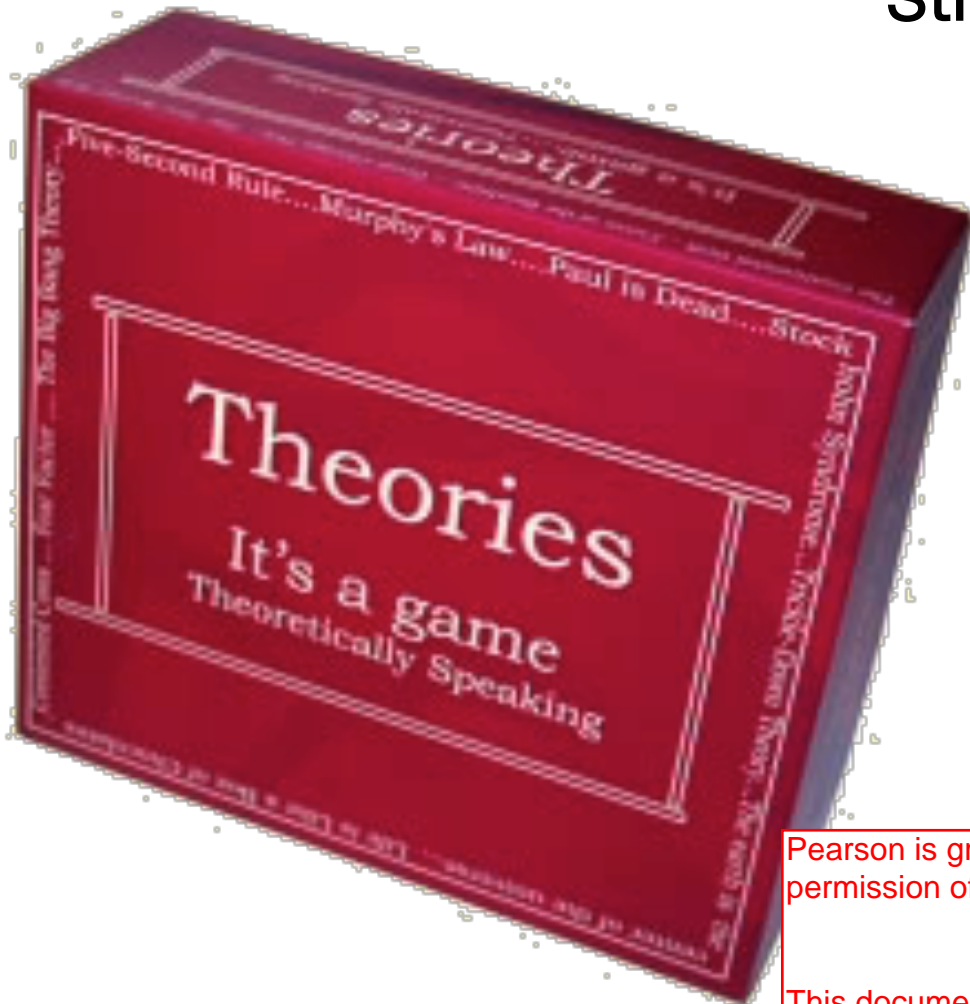


research **traditions**: rationality, structure, and culture



foundations of comparative
politics

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This document may be used by teachers and/or students to further exemplify and explain the comparative theories used in the USA content of our new A level Politics qualification (first teaching September 2017)



a note of **caution**

the discussion that follows will move very quickly. the main goal is to **introduce** basic theoretical principles and concepts, but we will return to everything we discuss today time and time again throughout the quarter: **this material is foundational**

it is critical you continue to think carefully and deeply about the material covered today ... review all this material at least once, if not much more in the coming few weeks



research traditions: an introduction to **rational** choice

let's begin with a basic point ...

**we're all rational actors. everyone in
this crowd, in our class, in this country,
in other countries; rich, poor, strong,
weak, etc.**

what does this mean?

to say that we are all rational actors is to say that we don't act in a random, unpredictable, or self-destructive manner; instead, our decisions and actions are guided by a goal or a purpose ultimately meant to make us better off. simply put, *to act rationally means to choose better alternatives over worse ones.*



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rational choice perspective

- put in slightly different terms, rational choice begins with the assumption that **self-interest** is the basis for most of what we do
- indeed, “rationality” is essentially defined in terms of self-interest, so just to be clear ...

