, however, one's information about probable reactions is unreliable. A politician with a new idea may be unsure about the reception it will get. Faced with such uncertainty, he might float the idea anonymously, possibly by having a subordinate discuss it with a trusted reporter who agrees to attribute her story to "well-placed sources." Such a "trial balloon" gives the idea some exposure without requiring the politician to take personal responsibility. If the reaction is unfavorable, he can quickly dissociate himself from the idea, even join the chorus of criticism. If instead the reaction is favorable, he can claim credit and begin promoting the idea openly. The lesson here is that efforts are made to test public opinion. The efforts often prove worthwhile, because taking an unpopular position in public can be very costly. It can turn one's friends into enemies, damage one's reputation, and extinguish one's career, among other possibilities.

Other news is passed to the press because public opinion is already well known. A cabinet minister may seek to discredit another minister, or his policies, by feeding the press news certain to damage him, on condition that the source of the "leak" be left unnamed. Through the subsequent outcry, the leaker manages to hurt her opponent, but without inviting reprisals. While secretly relishing the leak's consequences, she can express outrage, even call for tough penalties on proven leakers.

News leaks are a ubiquitous feature of Washington politics. Convincing that Ronald Reagan was insufficiently active on women's issues, one of his aides leaked her own in-house report on sex discrimination to a journalist, who then asked the President at a nationally broadcast news conference why he had not acted on a report of his own administration.¹⁴ The aide wanted to generate a public outcry that would push Reagan into action. Other Reagan aides made it a point to tip off the press about the President's disagreements with his first secretary of state, Alexander Haig.¹⁵ Their goal was to force Haig's departure without their having to take any blame.

Politicians go to great lengths to protect themselves and their policies from inconvenient leaks. David Gergen, who served as director of communications in the first Reagan administration, recalls that aides made it a practice never to say anything controversial in a conversation where more than one other person was present. The logic of such caution is that information delivered to a single person is unlikely to be leaked, because the source of the leak would be obvious. The fear of leaks, Gergen observes, makes the number of Washington officials involved with an issue *inversely* proportional to its significance. The more significant the issue, the fewer the number—precisely because leaks become more probable and potentially more dangerous.¹⁶

That leaks and trial balloons play an important role in Washington politics would not have surprised Machiavelli, the arch-realist of the European Renaissance. In *The Prince* he argued that politics features many forms of deception, including insincerity.¹⁷ The observation was not new, but earlier writers had tended to extol the virtues of sincerity. Breaking the pattern, Machiavelli insisted that insincerity is ineradicable, and on this basis, he advised the aspiring leader to be as cunning as a fox. A political player, he argued, must take on whatever appearance seems most prudent from the standpoint of acquiring and retaining power. The politician who insists on being fully open and totally honest will inevitably offend powerful groups and get outmaneuvered by more prudent rivals.

The politician's motive for wearing a socially acceptable mask did not disappear with the advent of modern democracy. We shall see that preference falsification continues to shape the political process everywhere.

The Secret Ballot, Blind Refereeing, and Secluded Negotiations

If preference falsification is as common, and its political consequences as significant, as I am suggesting, there ought to exist mechanisms for mitigating its causes. It will be instructive to consider a few.

In every modern democracy major elections and referenda are conducted by secret ballot. The rationale is to let citizens vote without intimidation. Votes taken by open ballot are considered illegitimate

precisely because they may have been tainted by preference falsification.

So esteemed is the secret ballot that undemocratic regimes try to make effectively open votes seem secret. The 1979 referendum on turning Iran into an “Islamic Republic” was preceded by a campaign that threatened to brand as an infidel anyone daring to vote in the negative. Although votes would technically be anonymous, the campaign created the impression that the regime could determine the nature of any individual vote. At the polls, moreover, voters saw their identity cards stamped, fueling fears that districts with many negative votes would become the focus of interrogations and reprisals.¹⁸ When the initiative received an approval rating of 98.2 percent, the revolutionary regime interpreted the result as an expression of overwhelming support. But the world press, sensing that millions had voted affirmatively out of fear, rightly called the referendum a sham. In effect, it declared the result biased on the grounds that voters did not *consider* their votes anonymous.

