

Working Paper

POLITICAL CULTURE:
AN INTRODUCTION

Michael Thompson

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**International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis
A-2361 Laxenburg, Austria**

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PREFACE

This is one of a set of three working papers concerned with the System and Decision Sciences task on Institutional Aspects of Risk Management.

Even a cursory comparison of the way the same technological risks are handled reveals that things get done differently in different countries. And, *within* any one country, the debate about how to improve the handling of those risks is often a debate between the advocates of several of these different ways of doing things.

To understand these differences we need to develop a cultural theory about the *appropriateness* and the *credibility* of risk-handling institutions. Since to invoke gross differences between national cultures would be to ignore the polarized debates within each nation, we need rather the idea of *cultural bias* - the contradictory predilections, ideas of nature, and personal strategies to which different individuals in the same society can adhere. In this way the cultural approach goes beyond the comparative study of institutions to investigate the social processes responsible for the ebb and flow of support between alternative institutional frameworks.

The first paper - *Political Culture: an Introduction* - provides some of the intuitive background for this approach. The second paper - *An Outline of the Cultural Theory of Risk* - gives a more formal treatment of this cultural theory as it emerges in the particular context with which we are concerned: risk. The third paper - *Beyond Self-Interest: A Cultural Analysis of a Risk Debate* - is an attempt to apply this theory to one of the case studies currently being assembled by the Management and Technology group that is investigating the ways in which the risks inherent in Liquid Energy Gases are handled in the process of terminal siting.

POLITICAL CULTURE:
AN INTRODUCTION

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THE BARE BONES

Perhaps the greatest achievement of anthropology has been to show that different people, faced with the same situation, do different things. No sooner does an economist, a psychologist, a sociologist or a political scientist produce his universally valid model of some aspect of human behavior than an anthropologist will jump up and say, "Ah, but what about the Bongo-bongo?" It is probably safe to say that there is no universalistic proposition that is immune to Bongo-bongoism.¹ Some semiologists, for instance, have suggested that there are some signs so rooted in nature that their meaning *has* to be intrinsic. One such sign is the arrow: →. Here, surely, the meaning is intrinsic to the sign; arrows always fly through the air point first and so the point of the sign, surely, must always indicate the direction of travel. Quite so, but who said the sign was an arrow? On a remote island in Micronesia the people spend much of their time hunting a secretive bird whose feet are specially adapted to the marshy terrain. Each time it puts one of its three-toed feet down on the ground, it leaves a sign: →: and every time a hunter sees one of these signs, he knows with certainty which way to go to catch up with his quarry. He goes in the direction indicated by the big central toe!

Anthropologists have been so carried away by their spoilsport success that they have almost lost sight of the one really interesting question which is: given that different people in the same sort of situation do different things, why do they do the different things that they do? This is the question that political culture tries to answer. If it was only the people on remote Micronesian islands who did things differently then political culture, whilst intellectually intriguing, would be of little practical relevance but, though we might like to pretend

otherwise, this is not the case. The simple but unpalatable fact is that the Bongo-bongo are alive and well and living right here in our midst.

More than a century ago General Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, after describing the iniquities perpetrated by the slave traders in the unknown African interior, suddenly brought the whole outrage uncomfortably close to home and asked: "Is there not also a darkest England?"² In much the same way, political culture brings the Bongo-bongo home to roost; the only difference is that this time it is our rationality, not our morality, that is outraged.³

The trick with political culture is to come at policy-relevant debates, such as those that surround technological risk or non-renewable energy resources from a contrary direction. Instead of asking "what are the risks?" or "how much oil and gas is there down there?" it has us ask "what would you like the risks to be?", "how much oil and gas would you like there to be down there?" Though political culture has something useful to contribute to all public policy analysis, its point of entry is that state of desperation, exasperation and exhaustion that is reached when, after years and years of debate and after the expenditure of millions and millions of dollars, we are still no nearer agreement on what the risks out there are or on how much oil and gas there is down there.

In the first instance, it is a theory of last resort; when all else has failed, try political culture. In the second instance, it leads us to ask (rather uneasily) why, in those less troubled areas where we all agree, we are all agreed. Could it be, not because we are right, but because we are all party to the same delusion? Are we, perhaps, all reading birds' footprints as arrows and moving in cosy unison ever further from our consensual goal?⁴

An Unconventional View of Culture

Though it is commonly assumed that to reject cultural universalism is to embrace cultural relativity, this assumption would only be valid if the number of different things that people could do was infinite. Political culture starts out from the intuitive hunch that, though people faced with the same situation do different things, there are't *that* many different ways of doing things differently. This idea that there are *patterns of culture*,⁵ that such patterns are accessible and describable, and that there are not very many of them is not a synthesis of the universalistic and relativistic traditions; it is a rejection of them both. It is as well to make this point explicit right at the beginning. Political culture is born of the marriage of anthropology to political science and culture is its key-concept, but the idea of culture that underpins this approach is far removed from the ideas that have held conventional sway in anthropology.

Ruth Benedict, whose seminal book was entitled "Patterns of Culture," is probably the most important ancestor in this

political culture tradition and many of her ideas are still visible (to the eye of faith, at any rate) in what follows. Just as the sound and fury generated by the contradiction of behaviorism and mentalism has tended to direct attention away from any formulation that suggests that they are both inadequate, and just as the mutual antagonism of institutional and neo-classical economics has inhibited the development of any mature approach that would reveal these polarised positions for what they really are - ideologically-committed statements of how the world should be, rather than accounts of how it is - so the patterns of culture tradition has always tended to be submerged in the turbulence set up between the universalists and the relativists. As we bring this submerged tradition to the surface, what features do we begin to discern?