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rational choice perspective



self-interest in rational choice theory is premised on the belief that we all have specific (“reasonable”) goals and that we, as individuals, behave in way—or make decisions among a number of alternatives—that **best** enables us to achieve those goals (note. self-interest is egoistic: it assumes we do not act for the benefit of others)

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rational choice perspective

self-interest: a **caveat**

self-interest is a **generic** concept—individuals may all be self-interested actors, but their specific self-interests can and usually are quite distinct, and these **distinctions** are often very important ...

a generic can of beer. all beer is beer, but not all beers are the same. **self-interest is the same:** all behavior is self-interested, but not all self-interested behavior (among individual actors) is the same





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rational choice perspective

thus, when we think of “self-interest,” it’s important to keep in mind that **specific interests of individual actors** vary ...

- the interest of a politician, for example, is to win or hold onto **political office**
 - a business person wants to stay in business and maximize **profit**
 - a student wants good **grades** (well, not always)
- a note. much of this class is organized around the principle of self-interest**



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rational choice perspective

once the concept of self-interest is understood, we are in a position to start “applying” rational choice in a very basic, but meaningful way ... for example, in considering aid to the poor, many critics point out that this aid tends to encourage poor people to remain on assistance for long periods of time, rather than to improve their skills or look for a job—often this behavior is attributed to personal deficiencies such as laziness

a rationalist, however, knows that those receiving public assistance are generally self-interested actors doing what is rational given their individual (decision-making) circumstances; if the circumstances change, so too will their behavior



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rational choice perspective

in the foregoing example, we were introduced, albeit implicitly, to a number of other basic concepts in rational choice theory

one of the most important (yet still basic) one of these concepts is **strategic calculation**

a question: what is “strategic calculation” and why is it important?



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rational choice perspective

another **key** concept in rational choice: **strategic interaction**

strategic **interaction** emphasizes that many, if not most, decisions are complicated by the existence of other actors

together with strategic calculation, this tells us that there is a lot of stuff going on in any decision made by individual actors

the scale illustrates the “weighing of costs and benefits,”
while poker represents the dynamics of strategic interaction

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uncertainty and rationality

... one more related concept in rational choice is **uncertainty**

rational actors do not and often cannot know the consequences of their decisions. why? simply because there are a lot of “unknowns” in the world—with strategic interaction, one actor cannot be certain how other actors will respond; nor do actors have all the information they need or want; sometimes they don’t even know what they don’t know ...



this video clip underscores how complicated uncertainty can be

uncertainty means that actors will sometimes make “bad decisions”; yet, this does not mean that rational choice is wrong. “indeed, ‘bad choices,’ or less than optimal decisions, are part-and-parcel of the rational choice framework”



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rational choice perspective: **additional issues**

consider this statement: “we **can’t** do anything we want”

why **not**?

short answer ...

constraints



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rational choice and **constraints**

- what are the **two major types** of constraints
rational actors face?

institutional and economic

**why are constraints important?
what do they do?**



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rational choice analysis: **key** questions

- who are the main **actors**?
- how are their **interests** or preferences defined?
 - what **information** is available to them?
 - what type of **constraints** do they face?
- how do constraints **influence** their actions?
 - what are other elements of the strategic **environment**?

make sure you remember
these questions!

one more time!

BURN these questions into your head. You will be asked REPEATEDLY to remember and apply the principles underlying these questions throughout the quarter!

AND, they will likely be on your next quiz, and perhaps even other quizzes

- who are the main actors?
- how are their interests or preferences defined?
 - what information is available to them?
- what type of constraints do they face?
 - how do constraints influence their actions?
- what are other elements of the strategic environment?



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the **structural** approach

- what are **structures** and how do they shape human behavior?
 - what are the most **important** structures and how do they work?

for now, just **consider** these
questions



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the **structural** approach

basic argument. structural approaches are based on the idea that human actions are partly and even largely **determined** by underlying, sometimes invisible forces, over which individuals—acting alone or in groups—have **limited or no control**

this can be difficult to fully grasp, since people today—especially in the United States—are taught to believe that we are all masters of our own fates, that we control the world, and not the other way around

to understand the abstract concept of structure, then, a few concrete examples are in order ...



