

STATE / CULTURE

State-Formation after
the Cultural Turn

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Culture in Rational-Choice Theories of State-Formation

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Certain perennial questions haunt the study of state-formation: What is the root of the stability or instability, rise and decline of states? Why do some states seem to infuse a social system with élan, whereas others parasitically sap social energies? Perhaps most fundamentally, why do we have states at all? Why didn't some other form of organizing power and accumulation come together in that crucible of state-formation, northern Europe? These questions are far too grand and vague to stand as proper historical or social science puzzles. Nevertheless they reappear at intervals and in different disciplinary guises, and the willingness to tackle them is a sure sign of a paradigm's theoretical vitality as well as its hubris. These big questions have surfaced dramatically in rational-choice analyses of state-formation, particularly with respect to feudal and early modern Europe. Douglass North has tried to formulate the basis of "a neoclassical theory of the state" in the context of examining the genesis of institutional structures that explain variable economic performance (1981: chap. 3). Mancur Olson problematizes the role of governance as a key variable in *The Rise and Decline of Nations* (1982). And an explosion of work in sociology and political science has pointed to "rent-seeking," "predation," and other concepts inspired by neoclassical and institutionalist economics as explanatory factors informing the rhythm of European political development.

I begin by summarizing the main lines of rational-choice arguments regarding feudal and early modern European state-formation. This growing body of work has highlighted some important sociological problems—surprisingly,

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because historical social arrangements antedating the institutional differentiation of economy, polity, and family on which most key rational-choice concepts rest seem the hardest terrain to tackle within a rational-choice paradigm. What rational-choicers have identified, I contend, are mid-range mechanisms, or bits of "sometimes true theory" to borrow James Coleman's phrase, that clarify certain key political patterns and developmental tendencies characteristic of early modern Europe.¹ This strikes me as extremely useful, and I hope to convince those ranged against rational-choice theory that interested outsiders can learn from it. Yet because the paradigm's assumptions cannot capture the individual motivations or the institutional and cultural conditions characteristic of patrimonial politics, they impose serious limits on explanation and understanding. Drawing from my own work on early modern European politics, I maintain that a culturalist model of familiarly oriented action generates a more complete and convincing account of the dynamics of patrimonial state-formation than a rational-choice approach. Political elites, who as patriarchal family heads became deeply identified with intergenerational privilege on behalf of their patrilineages, carried over their emotional investments into genealogies of state office. These patrimonial political principals had special reasons to participate in intra- or interstate contracts, or to undercut them for family advantage, and were wedded to historically specific understandings and attachments to other rulers, past, passing, or to come.

In the context of this volume's overall analytic claim that states and culture belong together, it may seem strange to introduce the rational-choice perspective. It is, after all, the theoretical approach that has most insistently refused culture a constitutive role. Nonetheless, signifying practices can be found even there, lurking in rational-choicers' core concepts and generalizations, which implicitly incorporate cultural constructs relevant to the actions and outcomes that are being explained. The goals of rulers, expectations of political principals, and the regulative institutions that these actors create, are imbued with shared meanings, including (most troubling for rational-choicers) nonrational desires that impinge on political structures and state formation. Raising the "cultural repressed" of these concepts to consciousness invites us to take steps toward explicitly incorporating meaning and affect in the context of our historically grounded generalizations and propels us beyond the limits of the rational-choice paradigm toward a sociocultural approach to state formation and political change.

State-Formation and Rational Choice

The rational-choice perspective is aptly named. Kiser and Schneider (1994) summarize its basic premise, the assumption that "all actors are rational, self-interested wealth maximizers." This assumption actually contains several sepa-

¹I owe this bon mot of Coleman's to Stinchcombe (1991). The original source is Coleman's *Introduction to Mathematical Sociology* (1964). Deploying it here is a bit of a liberty, perhaps, because my argument is so sharply at odds with Coleman's own work.

rate assertions about social actors: that they apply the standards of means-ends rationality, that they are self-interested, and that they are largely actuated by a desire for maximizing wealth. "Thin" models of rational choice emphasize the first assumption and are agnostic about actors' goals and values, whereas "thicker" versions try to specify actors' desired ends, at least as exogenously given constraints. In either case, variations on these basic conceptual themes characterize the literature on state-formation in the rational-choice tradition, which departs from the methodological individualist standpoint of the individual actor—a deliberately circumscribed construction of that actor—and builds from there.² In rational-choice theory of state-formation, the key personnel are rulers—"actors or sets of actors who perform as chief executives of state institutions" (Levi 1988: 2). Rulers are responsible for making political decisions within prevailing rules of the game and, on occasion, spelling out new rules. They are also charged with enforcing those rules, in the last instance with coercive force. If all heads of organizations have a modicum of formal power, by definition the distinctiveness of a ruler is that, in the last resort, he or she lays claim to a superordinate monopoly of coercive force in a given territory.³

Rigorous rational-choice theory may be silent on the ultimate ends to which political decisions and the application of force might tend. Or, the argument goes, variations are individual and idiosyncratic, and effectively cancel each other out. But thick and thin have tended to come together on one practical point: whatever any particular ruler's preferences or set of values, economic resources are needed to pursue and realize them. "[Rulers] always try to set terms of trade that maximize their personal objectives," which "require them to maximize state revenues" (Levi 1988: 10). Ultimate ends or goals can still be assumed to be exogenously determined, and random with respect to the general theory, at the same time that they are held to be contingent on a universal means to an end—revenue—that must itself be a goal if any higher-order ends are to be realized.⁴ By the same token, wealth is identified as the driving motivation of feudal and early modern rulers, who are therefore, by definition, "predatory."

Wealth-hungry or predatory rulers are also strategic, disposed to match means to ends.⁵ Substantively, rulers may deploy an array of tactics, ranging from out-

²Sometimes the actor's "self-interest" is treated as a bare prerequisite to the satisfaction of any other interest. At other times it is simply assumed to be human nature, or tautologically true, registered by "revealed preferences." For an explicit argument in favor of the strong version of these assumptions, see Coleman, who also insists that the actor is "unconstrained by norms" and that "the theoretical aim of social science must be to conceive of [purposive] action in a way that makes it rational from the point of view of the actor" (1990: 18, 31, 503).

³This fundamentally Weberian definition of the state is borrowed by many rational-choicers, whereas others rely on a contractual concept of the state.

⁴An elegant and extended justification of this position can be found in Cohen and Rogers (1983: 66–73).

