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Alexandra Crampton

Marquette University, alexandra.crampton@marquette.edu

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Review of *Protecting the Elderly: How Culture Shapes Policy*

Alexandra Crampton
Marquette University

Review

In reading across disciplinary boundaries, it is always interesting to encounter a work defending what was once taken for granted in one's "home" discipline. Lockert's study begins with what may be a provocative statement for anthropologists but apparently is not for political scientists: "only a few contemporary students of comparative politics employ culture as a prominent explanatory variable" (ix). Lockert explains that while culture was significant to comparativist scholars in the 1950s and 1960s, a more deductive approach using rational choice theory has become increasingly popular since the 1980s. Throughout the book, Lockert seems to be in dialogue with rational choice and institutional theorists, responding to anticipated criticisms and pointing out how culturally informed theories can be more complete.

The cultural theory Lockert applies is the "grid group theory" of Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildasky. As Lockert explains, grid group theory was first constructed within sociology, further developed in cultural anthropology, and is now used in political science. On one axis lies the degree to which a person (or

nation) possesses “increasingly strong feelings of group affiliation” and on the other is the degree to which the individual subscribes to the authority of others (6–7). The result is four ideal types: fatalism, egalitarianism, hierarchism, and individualism. Although all societies exhibit all four types, the relative emphasis of one over the other, or of a combined subtype (such as individualist-hierarchist), is used in Lockert’s analysis as an independent variable to explain why different social policies regarding the elderly were developed in the United States, Germany, the former Soviet Union, and Japan.

Overall, this book is well-written, clearly organized, and provides a compelling argument within the rather large scope of study. Lockert’s theoretical approach is laid out in part one, and then applied to the case histories of four leaders in four countries in part two. Although social policies in general are addressed, the main locus for study is the development of pension policies and how individual leaders and governments responded to economic and demographic pressures on the maintenance of these policies in the 1980s. History is addressed through explaining how “historical contingencies” (such as World War II) can provide the context for major cultural shifts.

From an anthropological perspective, Lockert’s use of culture is a bit simplistic. The problem with reducing culture to an independent variable is that culture refers to the underlying context of meaning within a population rather than individual content that can be picked out, measured, and evaluated outside of this context. This problem has also been identified in demographic research, where culture is sometimes used as a “residual category” after other variables have failed to explain the model. In other words, culture is that thing that does not really make sense universally but some people nevertheless seem to be motivated by it (along with ideology and other people’s religions).

One could argue, however, that the scope of Lockert’s project necessitates a broad-brush approach to examining the complexity of policy development in four different countries. He is not analyzing social policy as a way of revealing cultural differences but is rather using culture as a heuristic device for explaining how different policies could have resulted despite similar pressures during the same decade. As globalization increasingly pushes policymakers to analyze on the same scale as Lockert’s research, anthropologists who dismiss the use of culture to address international questions of policy and practice will simply be left out of the larger discussion. This book is an important addition to transnational policy research, and a foretaste of the kinds of research many social scientists will find themselves doing, willingly and with reservations, in the years ahead.

Reference

Charles Lockert. *Protecting the Elderly: How Culture Shapes Social Policy*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001. xii, pp. 224.