We start to lose interest in those vague pseudo-entities like American culture or French culture; instead we start to focus on the various *cultural biases* that are to be found (in varying proportions) within both American society and French society. Nor do we persist in our sympathy for either of those contradictory formulations that would have us believe, on the one hand, that culture is just some kind of reflection or rationalisation of social action, and on the other hand, that culture is some kind of rule-book for the game of social life that gets handed down, largely unchanged, from generation to generation. Culture, we begin to feel, conforms to neither of these contradictory extremes of total fluidity and rigid concreteness. Culture is plastic. Though it can be pushed this way and it can be pushed that way, it cannot be pushed just anywhere; and just to push it into some fresh attainable configuration (and then keep it there) requires a great deal of social effort. Instead of a lot of social actors programmed day-in-day-out by culture and instead of some cultural superstructure that forms like a fluffy cloud above the granite mountain of production and consumption forces, we have mentally and physically creative individuals for whom culture is a rather provisional thing that needs to be made (or, at the very least, patched-up and modified) afresh each morning.

So the idea behind the political culture approach is that there are only a few shareable (i.e., socially viable) cultural biases and that (in advanced industrial societies, at any rate) it would be most unwise to assume that any of these possible biases are "uninhabited." Each bias is stabilized, albeit precariously, by its distinctive *cosmology*⁶. By cosmology is meant those shared beliefs and convictions about how the world is that sustain and justify moral judgements. But, if shared beliefs and convictions are rather provisional things that have to be worked at all the time, how can you be sure that your's are in line with everyone else's? Only by engaging in the continual process in which each individual justifies his own actions and passes judgement on those of others can you become, and remain, a member of a moral community. "Giving a good account of yourself" is not just a figure of speech; it is the human propensity that makes human society possible.

The final piece of the political culture jig-saw is *social context* for it is an individual's social context, so the theory

runs, that determines his particular cultural bias and leads him to give credence to one cosmology - to one set of shareable beliefs about how the world is - rather than to any of the contradictory alternatives. And finally, social context it is held is adequately described by just two dimensions - *group*, which has to do with the extent to which the individual is involved in bounded social groups, and *grid*, which has to do with the extent to which the individual is involved in hierarchical arrangements (either of individuals or of bounded groups of individuals).

It is these three concepts - *culture* analysed not for itself but for its bias, *cosmology* that renders viable one or other of a small number of irreconcilable ideas of how the world is, and *social context* which furnishes the *selection rules* that tell us which particular cosmology an individual will be predisposed to find credible out of this *lexicon* - that provide political culture with its seemingly contrary orientation.

If you are convinced that the world is like this, and I am convinced that the world is like that, then we are likely to act in very different ways in the one physical world that we both inhabit. That is, people who subscribe to contradictory cosmologies will operate contradictory rationalities. Each, ensnared in his own provincial rationality, will see the others as the Bongo-bongo (Lord Rothschild,⁷ for instance, sees the Friends of the Earth as "eco-nuts" and "eco-maniacs" and they for their part see him as something quite unprintable). Since each is committed to the rightness of his own cosmology, none of them can let go of it long enough to concede the validity of the others' rationalities. In the acrimonious battle between these rationalities no one can afford to stand outside it to compile the lexicon and to unravel its associated selection rules; to do that would be to concede the validity of other rationalities and to admit that any approach aimed at determining which rationality is right is bound to be wrong, and the whole misguided purpose of the battle is not to live with the Bongo-bongo but to annihilate them.

Political culture is the systematic deprovincialisation of rationality. If individuals in different social contexts are firmly attached to contradictory convictions about how the world is, then it is only to be expected that they will have very different ideas of what the risks out there are and that they will have very different estimations as to just how much oil and gas there is down there. To ask "who is right?" is not just to ask a question that probably only history can answer; it is to encourage the arbitrary tyranny of one provincial rationality over all the others. It is in order both to avoid asking such ugly questions and to transcend such narrow provincialism that we ask instead "what would you like the risks to be?" and "how much would you like there to be down there?"

All this - the bare theoretical bones of the political culture approach - will not begin to make much sense until the flesh and blood of worked examples has been added to it, but at least this brief display of its formal skeleton of assumptions should serve one purpose and that is to make clear the integrative ambition of the unconventional theory on which it rests.

SOME FLESH AND BLOOD: MOUNTAINEERING, SMOKING AND NUCLEAR POWER

In November 1979, I attended a meeting of an essentially pronuclear group in America - Scientists and Engineers for Secure Energy (SE₂). The meeting was concerned with two topics - the safe disposal² of nuclear waste and the Three Mile Island accident. In a sense the meeting was, for me, a kind of field-work - a valuable insight into one side of the nuclear debate - and my reaction was part critical, part sympathetic and part practical in that I offered some small pieces of advice as to how they might better advance their cause. I should hasten to add that I do not see myself as being in any particular camp - pro- or anti-nuclear- and that I would welcome the chance of talking with other interested agencies (the Friends of the Earth, say, or various government departments) and of making helpful suggestions to them as well.

[Now if these suggestions are not mutually contradictory, and I would claim that they are not, then it follows that each conflicting position has its part to play. It suggests that no rationality is absolutely right and no rationality is absolutely wrong. Rather, each is more or less appropriate to various kinds of situation. Political culture, in providing some bases for making prescriptions (for that is what these "helpful suggestions" are), aims to help each rationality to play its part. To speak of divergent elements playing their different parts, and to speak of possible parts as being appropriate or inappropriate, is to assume that there exists one or more optimal configurations of those elements at which the welfare of the totality reaches some maximum. The description of such optima is one of the ultimate goals of political culture.]