⁵An emphasis on satisficing rather than maximizing, following Herbert Simon, introduces a number of possible equilibria, a complication that rational-choice analysts of state formation have sought to avoid. For the complexities about means-ends rationality that this tactic introduces, see Green and Shapiro (1994).

right plunder and pillage, to trading property rights for revenue, to constructing full-fledged tax systems, whose attributes are negotiated in a triangular relationship with taxpayers and the rulers' own agents (Kiser 1994; North 1981: 149–50; Levi 1988). One logical and decidedly bleak possibility is that predators may simply use these strategies to strip the ruled of resources. As Peter Evans notes, Mobutu's Zaire was "a textbook case of a predatory state in which the preoccupation of the political class with rent-seeking has turned society into its prey" (1992: 149). There are plenty of feudal and early modern European examples as well (Lane 1979). In these cases, the state simply becomes the "quintessential protection racket" (Tilly 1985: 169).

Happily for the ruled, their rulers are constrained along a number of dimensions. Rulers may be checked by the presence of rivals who could potentially substitute for their services (North 1981: 27). Rulers' dependence on the ruled may be increased by the length of time that a ruler expects to remain at the helm (rational-choicers call this the ruler's "discount rate"). If that period is long enough, rulers avid for revenue acquire an interest in reproducing the conditions that add to their subjects' wealth and expand their productivity, creating more revenue for appropriation. Thus, a sunnier forecast is that some predatory rulers, however self-interested and idiosyncratic, will discourage rent-seeking, or "behavior in institutional settings where individual efforts to maximize value generate social waste rather than social surplus" (Buchanan 1980: 4). Such rulers also want and need to protect property rights in a more positive sense. They might even function as tacit agents of the ruled—or, at least, of property holders. Finally, just as they can be enabled by them, rulers are constrained by the structures of coordination and command that they build to get the job done (Adams 1996).

Rampant rent-seeking formed the very basis of feudal and early modern European political economies and states-in-formation. Ekelund and Tollison refer to the early modern "mercantilist" era as one in which "the expenditure of scarce resources to capture a pure transfer" virtually defined the practices of both rulers and rent-hungry subjects. Rulers systematically created situations of artificial scarcity, in the form of state-guaranteed economic privileges, and awarded, loaned, or sold them to favored individuals or groups. Rents accrued variously to rulers and those who managed to capture monopoly rights, at the expense of competing claimants who were excluded and of those at the bottom of the heap, the consumers or constituents (Ekelund and Tollison 1981: 19–20). The impact of this *modus operandi* has generated ongoing debate among rational-choicers. Waste in the form of bribery and lobbying costs is endemic to any system founded on such principles. Furthermore, property rights are liable to systematic violation. Rulers in feudal and early modern Europe who traded protection and justice for revenue not only proffered or withdrew favors at will, but also tended to do so as a matter of expediency, to capture more resources in the short run. Even the favored recipients of rulers' largesse could never count on its continuing on the agreed-upon terms. The versions of rational-choice theory that have identified state institutions with expanded rent-seeking and economic in-

efficiency, such as those of Auster and Silver (1979) and Buchanan, Tollison, and Tullock (1980), would be disposed to put forward their case still more strongly with respect to feudal and early modern states, which violated as many contracts as they guaranteed. But more recent versions of rational-choice models have noted that mercantilist practices may be more or less economically efficient in some institutional circumstances. Kiser and Schneider (1994) argue that state revenue collection in nineteenth-century Prussia was well served by personalistic prebureaucratic institutions because they enabled rulers to minimize the costs of monitoring the state's fiscal agents.⁶ Root (1994) claims that early modern England evolved a particularly competitive form of rent-seeking, transacted through Parliament, that became a "political market" in which open bidding for property rights facilitated their more efficient use. These are important insights. The fact, however, that the privileges that were delegated also incorporated a range of rights to the exercise of sovereignty posed special challenges beyond considerations of economic efficiency. This does not immediately vitiate the rational-choice paradigm, to be sure, but it raises complications.

Recall that in feudal and early modern Europe, rulers' handout of privilege created interests that then pressed to be maintained and cosseted. These interests were politicoeconomic, representing presumptive claims on resources, backed in the last instance by force, and they were empirically evident in a whole series of political conflicts. In seventeenth-century France, for example, the Bourbon crown found itself face to face with legions of lesser state officers (*officiers*) whom it had created and then unintentionally entrenched by rendering their separate pieces of patrimonial power inheritable. When a predatory crown, in search of still more resources and loyalists, made plans to proliferate additional officers, those already in place feared that the value of their stakes in the state would drop. They took up arms against the crown, inaugurating that great mid-seventeenth-century upheaval, the Fronde. A similar struggle roiled the early modern Netherlands, after the ouster of the Habsburg emperors had lopped off the pinnacle of state patron-client networks in what was becoming the (uneasily) United Provinces. The vacuum at the top of the emerging state was filled by the stadholders (originally a sort of provincial governor) and the many local regent patriciates. As members of each regent elite tried for first pick of coveted patrimonial privileges, and stadholders and regents contended with one another, the situation came to resemble that in France, though it was even further complicated by confrontations among mutually jealous towns within each provincial boundary.

Rulers were handing out shares in state power and claims to economic surplus, and actors were seeking political leverage as well as wealth. Such systems are quintessentially "patrimonial" in Max Weber's sense, involving segmented relations of rule that are simultaneously political and economic (1968 [1922]). They are also unstable. Particularly when extensive rights to sovereignty are delegated

⁶See Philip Gorski's (1995) thoughtful critique of Kiser and Schneider's argument.

(even embracing the autonomous capacity to make war against foreign states), power tends to disperse. This tendency engenders a shifting field of strategic political possibility, of both renewed conflict among patrimonial rulers and would-be rulers and of potential deals and agreements (however shaky) among them. Centuries before Weber, Ibn Khaldun (1969) saw these oscillations as parts of a cyclical drama in which some rulers who governed more or less single-handedly would give way to an array of multiple contending candidates, who then vied with one another until a dominant figure reemerged, took charge, and extracted resources from his erstwhile challengers.

