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Comparative Culture

Chapter Summary

Culture is a way of life and affects the way that people think, speak, and behave; as such, it is a fundamental concept in international studies. Contemporary culture is shaped and influenced by numerous factors, with three in particular being critical: politics, religion, and new media.

Politics here generally refers to the structure and ideology of a country's government. How a government is shaped and run has a significant impact on the culture of the societies being governed, and *political ideology* is instrumental in determining how governments act. Throughout history, a number of ideologies have played this central role. **Conservatism** (case study: Iran's religious regime) is the traditional doctrine of medieval Europe and implies an aversion to change and a desire to conserve the heritage of past generations. It views society as analogous to an organic, living creature. **Liberalism** began in reaction to conservatism, and in its original conception, called **classical liberalism**, the core focus was on the freedom of the individual, which had been subsumed under conservatism's organic society. For these classical liberals (case study: nineteenth-century America), society is nothing more than the individuals it is comprised of. **Socialism** developed in response to classical liberalism and the events of the Industrial Revolution, which created vast inequalities in society—inequalities that were acceptable (though not necessarily desirable) to conservatives and classical liberals. Socialists favoured more political and economic equality through government action. Today, the dominant **political ideology** in the developed world is **welfare liberalism**, a combination of liberalism and socialism, that centres on a **welfare state** and a **social safety net** to protect the worst-off in society. The Canadian experience helps explore what this looks like in practice. Finally, the contemporary dominance of welfare liberalism is under challenge by oppositional ideologies like **feminism**.

A multitude of **religions** exist in the world, and differentiating among them can be a difficult endeavour. Broadly speaking though, three basic distinctions help simplify this task: religious versus secular, monotheistic versus polytheistic, and folk versus non-folk religions. A more multifaceted division also exists among the three **Abrahamic** (all **monotheistic**, or one god) religions and the three largest Eastern (all **polytheistic**, or many gods, also termed *Dharmic* or *Taoistic*) religions. The Arab–Israeli Conflict (Abrahamic) and the China–Tibet situation (Eastern) are used as case studies to demonstrate religion's impact and how it shapes different cultures. Each religion is further analyzed via certain key elements, including internal divisions, sacred books, key figures, religious observances, core concepts, and perspective on the afterlife.

When it comes to new media and their influence on national culture, there is a major schism between the Global North and the Global South, called the **global digital divide**. While there is im-

mense potential for countries of the South to benefit from new media technologies, especially the Internet, substantial obstacles remain to narrowing this divide.

Key Concepts

Abrahamic: a categorization of religions that includes the three largest monotheistic religions in the world: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. All share the prophet Abraham as a figure of religious and ethnic significance. (p. 100)

Classical liberalism (or neo-liberalism): a political ideology that rose in reaction to conservatism. It focuses on the role and freedom of the individual, as opposed to conservatism's prioritizing of the organic society. This means classical liberals have an atomistic view of society, believing society is nothing more than the individuals who make up it. Therefore, they tend to see a negative role for the state, meaning government involvement in society should be minimal and limited (like the role of a night-watchperson: keep the peace but that is about it). (pp. 89–90)

Conservatism: a political ideology dating back to medieval Europe that implies an aversion to change and a desire to conserve the heritage of past generations. Conservatives tend to see society in an organic manner (like a living creature), possessing internal character and personality, and the role of government is to enable the thriving of this organic entity. Therefore, there is a positive role for the state, which means active participation and involvement (in culture, the economy, education, etc.) in directing the society over which it governs. (pp. 86–87)

Corruption: when government officials use their decision-making power to promote their narrow self-interests (usually financial), especially when this results in harm to the interests of the public. (p. 85)

Dharmic (or Taoistic): a categorization for a number of polytheistic religions. In contrast to the Abrahamic tradition, which are monotheistic and stress a personal connection or covenant between God and his people, Dharmic/Taoistic are more impersonal, focusing on an underlying cosmic force or fate that binds everything together. (p. 101)