To those who have accused me, nevertheless, of being some sort of hired gun for the nuclear movement I should further add that all my helpful suggestions have gone unheeded!⁸

The Paralysis of Institutions

The technical presentations at the meeting served the useful purpose of showing that, so far as the members of SE₂ are concerned, there need be no fear that the problems of disposal are insuperable. What is more, two countries (Sweden and France) have, by going firm on one good (but not necessarily the best) method of disposal, gained political acceptance that this is so. The Swedish example - both their technical report and its political acceptance - should have been more than sufficient for us all to have agreed that the obstacles cannot be technical - they must be political. Yet, time and again during the meeting, the irrelevancies of glass versus ceramic, granite versus salt.... reprocessing versus not reprocessing reappeared in the discussion.

The European who sees the technically excellent New Mexico pilot project invalidated by the U.S. military's refusal to bury its dead in a civilian cemetery,⁹ and who watches distinguished scientists niggling over the claimed virtues of glass and ceramics *even after they have agreed that such niggling only allows the opposition to credibly claim that the experts cannot agree on a*

safe method of disposal, cannot but feel exasperation at America's refusal to reach a decision. Like an obese child confronted with a table loaded with goodies, America seems incapable of choosing, not because it has no choice, but because it is spoilt for choice.

But no man (and no obese child either) is an island, and the European should give vent to his irritation only for so long as it takes to get it out of his system. When America sneezes the whole world catches cold, and when America is racked with indecision the whole world becomes a much more dangerous place. America's current lack of any coherent policy for secure energy is turning almost *any* event into a crisis.

So, having put one's irritation to one side, one is faced with two crucial questions. First, what is the cause of America's institutional paralysis? Second, what if anything can be done about it? Before tackling these two questions, let me clear the ground a little. First, in the light of the Swedish example, and of the considered debate among SE₂'s experts, technical considerations are irrelevant. The search for the cause of the paralysis and for its cure should therefore be concentrated wholly within the social and political realm. Second, the institutions that are supposed to provide America with decisions (and with good decisions, to boot) fail to do so, not because there is something wrong with the institutions themselves, but because the institutions have lost the support of many individuals within contemporary American society. Institutions are not just *there* - they flourish or wither according to whether they do or do not enjoy the credibility of the members of the society that created them. Almost all the suggestions that were made at the meeting involved doing something to the institutions - pointing out what they *should* be doing in contrast to what they *are* doing, improving management and communication...urging paraplegics to snap out of it! These I regard, not as solutions, but as accurate descriptions of what is wrong. They contrast what the situation should be, if the institutions were able to work properly, with the sorry state to which they are now reduced. They are diagnosis disguised as cure. Telling the institutions that they are not doing what they were designed to do will, miracles excepted, meet with about as much success as commanding the man sick of the palsy to take up his bed and walk.

Since the crisis is that the institutions *can't* do what they are supposed to do, there is little to be gained from trying to influence them directly, but this does not mean that we can do nothing to alter the situation. We may not be able to change the institutions but we may be able to change the people.

The institutions are paralysed because public opinion is polarized. Even an institutional procedure like the Kemeny Commission, that is specifically designed to resolve such a polarization, ends up by itself falling victim to it. At our meeting we learnt from one of the members of the Commission about the split within its ranks and we lost no time in extracting from him just how the proposal for a moratorium was introduced by the anti-nuclear faction. I have no doubt that in some other meeting some other member of the Commission was spilling the

corresponding beans about the pro-nuclear faction. I made this perhaps distasteful point in order to suggest that there is a very real sense in which we in SE₂, in exacerbating this polarization within American society, are actually the *cause* of the very problem we are committed to trying to resolve. I suggested that at least we considered this as a possibility, and that we asked ourselves what constructive steps we could take if it were true.

Anthropology's Contribution

Different people may perceive risks differently and, of those risks that they perceive, they may vary quite considerably in the level they deem to be acceptable.

If two individuals happen to be at opposite ends of both these modes of variation - one perceiving only short-term risks, the other perceiving only long-term risks, one accepting a high level of risk, the other a low level of risk - then their behavior *in the same situation* will be widely divergent. Yet each will be acting perfectly rationally. Since the great claim that is always made for anthropology is that it deprovincializes rationality, the anthropologist should be able to offer an explanation for such variations in risk perception and in risk acceptability.

The field in which I first began to look at these questions was not nuclear power but Himalayan mountaineering - an activity in which those who partake, Western climbers and Nepalese Sherpas, cheerfully and voluntarily expose themselves to *enormous* risks.¹⁰ It is, in fact, quite easy to compute what these risks are (the likelihood of death is in the order of 1 in 10 per expedition) but climbers and Sherpas go to some trouble *not* to discover what they are. There can be no doubt that the best way not to lose any sleep over the risks you are taking is to make sure that you remain blissfully ignorant of their existence. Ignorance, for them, is not simply the absence of knowledge - it is a deliberately cultivated condition.

For the Sherpas, social and cultural institutions such as principles of inheritance whereby each son and daughter gets his or her share at the time when they decide they would like to set up on their own, property rights whereby on divorce the common property is split along the same lines as it was merged, and an insistence upon not mentioning the names of the dead all serve to render credible a belief in economic individualism, personal salvation, private morality, and an ideal of neither squeezing others nor allowing oneself to be squeezed. Such institutions militate against the construction of long time perspectives which, by emphasising historical and genealogical connections, would allow some members and groups to press strong claims against others. The result is that time perspectives are severely truncated and only short term risks are perceived with any clarity.