These tendencies can be redescribed, with more precision and pessimism, in rational-choice terms. If the capacity to wield autonomous force devolves to agents, they are more likely to capture enough power to turn into principals, and therefore into competitors of their own principals. In iterated interactions, or competitive “games” of indefinite length, notes Bowman, “the equilibrium price generated by the independent behavior of competitors becomes a collective *bad* that they must eliminate in order to survive” (1989: 13). Bowman is studying the collective-action problems generated by intercapitalist competition in the American coal industry, rather than problems besetting patrimonial rulers, but from a rational-choice perspective the point is broadly pertinent. Some feudal and early modern “games” were decades, even centuries, long, and engendered serious “social dilemmas,” or situations in which individuals’ uninhibited pursuit of gain produces a suboptimal collective outcome (Dawes 1991; Taylor 1987). Extreme cases yield an anarchic, inimical “war of all against all” among patrimonial principals or rulers, but (*pace* Khaldun) with no prospects of even temporary resolution. For assuming that participants recognize an ongoing social dilemma, nothing guarantees that they will join together to address it.

Still, such dilemmas are neither historically nor theoretically intractable, even within rational-choice theory. Social dilemmas can be resolved by swords or covenants, as utilitarians since Hobbes ([1651] 1962) have pointed out: struggles may ultimately give rise to an autocrat’s assumption of total power, a multilateral contract among belligerents, or some combination of the two.⁷ The role of the absolutist ruler is an easy early modern parallel. Less well-known are the many-sided social struggles among European elites that issued in collective contracts of one sort or another. On occasion these deals were remarkably explicit. The Dutch regents designed what they called Contracts of Correspondence: formal group compacts that rotated offices among various incumbents, targeting a specific town council or other patrimonial organization. These contracts were local, plural, and drawn up among equals. Like other similar compacts, these appear to have furthered, even to have been aimed at, collective rent-seeking. This at least would be the rational-choice interpretation. In general, according to

⁷ See, among others, Axelrod (1981); Ostrom, Walker, and Gardner (1992); Taylor (1990); Hardin (1990: 358–77); and Heimer (1990: 378–82). I leave aside, for the moment, the conditions that might produce these varied outcomes.

Mancur Olson, cartels that function as distributional coalitions strive to increase their own benefits, whatever the effect on the surrounding society (1982: 41–74). Effective cartels also limit access to the “commons” by blocking entry into the desirable area.⁸ The formalization of appropriation of state office accomplished those tasks quite nicely. And as state officers reasserted their corporate prerogatives vis-à-vis rulers, such contracts simultaneously reformed nodal links in patrimonial chains of command and regenerated the state.⁹

Both the predatory and classical contractarian visions of state-formation are enjoying an intellectual renaissance at the moment. Within certain limits—scope conditions that I develop in subsequent sections of this essay—they apply to pre-modern Europe. Together they reflect inherent tendencies in mechanisms of patrimonial governance and illuminate the process by which workable pacts arose out of conflicts among contending principals, simultaneously shaping and stabilizing relations of rule, whether the contestants are reconstituted as a unitary principal or their clashing interests managed through an overarching structure.¹⁰

Criticism, Self-Criticism: Culture and Emotion

Let's take a closer look at the structure of politics in early modern Europe, where, as we have seen, rulers held, and often virtually owned and commanded, pieces of the polity, of resource-bearing political privilege. As I have argued elsewhere, this privileged site was also entwined with elite family position (Adams 1994). Politically secured private accumulation promoted a man's reputation, family honor, and the prospects of his descendants, and the prestige of his lineage qualified him to occupy lucrative state offices and to pass them along to his sons, nephews, and grandsons. In other times and places, power holders could have routinely passed on privileges to cross-cousins, younger sons, or women, but in feudal and early modern Europe the typical lines of appropriation and filiation favored primogeniture, patriliney, and patriarchy. This was especially true among the ruling urban patriciates, when the royal or aristocratic family-household was not the dominant symbolic focus and staging-post of rule.

Certainly rational-choicers have acknowledged the role of family practices, especially those undertaken by elite family heads functioning as principals in po-

⁸This use of the metaphor of the “commons” derives loosely from Garrett Hardin's classic 1968 article, collected in Hardin and Baden (1977).

⁹I define a hierarchy as a structure embodying relations of authority and subordination, and a contract as an agreement between persons or firms that governs an exchange. Note that patrimonial contracts embrace the exchange of political support as well as economic resources, and patrimonial hierarchies convey economic surplus as well as reflect relationships of fealty.

¹⁰According to Ekelund and Tollison, the more unified the ruling group (at the limit in the person of a single monarch), the lower the bargaining costs for eager rent-seekers and the more hospitable the state to their activities (1981: chap. 3). See Coleman (1994: 169) for a rational-choice perspective on how one might gain utility by surrendering control.

litical contracts, organizational arrangements, and state-building. Take the work of Eleanor Searle on “predatory kinship” and Norman power. Searle claims that the Norse warleaders who founded the duchy of Normandy chose to recognize each other as kinsmen to unite for the purposes of individual protection and enrichment. They “had a rational assessment of their own interests as well as the capacity for violence that could translate that assessment into profitable feud” (1988: 9). To further this end, the group deployed marriage strategies, intermarrying, recruiting allies, and reallocating scarce resources (including elite women) by marriage. The quasicontractual establishment of a network of kin-allies “was the beginning of centralization and thus the beginning of an effective model of powerbuilding” (24). It was also, according to Searle, the basis of a solution to their particular social dilemma. Here we have a fascinating account of family heads hammering out contracts to advance predation, which in turn advanced state-formation.

Padgett and Ansell (1993) are skeptical about whether ruling patrimonial families really devised grand strategies, and in the context of a magisterial network analysis of the medieval Florentine elite, they contend that family heads engaged in the sorts of “contextual improvisation” favored by localized, heterogeneous, and ambiguous structural situations. Padgett and Ansell also suggest that individual actors calculate within shorter time horizons and coordinate collective action in more modest capacities than Searle claims. Nevertheless, their analysis is framed within the same utilitarian assumptions. One might say that the Florentine lords mastered tactics (defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “handling forces in battle or in the immediate presence of the enemy”) rather than strategy: “the art of projecting and directing the larger military movements and operations of a campaign.” The bargains and tacit contracts that emerged underwrote political centralization.¹¹

These narratives are full of nods to the role of family. What’s missing is an explicit theoretical mention of the link between the principles demarcating more-from less-valued families and elite predation—the pursuit of resources and power. It is precisely when explanations are invoked as empirically central but are not registered in theory that the limits of a paradigm emerge. In utilitarian economics, for example, it is sometimes recognized that relations of trust and confidence may bind actors so strongly that they “will not cheat even though it may be ‘rational economic behavior’ to do so” (Arrow 1984: 104). Comments such as these surface periodically and are quickly sidelined.¹² If elite predation is em-

¹¹ Mark Granovetter takes much the same position in his influential criticism of economists for ignoring actors’ network embeddedness and, more broadly, their rootedness in social structures. “What looks to the analyst like nonrational behavior may be quite sensible when situational constraints, especially those of embeddedness, are fully appreciated” (1985: 506).