Academic promotion decisions are often made in settings designed to obviate preference falsification. Faculty asked to evaluate candidates for promotion are assured that their names, or at least the substance of their recommendations, will be kept confidential. Leaks do occur, which is why evaluations are replete with circuitous language and why experienced readers pay more attention to what is *not* being said than to what is. On the whole, however, the system undoubtedly promotes sincerity.

Scholarly journals customarily base their publication decisions on unsigned reports whose preparers are known only to the editors. As every academic writer knows, anonymous referees are notoriously quick to condemn articles that they would not dare criticize openly. Anonymity also allows referees to be sloppy and to vent their jealousies, animosities, and prejudices. But the academic community tends to consider the drawbacks of anonymity outweighed by its advantages—evidence that intellectual preference falsification is recognized as pervasive.

Academic publication lists commonly distinguish between refereed and nonrefereed publications. The latter generally enjoy less prestige, because their editors, having no anonymous reports on which to blame rejections, are thought to be less capable of upholding standards. Sim-

ilar logic limits the prestige of journals that receive submissions primarily from writers with whom the editors interact on a daily basis. The editors of such “house journals” are thought to have great difficulty turning down mediocre submissions.

A final illustration comes from diplomacy. Sensitive international negotiations are often conducted in seclusion, so as to insulate the negotiators from pressures against compromise. A case in point is the Camp David Summit of 1978, which resulted in a historic peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. The final treaty was negotiated by tiny teams behind closed doors, while neither nation knew what its leaders were giving away. No daily progress reports were issued during the negotiations, lest they generate protests that would kill the chances for a settlement. The leaders on each side made concessions that they would not have wanted to defend publicly, except as the price of an accomplished treaty ending decades of hostility.¹⁹

The essential lesson here is that the proclivity to engage in preference falsification depends crucially on the institutional context. People who will mask their wants and beliefs in one setting will readily expose them in another. Conscious of this variation, political agents seek to manipulate the settings in which preferences are communicated. They may opt for arrangements that promote sincerity, as when the Israeli and Egyptian leaders agreed to negotiate behind closed doors. Or they may foster insincerity, as when Iran’s ayatollahs made it appear risky to vote against Islamic rule. Coming chapters will show that the institutions governing the incentives for preference falsification are themselves matters of choice on which preference falsification may be rampant.

Conceptual Preview: The Social Effects of Preference Falsification

The foregoing illustrations should leave no doubt that preference falsification is a phenomenon to which political actors accord enormous significance. It should also be clear that there exist a panoply of settings where individuals find it prudent to project socially approved preferences—to act, that is, like chameleons. The settings are all ones in which people’s social standing depends on their professed disposi-

Preference falsification produces two categories of effects. First, expressed preferences have social consequences, as when women choosing to veil induce conformist responses from women who would rather stay unveiled. Second, the social climate fostered by preference falsification may transform the preferences people are trying to hide. An example would be the eventual disappearance of a religion that is practiced only in secret. In the first category of effects, individual choices shape social outcomes. The second reverses the causality: social outcomes shape individual choices. Paired together, the two categories imply a circular causal relationship between social outcomes and individual choices. They thus suggest that to identify and understand the consequences of preference falsification, one must investigate both how individuals shape social variables and how social variables shape individuals.

Where to begin the analysis? In principle, the investigation of a circular relationship can start anywhere, provided one then travels the entire circle. For our purposes, however, it is best to start with the individual's influence on social outcomes, because preference falsification is an individual act. The mechanisms by which the social effects of preference falsification shape individuals will become easier to understand once the effects themselves have been investigated systematically.²⁰

The starting point of the analysis is the choice faced by an individual who must convey a preference on some issue. The issue is one where he will receive benefits or incur costs for the preference he expresses. Thus it is unlike that which he would encounter if asked to select, say, among flavors of ice cream, because that choice would not be of concern to others. In the case at hand, our individual knows that he will be judged by the preference he declares. Another important characteristic of this issue is that it will be settled through an aggregation of the relevant preferences expressed.

How will the individual choose what preference to convey? Three distinct considerations may enter his calculations: the satisfaction he is likely to obtain from society's decision, the rewards and punishments associated with his chosen preference, and finally, the benefits he derives from truthful self-expression. If large numbers of individuals are expressing preferences on the issue, the individual's capacity

to influence the collective decision is likely to be negligible. In this case he will consider society's decision to be essentially fixed, basing his own preference declaration only on the second and third considerations. Ordinarily, these offer a tradeoff between the benefits of self-expression and those of being perceived as someone with the right preference. Where the latter benefits dominate, our individual will engage in preference falsification.