Western climbers similarly lay great emphasis on personal mountaineering skill, judgement and experience in order to convince themselves that, though the risks in general may be high,

the risks they themselves are exposed to are less and are within their own control. Most deaths, in fact, result from objective dangers - if you are in the path of an avalanche when it comes down you are dead regardless of your skill, judgement and experience.¹¹

So Himalayan mountaineering provides examples of people underestimating the risks, especially the long-term risks. For them, almost anything is safe enough. By contrast, the near neighbours of the Buddhist Sherpas are Hindu villagers who would *never* go on a Himalayan expedition.¹² Where the Sherpas are individualistic, egalitarian and omnivorous, their neighbours are grouped into joint families with their commonly held land in the control of an elderly head, they are much concerned with hierarchy, status and purity, and they insist on all sorts of dietary and other prescriptions. Where the Buddhist Sherpas are entrepreneurial risk-takers, their Hindu neighbours are stay-at-home risk-avoiders. The Sherpas free-and-easy expansive style of wealth creation contrasts sharply with the carefully tended fields and the close-knit face-to-face communities of their neighbours as they go about the husbanding of resources that they perceive to be fixed and finite. If the Sherpas resemble 'the savage beasts of capitalism,' their neighbours constitute a sort of oriental Sierra Club. Why the variation?

The conventional anthropological answer is that individuals are guided in their choice between risk-accepting and risk-avoiding strategies by their world views - their culture. A more radical hypothesis accepts this but goes on to suggest that both chosen strategy and culture are, in turn, closely related to the social context that an individual finds himself in. Since an individual's social context can be changed, either by his own efforts or by the actions of his fellows, it follows that his culture and his chosen strategy may also change. It is at this point that the anthropology of risk begins to acquire practical implications.

The Hindu adopts a risk-sharing strategy, and subscribes to the pessimistic all-embracing world view that justifies such a strategy, because he has someone to share with. The Buddhist adopts a risk-narrowing strategy, and subscribes to the optimistic piecemeal world view that justifies such a strategy, because he has no one to share with. Social context is *enormously* persuasive. If there is no one there to share your risks with you, you cannot go in for risk-sharing and, conversely, only a mug would take a huge personal risk knowing that, if he was successful, he would have to share the rewards among all his risk-shunning fellows.

So here is one social dimension of risk perception and risk acceptability. In the strongly individualised context of the Buddhist many risks go unperceived and, of those that are perceived, many are acceptable. In the collectivised context of the Hindu many more risks are perceived (including many that *aren't* there) and few of these are acceptable. There is something intuitively attractive about these Himalayan vignettes and they provide some uncanny parallels with America's current predicament. Could it be that many Americans have over the last decade or so been converted, so to speak, from Buddhism to Hinduism?

From Anthropology to Political Science

A more recent research project has been concerned with the detailed investigation of this collectivised context - a comparative study of an 'anti' movement (the anti-smoking movement) in both the United States and Britain. The first thing to notice about 'anti' groups is that they are groups. Their members have surrendered some of their individuality in order to present a unified collectivised front on some issues. But the interesting thing is that, though the social contexts of the members are, in consequence, all towards the collectivised pole on this first dimension of social context, they are spread out at right angles to it along a second dimension - that running from the high level of prescription that is imposed upon the members of a hierarchical internally structured group to the absence of prescription that characterises a tightly-bounded but internally undifferentiated, and therefore egalitarian, group. These two kinds of group are well known to anthropology; they correspond to castes and sects respectively.

Jumping ahead to the model for a moment, it may be helpful to interpose one of its basic diagrams at this point. This diagram is simply the two social context dimensions with five stabilizable equilibria superimposed on them. We can then label two of these as the contexts occupied by individuals who are members of castes and sects respectively (and we can also tentatively label the context appropriate to the savage beasts of capitalism). Though we will not meet them again until we get to the next paper - *An Outline of the Cultural Theory of Risk* - we can take this opportunity to tentatively fill in the remaining two contexts.

The top left context is where we find the social condition immortalized by Durkheim - *anomie*. Very alone and everywhere hedged about by externally imposed prescriptions, the individual in this context has little control over events in time and space and his (or her, since women tend to predominate in this context) cosmology tends to be cobbled together from such ill-assorted bits and pieces as he can lay his hands on. This is the social context of *kitsch*, of millenarianism, of inconsistent eclecticism and, above all, of Lady Luck as the provider and withholder of all resources. Engels,¹³ in his account of the condition of the un-unionised working classes in Victorian Britain, is describing this context and so too (though with a slightly different set of prescriptions in mind) is Mrs. Gaskell¹⁴ when she speaks of those for whom 'life is like a lottery.'

The fifth context is the one that is often missed by occidental social scientists; it is the distinctive context occupied by the individual who has deliberately chosen to keep his involvement in socially-binding relationships (be they network or group relationships) to a minimum. This is the social context of the hermit - the still centre of the social hurricane (but not those raucous North American pseudo-hermits, like Thoreau who are really sect-leaders in search of followers). Nor are such individuals always *outside* of society. Though they may choose to withdraw from all social involvement, it is only *coercive* involvement that they have to avoid to stabilize them-

selves in this context. Whole convivial societies can be stabilized around this context with the help of its live-and-let-live, sufficient-into-the-day-is-the-evil-thereof, cosmology. In labelling the Sherpas 'savage beasts of capitalism' I have done many of them an injustice for, though such forceful individuals do exist in this society, the most prevalent context is not that of the *entrepreneur* but of the *autonomous* individual.