¹² See also Stiglitz: “. . . some managers are endowed with a sense of corporate responsibility; they maximize the stock market value of the firm because they believe that this is what a good manager is supposed to do” (Stiglitz 1985: 135). Mark Gould pointed out this example to me in a personal communication.

pirically linked to the value that actors placed on family lineages, then the wealth (and even, if we stretch the point, power) maximizing (or satisficing) assumption of rational-choice theory is incomplete at best.

At minimum, relevant patrimonial resources must be seen as symbolic, involving what rational-choicers would characterize as “tastes” for patriarchal patrilineal honor that are endogenous to the system and that function in tandem with politicomilitary and economic resources. Yet this is still too limiting, for family honor and prestige were clearly more, or less, than what we are wont to think of as resources. For what kind of resource is it that can be gained or lost, but should never be pursued too obviously? “By giving it away, you show that you have it; by striving for it, you imply that you need it”—and therefore lack it (Pitt-Rivers 1968: 508). Stewart hits the nail on the head: “The more closely one looks at honor, the odder it seems” (1994: 145).¹³ In fact, what mattered was not whether ruler and family actually were in any real sense honorable or prestigious, but whether they were perceived to be or have something that entitled them to being treated as such. Symbols of gender and generation from which such honor claims were fabricated were only loosely moored in “the biological” and resembled a language as much as a currency.¹⁴ These symbols could be detached from their anchorage and discursively deployed, but their social effectiveness was limited by the normative boundaries imposed by available kin, the acquiescence of other elite families, and the value placed on an unbroken line of honorable, preferably patrilineal, descent. Establishing enduring claims to politicoeconomic privilege meant composing a successful social fiction, one that was based on and assumed a particular collective’s evaluative orientation to social life.

Consider how this might have structured the conditions that underlaid individual rulers’ political action (the supposed forte of rational-choice theory). Rulers were disposed to present themselves as members and representatives of enduring patriarchal patrilineages as part of the requirements and the very definition of governance in pre-modern Europe: they spoke and wrote from this subject position (Adams 1994). In the Netherlands, for example, the ruling regents kept generations-long family records enumerating the political privileges that were held by ancestors, by themselves, and those that would be held by descendants; these “office genealogies” were passed down from father to son. They commissioned public eulogies that marked a family member’s accession to office or marriage into another family of privilege; they left long meditations on political principle meant for their children and children’s children, especially the sons who would succeed them. Throughout Europe, office genealogies, as well as correspondence, other written records, and ritual practices evince rulers’ self-

¹³In this sense, it partakes of the troubling duality of the larger concept of culture. “Culture is Janus-faced,” writes David Laitin, “people are both guided by the symbols of their culture and instrumental in using culture to gain wealth and power” (1988: 589).

¹⁴One analogy might be to Bourdieu’s notion of “cultural capital” (see Bourdieu, this volume). The concept remains a suggestive but anachronistic analogy in this historical context, however, because a rigorous notion of “capital” assumes a circulation of prestige signs that is relatively autonomous from rootedness in money and power—a condition that is not met in the era in question.

understandings as agents of long-dead ancestors and fantasized future descendants. Elite self-representations were bound up with the relatively long time horizons of genealogies of privilege that, though to a lesser degree than some enduring landed estates, became deeply identified with the character and continuity of the proprietor families.¹⁵

There was certainly variation in how actors mastered the performance of these tropes and how thoroughly they internalized them. Eldest sons could be expected to see things differently from their younger brothers, who were vested with the dual role of supporter and understudy. Women serving as guardians and political representatives of their small sons on behalf of royal lineages could be expected to feel differently about their position as principal, which was hedged with gendered restrictions, than would the prince on attaining his majority. But inasmuch as their lives revolved around the accumulation and inheritance of state office and privilege, all these actors oriented themselves more expansively than with respect to their own tenure in office and privilege. One upshot is that the “self-interest” assumption of rational-choice theory is much too narrow to encompass the actions of patrimonial rulers or to make sense of the views they expressed.

All other things being equal, a principal who sees himself as a bearer of others’ interests or (to put it more precisely) as sharing others’ discursively defined positions will be more likely to fall in line with the goals of those significant others, be they fellow principals, agents, or the ruled.¹⁶ Thus, principals’ actions may be disciplined not only by the three stock rational-choice constraints—competition from other principals, favorable discount rates, and the usual organizational agency problems—but also by mutually shared identifications. Shifting the conceptual lens opens up new ways of thinking about different types or levels of identification that inhere in the structure of patrimonial rule. If patrimonial rulers count themselves as principals because they see themselves as agents of a discursively bounded collective of ancestors and descendants, then “representative of elite lineage” is one crucial cultural ground on which rest assessments of the identity of fellow political principals as well as perceptions of political selfhood. How do the distinctions that principals draw within this category, and the different levels of identification with each subgroup, structure principals’ political actions, solidarities, and antagonisms? Under what circumstances are these categories of identification enlarged to embrace something beyond the familial, such as a “nation”? Such crucial questions can be adapted to

¹⁵ Regarding the blurred boundaries between elite families and landed estates in England, see, for example, Stone and Stone ([1984] 1986).

¹⁶ Elite family heads who were also rulers might fail to adopt collectively approved positions, and face negative sanctions—from relatives or from other family heads in powerful political and legal capacities—but this does not mean that norms are analytically reducible to the threat of sanctions. What rational-choice models portray as manipulation of sanctions is often attempted manipulation of normative commitments and values that impel agents to take actions that are not in their self-interest (see Gould 1992). In multivocal patrimonial systems, values were also, and as a matter of course, family values, anchored in patriarchal patrilineal structures of rule.

the quirks of each historical case while remaining generally applicable in patrimonial contexts.