Diaspora: the spread or dispersion of a specific group of people from its home territory into other countries, sometimes around the globe. The term was first used to refer to the dispersion of Jews beyond Israel. Contemporary examples today include the Chinese and Indian diasporas. (p. 101)

Feminism: an oppositional ideology (it opposes what has been the historical norm) that argues contemporary mainstream values and ideologies have been framed around the experiences and interests of men, thereby reflecting a system of patriarchy (the rule and dominance of men). (p. 96)

Folk religions: religions that are unique to a people, in other words, to a coherent nationality or ethnic grouping. Both Judaism and Hinduism are examples of folk religions. (p. 101)

Global digital divide: a key aspect of the dramatic split between Global North and Global South, referring to the tremendous advantage enjoyed by people in the North based on how much more “plugged in” and technologically advanced they are, especially with regard to the latest information technologies like the Internet. (p. 115)

Great Depression: enormous slowdown and shrinkage in the economy, worldwide, lasting 10 years from 1929 until 1939, which led to vast unemployment and poverty. These events resulted in much of the world transitioning from classical liberalism to welfare liberalism. (p. 90)

Ideologically-charged: countries committed to spreading their values globally. Historical examples include revolutionary France (1790–1815) and the Soviet Union (1917–1991). (p. 97)

Laissez-faire: means “let it be” or “leave it alone.” An approach to governance favoured by classical liberals, where the state has a minimal and limited role. (p. 93)

Monotheistic: religions that believe in one God (*mono* means “one”). (p. 100)

New Deal: a program of government intervention in the US in response to the Great Depression, an early example of welfare liberalism being enacted in practice. (p. 93)

Non-folk religions: religions not limited to one group, ethnicity, or nationality. Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam are all examples of non-folk religions. (p. 101)

Polytheistic: religions that believe in many Gods (*poly* means “many”) (p. 100)

Religion: from the Latin *religio*, which literally means “re-linking” or “linking back;” this refers to a supposed link between humanity and the god (or gods) who created humankind, as well as the universe. Different religions are characterized by different perspectives about the divine and other aspects of the universe. A religious approach to life is opposed by secularism or a secular approach. (p. 98)

Political ideology: ideals and values surrounding how best to run a country and how to organize its people and shape their way of life. (p. 85)

Principled state: a country with a government which tries to realize a set of ideals (even if the government can do so only imperfectly, given real-world constraints). These ideals constitute the political ideology of the government or state. (p. 85)

Secular: a non-religious approach to life. Secularism tends to fall into one of three categories: atheists (who believe that there are no gods); agnostics (who are simply uninterested in religious matters); and secular humanists (who prefer to substitute a religious code of behaviour for their own code that refers not to the divine, but to humanity). Secularism is opposed by a religious approach to life. (p. 98)

Separatist: someone who aspires to have his or her nation released from its existing political arrangements so that it may become an independent nation-state. (p. 113)

Sharia law: a strict, conservative reading of Islam’s holy book (the Qur’an) and other Islamic principles. (p. 87)

Social safety net: an attempt to protect a society’s worst-off citizens by taxing the wealthy and using those resources to provide welfare payments to the very poor and unemployed. (p. 93)

Socialism: a political ideology that developed in response to both classical liberalism and the events of the Industrial Revolution, which created vast inequalities throughout society. Socialists favoured more political and economic equality (in contrast to conservatives and classical liberals), via sharing of resources which could be enacted by the government. (pp. 91–92)

Theocracy: a regime in which the state uses its power to realize and enforce a religious vision. Any theocracy implies a blending of church and state. (p. 87)

Two-state solution: a possible solution to the Arab–Israeli conflict, wherein Israel and Palestine each get their own separate nation-states. Drawing the exact borders of each territory has proven difficult, however, and remains unresolved. (p. 109)

Unprincipled state: country controlled by a very small, elite group, whose only agenda is to use the power of government to serve itself. (p. 85)

Welfare liberalism: a political ideology that attempts to combine classical liberalism with socialism. It centres on the establishment of a welfare state and the construction of a social safety net. (p. 93)

Welfare state: government with a positive, robust, and intervening role to play, especially with regard to constructing a social safety net for the worst-off citizens. (p. 93)

Zionism: the Jewish yearning to re-establish a self-governing Jewish community in Palestine. The movement fed off the ideals of nationalism, which had developed in Europe. (p. 105)

Study Questions

Scroll to the end for answers.