However, it is a fact that these two contexts are not too easily kept apart. The individualistic opportunistic Sherpa, given the opportunity, can soon turn himself into a savage beast of capitalism whilst such few members of this endangered species as survive in the West often dream of abandoning it all to sit hour after hour beside that trout stream in Hampshire. Just about the only thing that keeps these contexts apart is the presence or absence of economies of scale. It is the economies of scale that the savage beast of capitalism has exploited that keep him from his trout stream and it is the paucity of opportunities for economies of scale in their Himalayan habitat that prevents most Sherpas from turning into carnivores. (Figure 1)

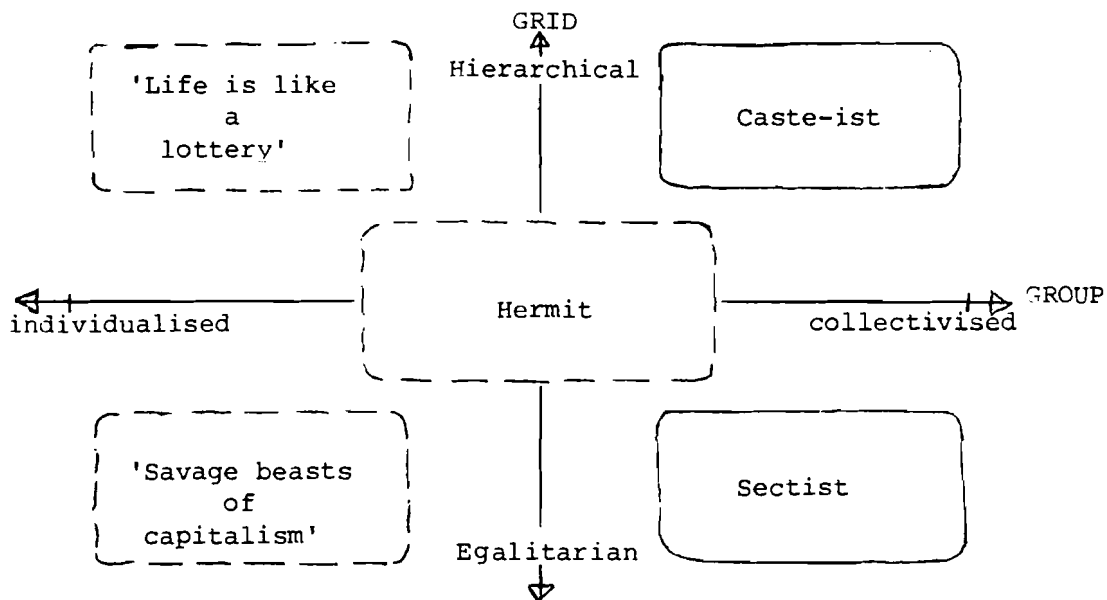


Figure 1. Stabilizable conjunctions of social context and cosmology

A *sect* erects a wall of virtue between itself and the nasty outside world from which it wishes to set itself apart. The members collectively *reject* the outside world - they do not negotiate any sort of relationship with it. The result is that, though the collectivity may exercise almost total control over its members, it can do nothing to the rest of the society.

A *caste* separates itself off, not with a wall of virtue, but by means of clearly defined distinctions between it and those other groupings that exist outside it. The result, as each caste defines itself by its distinction from (yet clearly specified inter-relation with) other castes, is a complex

hierarchical framework of status distinctions, prescriptions, restrictive practices, correct channels, and proper procedures. The members of a caste, therefore, do not reject the outside world; they collectively take up a clearly specified position *within* it. A caste, as a result, can come to exercise a high level of control over its own members *and* over those outside its boundary.

Though this fundamental distinction between sects and castes originates in anthropology, it has now been developed to the point where it connects with similar distinctions that are drawn in fields as diverse as organizational theory, political science, the sociology of knowledge, dynamical systems modelling, the philosophy of science, and the sociology of religion.¹⁵ The following table (Table 1) lists some of the operationalizable criteria that can be used to determine whether a group is a sect or a caste.

Table 1. Criteria for separating castes and sects.

CASTES	SECTS
<u>Dominant Criterion</u>	
Multi-issue aim.	Single issue aim.
<u>Secondary Criteria</u>	
1. Membership: Quality	Quantity
2. Internal Organization: Differentiated and hierarchical	Homogeneous and egalitarian
3. Relation to Outside: Negotiated and clearly-specified relationships	Opposition and rejection (unnegotiated)
4. Power: Manipulates others (collectively).	Is manipulated
5. Stability: Follows collectivist manipulative strategy that tends to maintain its position on 'peak of power.' Mature castes inherently stable.	Follows collectivist survival strategy consistent with its situation; adopts hit-and-run tactics. Cannot mature and is inherently unstable; cannot abide compromise
6. Leadership: Many different levels, each highly specialized, provide clear multi-stepped career structures. Leaders tend to be mobile within these structures.	Problematical - leaders contradict egalitarian ideal. Maintain themselves by maintaining the wall of virtue - by constantly reaffirming group values, attacking those on the outside, spotting outsiders who have crept in undetected. No career structure so leaders are immobile.