To understand early modern politics, we must grapple not only with these kinds of culturally specific cognitive expectations and cognitively informed practices, but also with actors' expressed feelings about ancestors and descendants, political privilege, and family line. This is a particularly troublesome area for rational-choicers. The issue of emotion/affect/feeling/passion/sentiment/cathexis (there are many names, hailing from many theoretical provenances) touches the heart of the theory because it threatens to undermine, or at least radically condition and complicate, the bedrock maxim of actors' "rationality"—the last of the three foundational assumptions left standing, now that I have, I hope, persuaded readers that the core utilitarian principles of wealth-maximization and self-interest do not generate a conceptual space in which we can comfortably account for the actions of patrimonial rulers.¹⁷

We know that emotions infuse the moments of extraordinary mass politics in which political institutions and cultural patterns are dramatically reformulated. William Sewell Jr. (1995, 1996) offers an excellent example from the early days of the French Revolution, when the representatives of the Third Estate recast themselves as the National Assembly in 1789. After a good deal of interpretive struggle, they approved the taking of the Bastille and went on to remake the fundamental laws and political arrangements of France. En route, they helped transform the meaning of revolution itself, by redefining the Parisian crowd's action as an instance of legitimate popular sovereignty. This process certainly incorporated elements of strategic action on the part of the Assembly and therefore invites examination by rational-choice theory, but a full explanation, Sewell notes, would also include an analysis of the link between discursive innovation and the rousing emotional response elicited by contact with a charismatic collective upsurge "that touched ultimate sources of order" (1995: 16). Certainly Sewell is right to underline the role of symbolically focused emotion in the revolutionary semiotic transformations that rang down the curtain on Old Regime France. I want to argue for its constitutive role in everyday life—in this case, the politico-familial lives of patrimonial rulers.

Family heads sacrificed *for* their children, actual and hoped-for, insofar as they represented the continuity of the patrilineage, which also—and this is a key point—organized the continuity of the pinnacle of the corporate state (Adams 1994). By the same token they also sacrificed them. As Giesey (1977) has shown for the early modern French elite, living family members were expected to advance the familial-political vision, and though the burden fell more heavily on some (such as women and younger sons) than on others, family heads and eldest sons generally sustained their part. One exemplary practice was office venality: buying state-sponsored privileges that would come to fruition for families, not

¹⁷Cognitive assessments are also conditioned by imperfections in reasoning, of course, including memory lapses, perceptual distortions, and other sources of miscalculation. See Kahneman and Tversky (1986) for a discussion of cognitive limits on individual rationality.

individuals, and even then only after several generations. Affectual attachment animated those actors' family strategies, and insofar as progeny composed part of a collectively held image of a glorious destiny for the family's name and descendants, adults' instrumental manipulation of children might be entirely compatible with warm feelings for them. This particular version of intergenerational emotional identification, both forged and invested in a patrimonial family form, should not be confused with present-day Euro-American understandings of either altruism or love.¹⁸

But surely families are always crucibles of emotion, strong negative as well as positive affect, and are generally ambivalent domains par excellence, in which the layered histories of childhood—of gender identifications, desire, refusals, and repressions—constitute sexed subjects (Butler 1995; Freud 1961 [1909]: 51). The definition of normative masculinity (with respect both to ideas of femininity and to alternative nonnormative masculinities); the instability and unease inherent in the dominant organization of masculine power; the ways that family figures serve as powerful fetish objects, as precipitates of contradictory expectations and desires: do not these processes potentially contribute to the cross-cultural formation of subjectivities activated in any and all macropolitics? True, but the specific historical connection of interest here, in the patrimonial systems of early modern Europe, is the path (or paths) by which forms of elite masculinity come to be linked to ideologies of rule through emotionally charged symbols of fatherhood.¹⁹ This specific connection provides the missing theoretical link that rational-choice theorists need, whether they are attempting to invoke European elites' responses to their kings' family position as a factor in royal legitimacy (Root 1994: 217–18) or are fleshing out the “relative closeness” of ties between rulers and their heirs as a variable in rulers' capacity to make credible commitments (Kiser and Barzel 1991: 400).

It is interesting that rational-choicers themselves seem increasingly unwilling to consign all things apparently nonrational, including culture, emotion, and even habit, to a residuum, the category of exogenous input, background noise, or the “tosh” that Oliver Williamson decrees should “remain in its place” (1994: 98). Least successful so far are efforts to endogenize emotion. One increasingly common approach forswears sociological analysis altogether and asserts that emotion is a biologically wired reinforcer (see, for example, Frank 1988). Others have tried to redefine emotion as somehow “rational” and treat it accordingly.

¹⁸ Given the stark empirical division that rational-choicers tend to draw between “family” and “world,” and their tendency to assign emotions to the former and calculative orientations to the latter, my point is likely to prove a difficult historical dish for rational-choicers to digest. For a more sympathetic perspective than mine, see Green and Shapiro's (1994) summary of the literature on altruism and rational-choice theory.

¹⁹ Feminist theorists have been helpful in this context. They have underlined the patriarchal nature of ideologies of early modern European monarchical power, mainly by means of rereading classical commentaries by theorists of state power and political authority, to draw out the limits of political discourse. See, among others, Landes on Rousseau (1988), Pateman on the English contract theorists and their opponents (1988), and Hunt (1992), who focuses on popular propaganda surrounding the French royal family.

This is a logical conceptual gambit, given the constraints of the paradigm, but it is doubly unsatisfactory. "By clothing the null hypothesis in the garb of selective incentives," as Green and Shapiro (1994: 87) point out, this analytical move erodes the very distinction that calls for explanation and integration.²⁰ Furthermore, the stark conceptual divide between reason and emotion is itself a cultural construction, with a historical lineage that is causally implicated in our object of analysis, European familial politics. The very idea of rational discourse emerged as a clarion call in the waning years of Europe's Old Regimes and became a weapon raised against the nepotistic closure of patrimonial power (see, for example, Maza 1993). "Instrumental rationality" then figured as a revolutionary maxim and prescribed rule of conduct for state agents, purged of their family entanglements, and, as Max Weber's ([1922] 1968) work shows, a discourse of legitimation and justification as well as a valued property of political organization after the great bourgeois revolutions. By the nineteenth century, European states were assumed to be the special province of reason, however much their rational-legal discourse was actually imbued with unacknowledged emotion. "The rational" led a triply complicated life in Old Regime Europe, as symbol, prescriptive institutional principle, and analytical tool, and I am not convinced that it was readily available as a ideal-typical template for rulers' agency at the historical juncture at which rational-choicers invoke it. The sociohistorical process by which "rational choice" emerged as a paradigm for political action needs more analysis, but that is another project.²¹