The preference that our individual ends up conveying to others is what I will call his *public preference*. It is distinct from his *private preference*, which is what he would express in the absence of social pressures. By definition, preference falsification is the selection of a public preference that differs from one's private preference.

Attention will be paid later on to certain determinants of the individual's private preference. At this point, however, it is simply given. Other factors that I am treating as given are the individual's susceptibility to social pressure and the satisfaction he derives from truthfulness. To treat a variable as given is not to assume, of course, that it cannot differ from individual to individual. People may bring to an issue different wants, different needs for social approval, and different compulsions to verbalize their wants.

Such possibilities imply that people can vary in their responses to prevailing social pressures. One individual may resist pressures that another chooses to accommodate through preference falsification. A related implication is that individuals can differ in terms of the incentives necessary to make them abandon one public preference for another. The switchover points define their *political thresholds*.

One more set of players needs to be introduced: pressure groups trying to get their objectives endorsed publicly. Often directed by political activists, pressure groups reward their members and exempt them from punishments they impose on others. The rewarding and punishing is done by the members themselves, so the larger a pressure group's membership, the greater the pressure it exerts. The distribution of public preferences across individuals makes up *public opinion*, and that of private preferences forms *private opinion*. The latter distribution is hidden, so insofar as people's preferences determine which political programs get implemented, it is the former distribution that pressure groups have the most immediate stake in controlling. Like-

wise, it is public opinion, and not private opinion, that determines the rewards and punishments individuals receive for their public preferences.

Public opinion is thus a determinant of its own constituent elements, individual public preferences. Therefore it may transform itself through the changes it engenders in individual choices. Yet public opinion does not change perpetually. Under common circumstances, the transformations of public opinion will eventually produce an equilibrium. That is, public opinion will become self-reproducing. For many sensitive issues, more than one equilibrium is possible. In such cases which equilibrium gets established will depend on history, and circumstances of little significance in themselves may make a crucial difference. Once in place, a selected equilibrium will persist indefinitely, even if slightly different early circumstances would have produced a very different equilibrium. This theme receives close attention in Chapters 2–5, which explore how public opinion emerges from the interdependent public preference choices of individuals.

At any given equilibrium, public opinion may differ from private opinion. In fact, the equilibrium may owe its existence and stability largely to preference falsification on the part of people unsympathetic to the policies it makes possible. Such disgruntled people, even if they form a huge majority, will refrain from dissenting because of social pressures—pressures that they themselves sustain through acts of preference falsification. One socially significant consequence of preference falsification is thus widespread public support for policies that would be rejected in a vote taken by secret ballot. A related consequence is the retention of such policies, to the exclusion of alternative policies capable of commanding stable support. The latter phenomenon, which I call *collective conservatism*, is the subject of Chapters 6–9.

Chapters 10–14 explore how preference falsification affects private preferences. The task requires recognizing that our private preferences on political issues rest at least partly on beliefs shaped by *public discourse*, which consists of the suppositions, facts, arguments, and theories that are communicated publicly. We do learn, of course, from our personal experiences, and we do think for ourselves. Yet the limitations of our cognitive powers allow us to reflect deeply and comprehensively on only a fraction of the issues on society's political agenda. However much we might want to scrutinize every issue on

our own, we all rely heavily on public discourse, and often on its superficial elements, for the *private knowledge* that will undergird our private preferences.

Preference falsification influences public discourse. This is because to conceal our private preferences successfully we must hide the knowledge on which they rest. That is, we must reinforce our preference falsification through *knowledge falsification*. In so doing, we distort, corrupt, and impoverish the knowledge in the public domain. We conceal from others facts we know to be true and expose them to ones we consider false.

This brings us to another possible consequence of preference falsification: widespread ignorance of the status quo's disadvantages. The disadvantages may once have been appreciated quite widely. Insofar as public discourse excludes criticism of fashionable political choices, however, their shortcomings will tend to get forgotten. And in the process members of society will lose their capacity to want change. The status quo, once sustained because people were afraid to challenge it, will thus come to persist because no one understands its flaws or can imagine a better alternative. Preference falsification will have brought intellectual narrowness and ossification. When that point is reached, current preference falsification ceases to be a source of political stability. From then on, people support the status quo genuinely, because past preference falsification has removed their inclination to want something different.