1. What is the difference between democratic socialism and scientific socialism?
2. What is the difference between classical liberalism and welfare liberalism?
3. What is the difference between folk and non-folk religions?

Weblinks

Vox's Borders series

<https://www.vox.com/a/borders>

- Video series about the power and influence of borders, an artificial and social construction (human-made) that develops meaning based on how they are interpreted
- Six videos in total, on the following “borders”:
 - Haiti/Dominican Republic
 - The Arctic
 - Japan/North Korea

- Mexico/Guatemala
- Nepal/China
- Spain/Morocco

Foreign Policy article on Farahnaz Ispahani's book

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/20/how-the-muslim-world-lost-the-freedom-to-choose/>

Foreign Affairs article on Farahnaz Ispahani's book

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2017-10-16/purifying-land-pure-history-pakistans-religious-minorities>

- Two concise reviews of Farahnaz Ispahani's book detailing Pakistan's turn away from secularism and towards religion (see citation in Further Readings section)

Reading Marx's *Capital* with David Harvey

<http://davidharvey.org/reading-capital/>

- Series of video lectures with British anthropologist and Marxist geographer, David Harvey (City University of New York), that explores in detail the main work of Karl Marx (*Capital*), arguably the most famous of the socialist political philosophers

Further Readings

Wollstonecraft, Mary. 1996. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc.

- Originally published in 1792, this is one of the earliest works of feminist philosophy and ideology; it challenged the ideas about the intrinsic inequalities between men and women prevalent at the time.

Locke, John. 1980. *Second Treatise of Government*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.

- Originally published in 1690 by famed English philosopher John Locke, this is considered one of the seminal texts on the political aspects of classical liberalism.

Smith, Adam. 2012. *Wealth of Nations*. Hertfordshire, United Kingdom: Wordsworth Editions Limited.

- Originally published in 1776, this classic work by Scottish economist Adam Smith lays out the economic foundations of classical liberalism.

Ispahani, Farahnaz. 2017. *Purifying the Land of the Pure: A History of Pakistan's Religious Minorities*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

- A very interesting book by a Pakistani author, journalist, and politician, which traces the modern history of Pakistan and analyzes the failed secularization project and turn towards religion (Islam) in the country's politics.

Kurzman, Charles. 2004. *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- A well-researched analysis that examines the various explanations for the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which resulted in a new theocratic state (one of the case studies discussed in this chapter, as an example of a modern day conservative regime).

Answers to Study Questions

1. Democratic socialism is the moderate version of socialism wherein socialist goals are pursued through democratic means, like winning free elections and gaining a mandate from the people. Scientific socialism is the more extreme version of socialism, where direct, violent revolution is used to overthrow existing governments and implement socialist measures. (p. 92)
2. Both types of liberalism focus on the freedom and importance of the individual, but they differ in regards to the existence of inequality in society and the role of the government in addressing this. Classical liberals see a very limited (or negative) role for the state, and accept a certain level of inequality in society as inevitable (though not desirable). Welfare liberals have adopted some features of socialism and favour more political and economic equality, which can be achieved through a stronger role for government (like the establishment of a welfare state). (pp. 89, 93)
3. Folk religions are ones unique to a people, like a coherent nationality or ethnic grouping. Examples of folk religions include Judaism (the Jewish people) and Hinduism (East Indian peoples). Non-folk religions are not limited to one group, ethnicity, or nationality. Examples of non-folk religions include Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam (e.g., there are Arabic Muslims, Malaysian Muslims, Indonesian Muslims, Indian Muslims, etc.). (p. 101)