Rational-choice work on incorporating "cultural beliefs" into models of political institutional change has been more successful, but has not advanced very far. North's (1981) work on pre-modern Europe is a well-known example that raises hackles among more orthodox practitioners (see Nee and Ingram 1998). Avner Greif also argues that so-called cultural factors impelled feudal and early modern societies to develop along distinctive social trajectories (1994: 914). Greif defines cultural beliefs as "ideas and thoughts common to several individuals that govern interaction . . . and differ from knowledge in that they are not empirically discovered or analytically proved" (915). In particular, actors hold beliefs about the courses of action that other actors are likely to take when confronted with contingencies, and those beliefs influence ensuing social arrangements. North similarly suggests that rational-choicers need an approach "that

²⁰The difficulty of making empirical distinctions between the rational and emotional is underlined by Lynn Smith-Lovin, who wonders: "Is a 'rational choice' made unconsciously on the basis of affective associations and available interaction partners still a calculated, self-interested endeavor?" (1993: 291). Nonetheless, I want to be able to capture the separate analytical dimensions, perhaps especially when they are empirically indistinguishable. See Smith-Lovin's contribution and other papers in the special issue of *Rationality and Society* (1993).

²¹An excellent starting point for those interested in this latter problem is Hirschman's (1977) analysis of the development of separate discourses designating passions and interests, and the assignment of the latter to matters economic. Steven Pincus's essay in this book includes a fascinating discussion of the emergence of the language of political interest from the "obsolete" (and, Pincus indicates, highly gendered) "language of confessional strife" in early modern England. For a contrasting argument emphasizing the affective character of colonial states, see Stoler (forthcoming).

explains how different perceptions of reality affect the reaction of individuals to the changing 'objective' situation" (1981: 7–8). In this view, culture is a bundle of cognitive expectations and cognitively ordered practices. Its contribution to the institutionalization of organizations, including states, is understood as "fundamentally a cognitive process" (Zucker 1983: 25).

To the extent that expectations and beliefs are seen as separate from "reality" (or as North puts it, the "objective situation"), they could be treated as relatively plastic and discursively manipulable, in which case the theory would take on a pronounced culturalist tinge. This has been a direction that most rational-choicers have been loath to take, since it threatens to give meaning an analytically constitutive role in social action and social structure. Most prefer to argue that culture is active in situations of objective indeterminacy, that is, in interactions off the equilibrium path, so to speak. Thus, Greif (1994) tries to show that divergent cultural beliefs crystallized with special force in overseas ventures, which posed inherent principal/agent problems in the feudal and early modern eras, heightening the uncertainty that always attends exploratory transactions. When uncertainty is high, it is argued, culture has special causal power. This is still a minimalist's notion of culture and of the explanatory work that culture might do.

A more expansive reevaluation of beliefs qua values can be found in the work of some theorists—whether, like North, they say that shared ideologies and moral codes constitute the real cement of society (1981: chap. 5) or, like Jon Elster, insist that "The chain of norms must have an unmoved mover, to which the rationalist reduction does not apply" (1990: 47). These views, as yet tentatively expressed, jar with a "thin" theory of rational choice unless it is assumed, following Hechter, that whereas actors may be motivated by immanent and not merely instrumental values, the distribution of those values across the population remains random (1994: 320, 323). Whatever its validity with respect to the actions of capitalist employers or managers, however, this assumption would not hold up for patrimonial principals.

(Discursive) Formation of Familial States

If I am correct about the structuring effect of ideologies of paternal power and family identity on actors, and more generally emotionally charged meanings in patrimonial politics, then we may expect both the severity of social dilemmas and the motivation for solutions to be heightened. For if it were deemed essential to their families, one would expect rulers and aspiring rulers to try that much harder to grab a piece of state power, and to struggle to squeeze sons and other relatives into office, at the risk of depriving similarly situated patriarchs of perquisites. Family cliques did at times manage to monopolize local state apparatuses and corporate bodies at the expense of rival groupings, as we saw earlier. They were vulnerable to being toppled by competing factions, who were then toppled in their turn, and so forth. But by the same token, the impetus toward

and effectiveness of solutions, whether propelled by covenants or swords, would increase commensurately. When family heads are committed to preserving family position in and through a patrimonial state, they are wedded to maintaining the organization as an elite commons of patriarchal patrimonial privilege. Not only would any single elite patriarch be unlikely to act in ways that would obviously dilute or sacrifice his or his children's (particularly his sons') position, but when the resources and prestige that it offered were accessible only by entering into a group accord, each family head's motivation to do so would increase. Once party to such a collective corporate pact, each participant would try to hold others to their end of the bargain. The exit of any participant threatened the position of all others, and rulers could be expected to negatively sanction those that tried to secede. By the same token, however, the collective deals would have made exit less likely. They created a basis for socioemotional bonds among rulers, the male family heads encamped inside the centralizing state apparatus. The autocratic solution would also become more compelling. Influential ideologists of absolutism argued that a *pater patriae* representing, or rather incarnating, a single royal or crypto-royal lineage could provide a key symbolic focus and first among equals to whom warring elite family interests would, and should, subject themselves.²² The twin solutions of covenant and sword were not mutually exclusive, a fact that the defamilized language of rational choice conceals: they were ideologically and organizationally interdependent.

As distributional coalitions, groups of patrimonial families differed from Bowman's capitalist cartels or Olson's nation-states. A cartel constituted by families-in-relationship can draw on deeper reservoirs of loyalty and trust than other, more elective and less affective groupings. These "family regimes" (as the Dutch called them) could be a force for elite political cohesion and stability. In the Netherlands, for example, they reinforced and elaborated the localism of patrician authority. In France, this arrangement strengthened the fiscal and political interdependence of crown and elite. By dangling the prospect of intergenerational family privileges in front of potential investors, the crown lured them into putting resources into areas that would supply funds (corporate monopolies) and committing political support to an absolutist organization of which they were increasingly a corporate component. In both these and other cases, family regimes ratified the shift in class character from merchant capitalists into state *rentiers*. Elite family bases of organization and identity were not automatically superseded in modernization projects, but incorporated into the constitutive foundations of each patrimonial state.