7. Order:
The basis of morality, hence rejection of disorderly bodies, e.g., sects. Formal and elaborate structures. High level of prescription and elaborate rules.
Rejection of outside the basis of morality. Inside the wall of virtue all is unstructured and informal. No prescription or rules except those that emphasize boundary between inside and outside.
8. Commitment:
Expressed in ritual and in adherence to correct procedures and proper channels.
Expressed in collective moral fervour, adhocism, and spontaneous affirmations of shared opposition to the enemy outside.
9. Scope:
National or global. If there are local chapters, organization remains strongly centralized.
Tends to be local. If there is a central headquarters this creates problems with hierarchy and may render the organization unstable.
10. Recruitment:
Not particularly joinable. Operates by invitation to those who have taken the trouble to make themselves acceptable.
Joinable. Open to all who clearly subscribe to the single aim and who reject the outside world.
11. Concern:
May well be for the welfare of all (though all may not accept that this is so).
Restricted to a minority - those inside the wall of virtue.
12. Use of scientific knowledge:
Science respected (especially scientific method) but new insights that threaten to confuse existing paradigms are resisted. The social context of 'normal science.'
Scientific knowledge valued only if it supports 'us' in fight against 'them' and is accessible to all. Emphasis on egalitarian ideal renders specialist and inaccessible knowledge suspect. Scientific method subordinated to requirements of boundary maintenance. The social context of 'scientism'.

[Note: The sectist use of scientific knowledge, though it contrasts so strongly with that of the caste-ist groups, is certainly not the source of breakthroughs and paradigm change. These are initiated by those prickly (but brilliant) individuals who, respecting neither persons nor disciplinary boundaries and conventions, occupy yet another social context - that of the entrepreneur - and operate the high risk/high reward strategy of the manipulative individualist.]

One interesting prediction from this model is that, though individuals can (by letting their sect loyalty lapse and then developing a more caste-ist account of themselves, or *vice versa*)

move between these two context, whole groups cannot. Such a prediction is directly counter to the evolutionary sequences sometimes advanced in the sociology of religion in which tiny persecuted face-to-face sects are depicted as the acorns from which the mighty oak trees of hierarchically-organised established churches grow. Instead, it suggests that each is a separate species that grows or withers according to the nature of the social context soil. Where both appropriate contexts are found in the same society then massive churches and tiny sects are likely to co-exist, the latter providing a continual critical commentary on the former.

The reason why whole groups, be they sects or castes, cannot move is that each is stabilized by the collective pursuit of a distinct strategy. The members of a caste end up manipulating others; the members of a sect end up manipulated by others. Because of this divergence between their stabilizing strategies, castes and sects always remain clearly separate. A sect is an egalitarian and externally impotent collectivity; a caste is a status conscious and externally potent collectivity.

Now before someone else says it, let me say that a group like the Friends of the Earth, though it is clearly a sect in terms of this definition, is *not* impotent; if it were, there would probably be no need for an organisation such as SE₂. The difference between the FoE and a *life sect* (like the Amish or the Jonestown Commune) is that the members look to their group for only a part of their life support, not for it all. The same sort of thing is true for most of the caste-like groups we will be looking at - the collectivity has relevance for only a part of the lives of each of its members. It is in order to maintain this distinction between the *total commitment* of the members of life sects and life castes and the tendency or bias of the group members we will be looking at that I choose the terms *sectist* and *caste-ist*.

In a life sect, leaders and followers are in daily fact-to-face contact; they are united in their impotence. If impotence goes with unity, perhaps power goes with separation? Perhaps it is not the sect but just the sect leadership that can acquire power? Surprising though this suggestion may seem, it turns out to have some substance; the reason sects such as the FoE have managed to acquire power lies largely in the separation between leaders and followers.

Many sects have a Washington-based leadership and a provincial mail-order membership. On top of this, the sect leaders (unlike their followers) have impressive media skills. At the SE₂ meeting there were many moans about the anti-nuclear bias of the media and frequent laments about the Devil having all the best tunes. Nor does it stop there. The Devil, it seems, has all the pretty faces too; the antis have Jane Fonda, Paul Newman and Linda Ronstadt, to name but three, whilst the pros have only the bushy-browed Ed Teller - the Father of the H-bomb. The sect leaders are thus able to do two things at once in two different places - they can put pressure on government in Washington at the same time that they feed suitably sectist exhortations back to the provinces to maintain the unity of their fissure-prone followers.

For instance, the FoE book *Frozen Fire* opens with the following quote:

An official of one of the country's largest gas companies said yesterday 'absolute safety' for liquefied natural gas is impossible and 'inconsistent with national goals and public interest'.¹⁶

Only those of a sectist disposition would see this statement as anything other than a platitudinous truism; those in other social contexts (be they caste-ists, savage beasts of capitalism, hermits or down-trodden proletariat) would all agree that no technology can be absolutely safe and that, in consequence, a commitment to absolute safety would be infinitely expensive and so could never be consistent with national goals or public interest. The various non-sectists only begin to disagree when they get to the next question which is: 'granted that no technology can be absolutely safe, how safe is safe enough?' Since the remaining 298 pages of *Frozen Fire* are devoted to a detailed and meticulously argued discussion of this second question, culminating in a long list of suggestions as to how these inevitable risks might be better minimized and more carefully and equitably handled,¹⁷ one can only assume that this opening appeal to the uncompromising rejection of risk (especially risk imposed by big business) is a sectist sop thrown to the faithful followers to keep them happy while the author hobnobs on what are really rather caste-ist terms, with those who tread the corridors of power.