Such an outcome is all the more likely on issues where private knowledge is drawn largely from others. It is less likely on matters where personal experience is the primary source of private knowledge. Two other factors influence the level of ignorance generated by preference falsification. If public opinion reaches an equilibrium devoid of dissent, individuals are more likely to lose touch with alternatives to the status quo than if dissenters keep reminding them of the advantages of change. Likewise, widespread ignorance is more likely in a closed society than in one open to outside influences.

Thus far I have outlined two major consequences of preference falsification: the persistence of unwanted social outcomes and the generation of widespread ignorance. The first of these outcomes is driven by people's need for social approval, the second by their reliance on each other for information. One involves interdependencies among

individual public preferences; it does not require any interplay among private dispositions. The other involves interdependencies among private dispositions, and the interactions do not necessarily get reflected in public variables. Yet the two processes can reinforce one another. The disappearance of public dissent can make people increasingly ignorant about flaws of the status quo, and in turn, their ignorance can make them progressively less prepared to dissent. Here, then, is a manifestation of the circular causality mentioned earlier. A social outcome transforms individuals, who then strengthen the outcome's stability.

If public discourse were the only determinant of private knowledge, a public consensus in favor of some policy, once attained, would become immutable. In fact, private knowledge has other determinants, and these can undermine an attained public consensus. But the unraveling of a public consensus need not occur in tandem with the escalation of private opposition to the status quo. This theme appears prominently in Chapters 15–18, which explore how preference falsification shapes patterns of social change.

In the presence of preference falsification, private opposition may spread and intensify indefinitely without any apparent change in support for the status quo. Yet at some point the right event, even an intrinsically minor one, can make a few sufficiently disgruntled individuals reach their thresholds for speaking out against the status quo. Their switches can then impel others to add their own voices to the opposition. Public opposition can grow through a bandwagon process, with each addition generating further additions until much of society stands publicly opposed to the status quo.

The revolution will not have been anticipated, because preference falsification concealed the opposition developing under the surface. Even so, it will be easy to explain with the benefit of hindsight. One reason is that the very occurrence of the revolution lowers the personal risk of exposing the vulnerability of the prerevolutionary social order. Another reason is that the revolution creates incentives for people who had been content with the prerevolutionary order to pretend that at heart they were always revolutionaries waiting for a prudent time to speak out.

The possibility of unanticipated revolution rests critically on two factors: the imperfect observability of the criteria on which individuals base their public preferences and the interdependence of those public preferences. In combination, these factors allow small, unobserved

changes in private variables to galvanize explosive changes in public opinion. By the same token, they allow private variables to undergo major changes without triggering changes in public opinion. That is, they make it possible for profound transformations to occur, and much tension to build up, in a society that appears asleep. Deceptive stability and explosive change are thus two sides of a single coin.

Disproportionate effects can also stem from other types of shocks to the social system. Suppose, for example, that government officials instructed to implement some collectively selected policy end up pursuing an alternative. Insofar as individuals derive lessons from the consequences of policies pursued, the transgression will leave an imprint on their private knowledge. Ordinarily, small policy deviations produce small effects on private knowledge, but under the right circumstances the effects on private knowledge, and ultimately on public opinion itself, will be enormous. Likewise, under certain circumstances even a huge transgression will have negligible effects on either private or public variables.

The fact that relationships among social variables follow variable rather than fixed patterns has major implications for the social order. It suggests that social evolution may feature discontinuities and inefficiencies. And it indicates, as the book's final chapter discusses, that there exist insurmountable obstacles to predicting and controlling social evolution with precision. There are techniques for identifying and measuring preference falsification, and doubtless they can be improved. But as long as people have the incentive to misrepresent what they want and know, the techniques will never attain perfection. Frequently, therefore, we will be thwarted in our attempts to manage social evolution.

This book thus provides a unified theory of how preference falsification shapes collective decisions, orients political change, sustains social stability, fuels political revolutions, distorts human knowledge, and hides political possibilities. I call the model that informs the theory the *dual preference model*, since its central feature is the duality between private and public preferences. The model incorporates a deliberately limited number of primitive concepts, most of which have already been touched upon here. My goal is to make sense of patterns and relationships found in diverse social settings as parsimoniously as possible.