Precisely when—that is, at what historical conjuncture—elites implanted their families in the state was also potentially important for political development. Krasner's (1984) model of "punctuated equilibrium" in politics, derived from the work of Stephen Jay Gould and Niles Eldredge, holds that the stable social

²² See, among others, Jean Bodin (1992) and Sir Robert Filmer (1991), early modern political theorists of French and English politics, respectively. Pateman's (1988: 77–115) discussion of Filmer is of particular interest in this context.

arrangements that structure politics-as-usual are periodically disrupted by crises that undermine these arrangements, opening up the possibility of abrupt institutional transformation and thus for heated conflicts over the shape of change. In patrimonial contexts, the family coalitions that control the state during these periods of institutional fluidity have a decisive say over future institutional arrangements and policy. They can be expected to forward the discursively defined goals of particular lineages and kin groups, as well as to stake claims to the state on behalf of family members and clients. If patrimonial state-formation can be seen as a process of tying together nodes in a single cartel or network, in mutable arrangements that are variably centralized and contingently and culturally integrated, then elite family settlements in moments of political crisis are likely to freeze those arrangements in place.²³

This is not to say that political conflict was absent in patrimonial states. Far from it. Medieval and early modern political history is rife with epochal dynastic struggles. But at certain key junctures, interfamily alliances stabilized distributional coalitions that closed ranks against newcomers, forming the basis for a more thoroughgoing equilibrium by organizing against changes in political procedures and fixing “traditional” mechanisms of governance in place. Like the Dutch regents’ Contracts of Correspondence, and the deals among French *officiers*, these sorts of compacts envisioned family, gender relations, and the regulation of sexuality in a way that supplied a long-run dynastic basis embedding fractious elite factions into a single stable body. I refer to these organizations as “familial states” to convey that we are dealing with not just another variable, but patterned properties and forms of organization pervaded by gendered family ideologies and relationships. Patriarchal family ties directly constitute relations of corporate rule, recruitment to top political offices is restricted to certain men on the basis of their family ties and position, and claims to political authority are made on the basis of gender-specific familial criteria, with aspirants asserting their claims to rule on the basis of patriarchal power and hereditary qualification, or “blood,” rather than on, say, competence. In early modern European patrimonial polities—republican/estatist as well as monarchical/absolutist—discourses of dynasty and paternity were necessarily foregrounded because heritable offices and privileges descended through the male line, and developing state institutions were mobilized around the political symbolism of ruling fatherhood.

It may seem that by bypassing rational-choice theory to explore the institutionalization of ideologies of paternal power and family identity, and more generally emotionally charged meanings in patrimonial politics, we may find ourselves trading parsimony for texture, universality for historical variability. But why, after all, as Margaret Somers (1998) asks, should we prefer one set of qualities over another? The only convincing reason, she adds, would be if we believed

²³The literature on early modern European “elite settlements” (for example, Lachmann 1989; Higley and Burton 1989) lacks a systematically theorized familial dimension, but it captures and elaborates important aspects of the mechanism of competitive monopoly.

that these qualities actually captured the reality of the world being theorized—if, “that is, the world really *is* ‘parsimonious’ and ‘invariant.’” Somers takes issue with this picture of the social world on a number of grounds, including the general objection that it is implausibly “comprised of agents with essential and unchanging properties that operate independently of the very relationships by which they are constituted.” In these terms, my argument diverges from that of rational-choice theorists, for although it doesn’t stand or fall on embracing any particular twentieth-century conception of subjectivity, it insists on the socially malleable boundaries of self, originally formed in the family, the cultural component of identity, and the historically specific role of affect for early modern elite political actors.²⁴ That it is also able to generate a more complete understanding of the repertoire of social dilemmas and solutions is a strength of my approach, which stresses the conditions and limits of strategic action rather than denying its existence.

There are also major points at which my more culturalist model generates an account of political development and transformation that departs from the rational-choice story of state-building. Familial states were inserted in an evolving global structure that they were simultaneously creating. Maintaining a hegemonic or even workable position as a corporate actor, including as a mercantilist “going concern” operating in the chaotic early modern world, was a continuing achievement, as Arthur Stinchcombe points out in his work on monopolistic competition as a general social mechanism. Desirable structural sites or opportunities were vulnerable to the particular advantages of certain corporate groups, competing with one another to exploit those network niches from which flowed the possibility of continuing advantage (1998). In the early modern world, as we have seen, these corporate actors were a motley assemblage, including sovereign states, urban leagues, chartered companies, pirates, mercenary organizations, and empires, and the fact that their shifting relationships were not organized along territorially exclusive lines created distinctive political pressures for individual units in an increasingly economically competitive and militarized interstate system (see Spruyt 1994; Thomson 1994).

In this unstable situation, the same family and lineage privilege that promoted creative elite relationships to the state and its fruits also made it less likely that a shift in incentives, information, or resources would spur changes in individual or corporate behavior. Affective bonds that motivate special effort on behalf of the group impose commensurate limits on organizational flexibility and responsiveness, even when the existing political structure serves rulers inefficiently and when they have the resources and capacity to dismantle it. In these institutional conditions, under which, in North’s (1981) utilitarian nightmare, “maximizing behavior” by actors fails to produce increased output, rational-choice theorists

²⁴Many readers will be wary of more sustained exploration of what seems like psychoanalytical territory, even when nuanced with fillips of historical cultural studies. This rich psychosexual vein has yet to be much worked with sociohistorical tools, and here I merely point to it, rather than excavate it deeply. For two intriguing efforts to integrate psychodynamics with studies of aspects of the political and social landscapes of early modern Europe, see Marvick (1986) and Roper (1994).

expect actors to attempt to modify their behavior accordingly. And they may, under certain historical circumstances, but probably not in patrimonial politics. Precisely at this point, my expectations diverge most sharply from those of the rational-choice model, for I expect patrimonial elites to struggle to maintain family footholds, even if alternative, more resource-rich opportunities presented themselves.