A powerful sect is a colossal contradiction, and this two-places-at-once feat by its leaders must inevitably result in a lot of skillfully disguised hypocrisy. The greater the power of the sect leadership, the greater its separation from its followers, and the greater this separation becomes, the harder the leadership will have to work to create the illusion that it does not exist. This contradiction, without doubt, is the Achilles' heel of power-wielding sect leaders (the 'Porsche populists' as they have been dubbed) and without doubt it is the weak spot on which a caste-ist group such as SE₂ should concentrate its attack.¹⁸

The third factor that has enabled these sect leaders to wield so much power (the first two being their separation from their followers and their media skills) has been the eagerness of government to listen to them. Instead of performing its proper (from a caste-ist point of view) role of referee, government has failed time and time again to blow the whistle while the sects went on and on inventing their own rules. It is here that the American experience with the anti-nuclear movement (and other movements, like the anti-smoking movement) differs so markedly from those in Europe.¹⁹ In the hope of finding out why this should be so, I turned to a political scientist.

In American history, the Radical, although the founder of party is also its most persistent critic. Forever disillusioned with the actual tones in which party

speaks, he seeks to eliminate interference by bosses, corruption and special interests and to tune in the authentic voice of the people by regulating party processes, by setting up a direct primary, by instituting the initiative and the referendum. The strength of the Radical ideal in America is one major reason for the weakness of our parties.²⁰

America currently seems to be suffering from an excess of this Radical ideal. By contrast, some European countries (France, Sweden, Britain, Austria, for instance) though of course they have their strenuous internal disagreements about nuclear power, do seem to be able to make *some* progress²¹ and this is because in their various ways, their governments do blow the whistle - they do not allow the sects to go on and on changing the rules. They are not wholly convinced that, when the sect leaders speak, they speak with 'the authentic voice of the people'.

From Analysis to Prescription

If this *is* the current predicament, what can SE₂ do about it? How can it induce American government to exercise some of this healthy scepticism?

1. SE₂ can probably do very little directly to lever government away from the sects but it can, in its lobbying, point out that, since sects are uncompromising in their demands and are not prepared to enter into negotiation whilst politicians are in the business of compromise and negotiation, too close an association with sects may not be in a politician's long-term interest.
2. SE₂ can probably do quite a lot to reveal to both government and the populace that the voice of the sect leader is not 'the authentic voice of the people'. Since the sect leaders make much of their moral righteousness, their hypocrisy (if it can be revealed) could well prove to be their political undoing. Much more thought would be needed to develop the appropriate tactics for applying this strategy but here are a few suggestions:
 - a) SE₂ should not, in frustration, try to adopt the tactics of the other side. Their tactics are suited to their strategy and would not work well in the cause of a different strategy.
 - b) Healthy scepticism is a very effective weapon in the journalist's armoury and several good examples of its application to the New Class already exist.²² Ridicule is a most effective medium and a well-chosen epithet, like 'Porsche populist', is worth a hundred pages of analysis.
 - c) The two great unifying themes of a sect secure inside its wall of virtue are: 'Small is beautiful' and 'natural is good'. The sectist component of the anti-nuclear movement is vulnerable on both these

scores. First, its own organisation at the leadership end is massive and only the media skills of the Washington-based leaders prevent the followers from perceiving that this is so. Second, I was most impressed at the meeting to learn that so much of what is involved in nuclear power is so technologically simple (in principle, anyway) and so natural. The sun is a huge reactor (but well sited, admittedly), there have been natural reactors on earth millions of years ago in Gabon, radiation is natural and there has always been background radiation - sometimes higher sometimes lower than at present...radiation in the proper medical hands is *good* for you. In particular, the Swedish waste disposal system, with its absence of moving parts, the way it fits itself into natural processes that extend through aeons of time, and its imitation of nature as, for instance, in using copper containers because native copper has been present in the granite from the time it was created, has an enormous spiritual impact through its simplicity and its respect for nature and for creation. It contains a powerful theme that would have inspired Wordsworth! So, other things being equal, always go for the option that is simplest and that *imitates*, rather than masters, nature.

- 3) Implicit in 1) and 2) above is a major shift in strategy: a redefinition of who SE₂'s enemies are. At present, SE₂ tends to see itself opposed by a monolithic enemy: the anti-nuclear movement. But this anthropological analysis reveals that the anti-nuclear groups are not all the same and, equipped with it, SE₂ can now discriminate between the castes and the sects. Castes and sects are not natural allies. Castes negotiate, compromise, value scientific knowledge and respect expertise. Sects refuse to negotiate, will not compromise, value scientific knowledge *only* when it upholds their position, and, being committed to egalitarianism, suspect expertise. Sects go for quantity, castes for quality.²³ So, by these criteria, SE₂ is itself a caste and therefore has much more in common with an anti-nuclear caste such as the Sierra Club than the Sierra Club has with a sect within its own movement - the Friends of the Earth for instance. Let me give an example.

There is in Britain (and I suspect in the US too) a group of lawyers opposed to nuclear power because they believe that the security measures that will have to be taken to minimise the threat posed by the non-state aggressor will result in Britain moving towards a police state. Now lawyers, in Britain anyhow, are not terribly sectist people - they are professionals, their arguments stand or fall according to whether the evidence is (by the caste-ist rules of evidence) sound or false,... they wear sober suits and old school ties. Such a group becomes aligned with the hairy anti-nuclear sects largely because of the reaction of the pro-nuclear

people. But these lawyers are not opposed to nuclear power *per se* (as, for instance, is the FoE leader Amory Lovins). They are opposed to certain types of reactor which they believe bring with them as unacceptably high security risk. They do not want the end of nuclear power - just a rearrangement of the present reactor preferences. They, for their part, could benefit from SE₂'s technical expertise in arriving at a more accurate assessment of the security risks posed by different reactors (and other techniques such as reprocessing and waste disposal) whilst SE₂ could, in return, concede the validity of the lawyers' legal and social concerns and add them to the technical criteria that they already apply in their considered evaluations of the various reactors and techniques.