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the **structural** approach

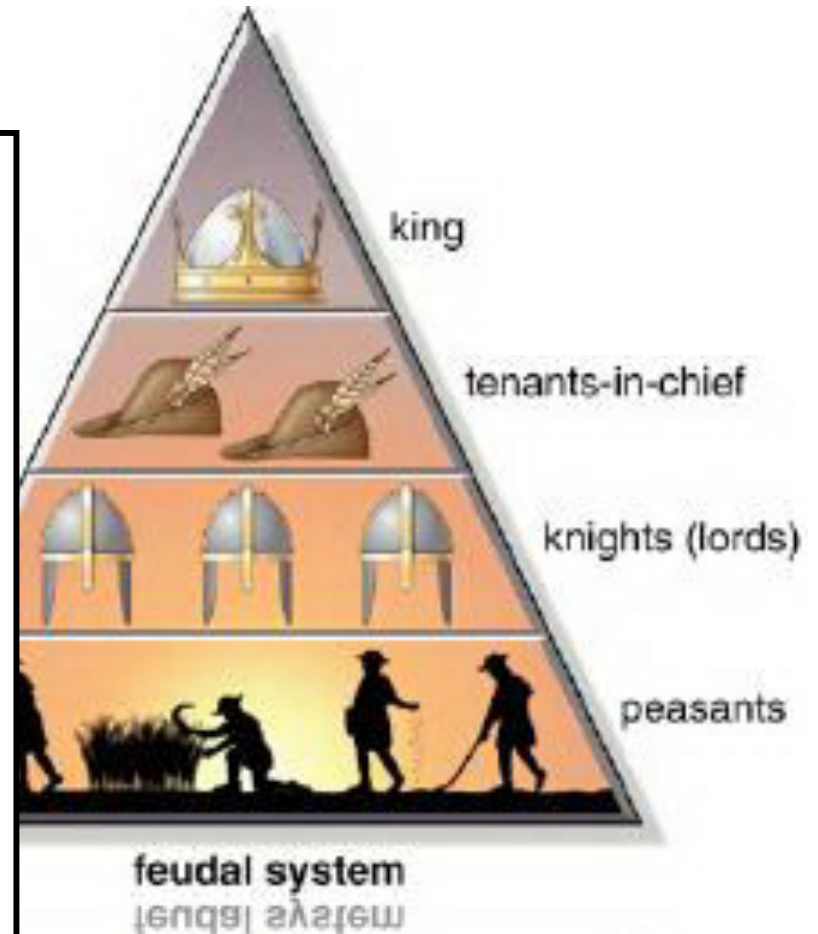
the human structure. the human body is an example of a structure/system: every part in the body is interrelated; changes to one part affect other parts in both subtle and profound ways; each part has a role to or function to play; some roles are critical to the overall operation of the system, others are not

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the **structural** approach

another example. consider the social and economic structure of **feudal** society, which shaped, in profound ways, the lives of millions of people and whole societies for centuries.

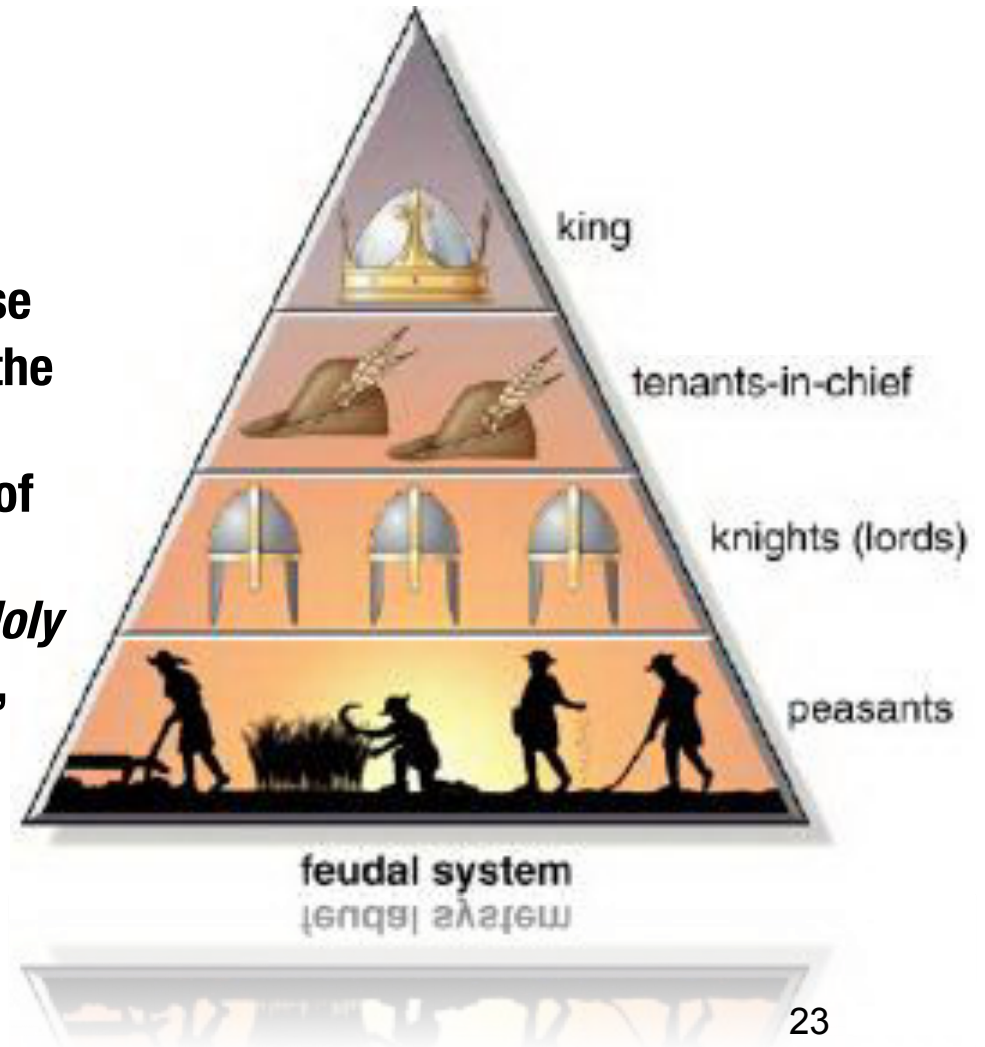
in feudalism, society was divided into distinct, but related parts; each part had a pre-determined function or role meant to keep the system intact and operating smoothly: once created, the system became highly resistant to change



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the **structural** approach

the following clips provide a sense of the organization and dynamics of the feudal system (the first is a rather dry, but informative, discussion of the feudal system; the second (a clip from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*) provides some comic relief, but helps underscore the very different principles underlying the feudal system, on the one hand, and the system we live in today ...





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the **structural** approach: key **points**

- structures are **enduring**, but not permanent (e.g., feudalism)
 - structures contain a specific **logic** and dynamic
- structures create particular **relationships** (e.g., peasant-lord, master-slave, worker-capitalist, dominant country-subordinate country)
- the fates of individuals, groups and societies are largely determined by their **positions** within a structure

relationships, such as those between master and slave, are defining features of historical structures



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the **structural** approach

a **question**

what is the key structure in the **contemporary** world?

for most structuralists, **capitalism**
is the key and most powerful structure of
the contemporary period: it shapes
almost every aspect of our lives and even
shapes our very **consciousness**

the **structural** approach: key questions to ask

- what is the overarching structure and what are the key **relationships** within that structure?
- how does the structure **work** or operate? what is the internal **logic** and basic dynamic of the structure?
- what are the key structural **rules of the game**, and who are they key players and what are their roles within the structure?