What I am suggesting is that SE₂ should identify these caste-ist (or potentially caste-ist) anti-nuclear groups and begin to make friends with them (on the basis of what they already have in common). In so doing, SE₂ would move them further towards the caste pole, would drive a wedge between them and the sects, and would itself become a much less isolated target for anti-nuclear attack. As such links were forged, government would begin to see the advantages of listening to the considered, orderly and coherent counsels of the cautious but progressive castes rather than to the increasingly fractured, strident and hysterical demands of the uncompromising and regressive sects. America would begin to recover from its institutional paralysis.

Finally, I should point out that, though these prescriptions are all based on the assumption that it would be a good thing if America were to recover from its institutional paralysis, such an assumption is not built into the analysis. The analysis just tells you what you can have; it is up to you to decide what you would like. If you are of the more revolutionary opinion that such tinkering is a waste of time and that the only solution is to hasten the inevitable and total collapse of the whole wretched system then you will be interested in a rather different set of prescriptions and, if you feed in these contrary assumptions as to what is a good thing and what is a bad thing, the analysis will generate that appropriate set of prescriptions for you. A cynic might object that there is no need to go to all this trouble to find out what these prescriptions might be - we only have to look at current United States policy!

NOTES

1. Credit for this fictitious tribe and the far from fictitious 'ism' that it highlights is due to Mary Douglas. See DOUGLAS, Mary
2. BOOTH, 'In Darkest England'.
3. Though, as I will argue presently, morality and rationality are closely related.
4. Whilst not wishing to disagree with those who would argue that the combination of nature and some measure of experimentation will soon reveal in which direction the goal lies, such a learning process I would hold will only work where there is some feedback of information - information as to whether you are getting nearer or further from your goal. The nature of the chase varies with its quarry. Sitting ducks are one thing; the pursuit of happiness is something else!
5. BENEDICT, Ruth, 1935. *Patterns of Culture*. Routledge, London.
6. See DOUGLAS, Mary, 1978. 'Cosmology'. *Occasional Papers of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, London.
7. ROTHSCHILD, Lord. 1978. 'Risk'. *The Listener*, 30 Nov., London.
8. Nor have I ever received any remuneration from the movement.
9. There are in the United States two kinds of nuclear waste which, though indistinguishable physically, must always be handled completely separately - military waste and civilian waste.

10. THOMPSON, Michael. 'The problem of the centre' in DOUGLAS, Mary and OSTRANDER, David (eds.) *Essays in the Sociology of Perception*. Routledge, Kegan Paul, London and Basic Books, New York (to be published January 1981).
11. Mountaineers, of course, will argue that skill, judgement and experience will ensure that you are not in the path of the avalanche when it comes down. The statistics on deaths in the Himalayas do not support this argument.
12. For a fuller treatment of this, see THOMPSON, Michael, 1980. 'The Aesthetics of Risk: Culture or Context?' in SCHWING, R., and ALBERS, W. (eds.) *Societal Risk Assessment*, Plenum Press, N.Y.
13. ENGELS, Frederik 18. The Condition of the....
14. GASKELL, Elizabeth 18. *North and South* Mary Barton.
15. See, for instance, IIASA Working Paper: THOMPSON, Michael. *The Social Landscape of Poverty*. Also (currently in preparation): DOUGLAS, Mary and WILDAVSKY, Aaron, *Risk and Culture* and THOMPSON, Michael and WILDAVSKY, Aaron *Starve, Burn or Fry: The Political Culture of Poverty, Smoking and Nuclear Power*.
16. DAVIS, Lee Niedringhaus. 1979. *Frozen Fire: Where Will It Happen Next?* Friends of the Earth, San Francisco.
17. One of the alternatives considered is to not have the technology but the author is careful to point out that this is not a risk-free option.
18. Were I making helpful suggestions to a sect, I would point out that their pursuit of power will inevitably give rise to this dangerous contradiction and that they will become increasingly vulnerable to any attack that is directed at it. Beyond a certain point (the position of which will vary with their media skills, government sympathy and caste-ist opposition) their pursuit of power will become counter-productive and the leadership will have to choose between two alternatives: to increase the loyalty of their followers by abandoning their pursuit of power or to increase their power by abandoning their followers. (In this latter case, the individual leaders move into the caste-ist context).
19. There is, for instance, much admiration in the U.S. for the Windscale Inquiry in Britain at which all parties were able to air their views at length, *but on oath and within an impartial framework of rules firmly imposed by Mr. Justice Parker*.
20. S.H. Beer, *Modern British Politics*, Faber paperback edn. 1965, p. 43.
21. Progress, that is, with making acceptable decisions, not necessarily progress with nuclear power.

22. E.g., MUNVES, James, 1979. *On the Front Lines of a Rubbish War*. New York Times, July 19th.
BERGER, Peter. 1979. *Gilgamesh on the Washington Shuttle*.
BRUCE-BIGGS, Barry. 1979. (ed.) *The New Class*. Transaction Books.
23. For instance, only those SE₂ members who happened to be Nobel laureates were mentioned by name in the telegram that the meeting sent to the President of the United States - a hierarchical distinction that no sect would tolerate.

(Some references are still incomplete)