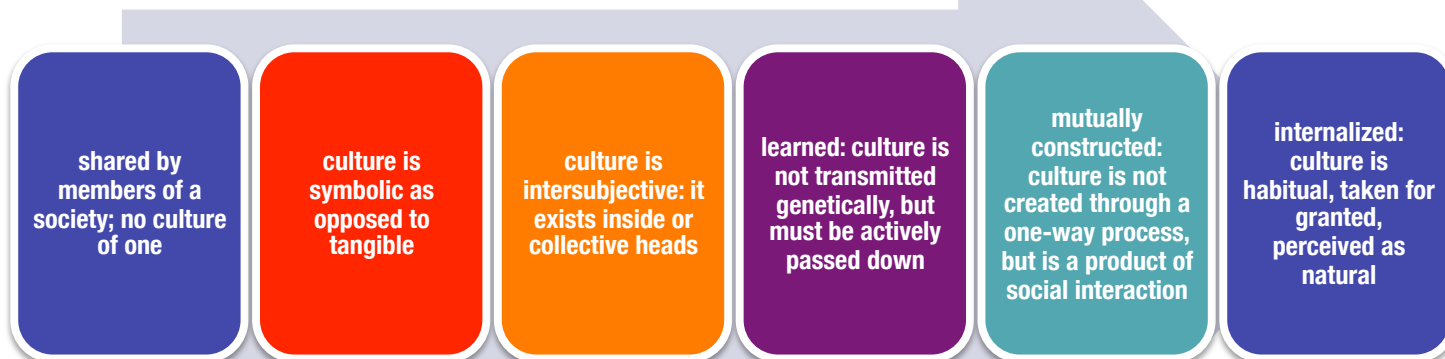
we'll **answer** these questions
in the coming weeks

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the **cultural** approach

let's begin with a basic definition

definition. culture is a **shared, learned,** and symbolic system of values, beliefs, **ideas,** and attitudes that shapes and influences our perceptions and behavior




the **cultural** approach: **key points**

the *subjective* nature of culture means, to repeat, that culture has no concrete existence: culture is, to large extent, what we **think** it is (or want it to be)

this means culture can be manipulated, **redefined** or re-shaped; it can also be **co-opted**



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the **intersubjective** nature of culture means that it must be **collective**; there is no culture of one or even a few culture, by definition, is **shared** among members of a community, tribe, society, nation, and so on ...



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the **cultural** approach: another key point

But **despite** its intersubjective, intangible nature ..

culture has power

sometimes this power is obvious, sometimes it is entirely unrecognized. yet, it is ever present.



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the **cultural** approach: another key point

consider the fundamental impact culture has on attitudes toward violence: cultures **encourage, reward, and compel** members of the culture to behave violently (e.g., “gang culture,” military culture,” a “national security” culture)

in stark contrast, some cultures--such as the Amish and Mennonite communities in the United States and Canada—teach their members to abhor all forms of violence



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culture has **power**

key points

- the ideas, beliefs, values and identities of culture have power at both the **individual** and **collective levels**
 - they can compel individuals and whole peoples to act and behave in certain ways, to make profound sacrifices and even give up their freedom or their very **lives**

a vivid example: Mohamed Bouazizi, who set himself on fire to protest against an unjust government; his single action ultimately led to the collapse of 23-year long dictatorial rule in Tunisia (a short video follows)



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... Mohamed Bouazizi is one of the most prominent examples of the power of culture. significantly, his act of self-immolation became a **cultural symbol** to millions of others: his one act gave to massive and powerful movements

but we see this same power exercised all around us, from suicide terrorists and OWS activists, soldiers and conscientious objectors, freedom fighters and the police: all represent the **power of culture** to motivate people and shape human society, to create far-reaching change or to preserve the status quo (and everything in between)



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culture has **power**

another **point**

culture has power, in part, because it is intangible or **subjective**. you may, for example, kill an individual or an entire community, but an “idea” (a system of beliefs, a culture) can live on forever ...

the ideas of freedom and liberty have played a central role in American culture: they have inspired and moved Americans for centuries; they continue to play a key role today



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the **power** of culture: **additional points**

- the power of culture gives it huge potential as a **political resource** or asset: this is of particular interest to students of political science
 - significantly, the power of an ostensibly single culture can be harnessed or **co-opted** by opportunistic leaders and others to achieve self-serving goals: consider **bosnia, rwanda, islamic terrorism**



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the **power** of culture: additional points

on the other hand, culture can serve as rallying cry, a force for broad-based mobilization and progressive change: **people power** in the Philippines, Poland, Ukraine, Iran and through the Middle East and North Africa today; the **anti-apartheid** movement in South Africa; the US **civil rights movement**



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the **cultural** approach: some **caveats**

- “culture” as an **independent** variable is not easy to use
 - culture can be both **cause** and **effect**
- the impact of culture may vary depending on a particular set of political, social and economic circumstances; culture **never** “acts alone”
- the subjective nature of culture means that it is **malleable** (it can and does change); it is also subject to various, even contradictory interpretations (it is **not monolithic**)

remember these caveats!