An unlikely path of structural change for patrimonial states, therefore, would be a top-down revolution that involved calculated elite participation in overthrowing the familial state. Along with the special form of their privileges, patrimonial elites would have to surrender the keystone of their and their families' identities. We should expect to find extraordinary conditions before the bulk of elite political actors in any particular political field could make such a radical break.²⁵ It is more probable that quotidian pressures for change would come either from "below" or from "way above," and based on what we know of patrimonial politics, we can say something of the retrospective form those pressures might have assumed. First, the features of rule that evoke elite and popular allegiance also channel hostility upward toward rulers in their guise as family authority figures. During the French Revolution, for example, the popular imagination was fired by rage at a weak father-king allegedly under the sway of a hypersexual, unmotherly queen (Hunt 1992; Maza 1993). These tropes were applied to elites as well as royalty in the lead-up to early modern political upheavals, and they were not confined to French politics. Their effectiveness in mobilizing opposition rested on subterranean relationships between perceptions of the ruler as incapable of governing his family and therefore, symbolically, his kingdom. Thus, perceptions of normative political authority in patrimonialism also described the gendered familial lines on which that authority would be challenged (Adams 1994). A ruler's cultural charisma, as well as bargaining capacity, was not simply secured, but also sharply limited by the symbolic and institutional logic of family politics.

Another potential source of pressure lay in the emerging supracultural system. It is not simply that we should include the "international strategic factor as an explanatory variable," as Aristide Zolberg (1980) has emphasized, although that task is still important. We also need to recognize that supracultural niches were actually restructured as functional alternatives to aristocratic dynastic ideologies and connections reorganized the drift of interstate relations, transforming the character of culturally appropriate claims to sovereignty. This shift might take as subtle a discursive form as it did during the repeated wars of Louis XIV's reign, when his opponents' propaganda began to condemn the principle that the state was in any way "possessed" by the ruler "who could dispose of it according to his whim," as Carlos II of Spain was to do in 1700: "Everyone knows," proclaimed one of the Allies' most prominent pamphlets, "that kingship is an office, an ad-

²⁵Sewell's (1995, 1996) account of the reaction to the taking of the Bastille at the outset of the French Revolution captures just such a rare and transformative political moment, experienced by the representatives of the Third Estate as they became the National Assembly. For the range of radical elite as well as popular demands addressed to France's Old Regime rulers, see Weitman (1968).

ministration, giving kings no proprietary possession" (Rowen, quoted in Bonney 1991: 530). That familial states had begun to be portrayed as internationally outdated and outdistanced is part of the story of their increasing ineffectiveness in the international strategic arena, as they gave way to, or were abolished in favor of, nimbler forms of doing politics.

Putting Rational Choice in its Place

I have shown that the basic assumptions of rational-choice theory do not credibly model the principles of action that animated feudal and early modern European rulers. How, then, has rational-choice theory generated reasonable explanations of certain political equilibria, or relatively stable collective outcomes of collective strategies? In particular, rational-choicers have helped us understand how elites in a variety of patrimonial political settings forged contracts that enabled them to overcome social dilemmas and claim the state as the fount of benefits for their distributional coalitions. In some cases, these contracts gave rise to conditions for political centralization and other ruling-group modernization projects. The puzzle is: how do flawed assumptions about key causal attributes produce, or seem to produce, even partially adequate accounts?²⁶

The answer in this case is, I think, twofold. First, rational choice contains the seeds of its own transcendence, in the latent, historically and systemically specific meanings smuggled into key concepts like "predation" and "rulers' goals." I have shown that these concepts are doing unacknowledged cultural work in rational-choice narratives. The "personal objectives" that Levi sees predatory rulers as maximizing (1988: 10); the "credibility" of the intergenerational commitments that Kiser and Barzel's rulers make (1991: 400)—once these and the other conceptual repressions discussed earlier have been raised to consciousness, historians and social scientists can do a better job of sorting out the dimensions of culture—including its neglected affective elements—and using them in theory and explanation. Conversely, as we recast basic utilitarian assumptions and survey the wider analytical landscape that is revealed, we can see that it will be a challenge for culturalists to hang onto the advances that have taken place within rational-choice research and to incorporate the "culture concept" in the context of historically grounded generalizations about patrimonial politics and familial state-formation, dissolution, and revolution.²⁷ It should already be clear, however, that in addressing the big (intractable yet inevitable) questions surround-

²⁶There are, of course, a number of reasons why this might be so (see King, Keohane, and Verba 1994: chap. 3). I argue that the theoretical leverage that rational choice has over core historical problems is less than its practitioners have imagined.

²⁷Tacit rational-strategic tropes can be found in avowedly culturalist narratives of macropolitical change. In Landes's tale of the French Revolution, for example, Jacobin authorities bent on doing away with the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women and reestablishing male dominance succeed partly by appealing to less-privileged men and women for support (1988: 142–46). They appear to have authored a political pact or bargain that crossed class and gender lines in service of joint interests in repression; all the more reason, therefore, for culturalists and rational-choicers working on overlapping empirical problems to confront one another's work.

ing the rise and decline, stability and instability of states, cultural meaning is a basic analytical starting point on a par with information and resources.

The second point revolves around the role of mid-range mechanisms in feudal and early modern European politics. By describing elements of these mechanisms, rational-choicers have improved on standard sociological tales of state-formation that invoke couplets such as centralization/decentralization, differentiation/differentiation, or development/decline as if they were unproblematic structural features or processes. Still, meso-level mechanisms do not a grand theory make. Competitive struggles among elite families in early modern Europe effectively mimic, and may even adumbrate, broader social mechanisms of monopoly competition, but only at certain historical junctures, when the parameters of patrimonialism are fixed and the familial and symbolically invested character of paternal power is basically a social given. The differences between my arguments and the utilitarians' highlight the crucial importance of spelling out the systemic scope conditions of theoretical and empirical generalization.

Neil Smelser (1992: 404) calls on us to treat an actor's disposition to act rationally as a variable rather than a postulate and to organize our research around "the question of the contextual conditions—motivational, informational, and institutional—under which maximization and rational calculation manifest themselves in 'pure' form, under which they assume different forms, and under which they break down." One possible response stresses the cultural, historical, or institutional specificity of notions of rationality (Wacquant and Calhoun 1989); another, the variability of rationality itself (Stinchcombe 1986); other impulses, deriving from feminist theory, portray the contextual conditions favoring calculative outlooks as rooted in socially masculinist institutional environments (McCloskey 1993) or advance the position that modern European concepts of rationality have been developed in inherently androcentric ways (Bordo 1986).

These are intriguing paths to explore, but I have tried to answer Smelser's call and the Weberian intellectual legacy that it evokes somewhat differently, retaining some of the insights generated from within the rational-choice perspective while contesting its basic theoretical underpinnings and beginning to embed it in a higher-order explanation of historical persistence and change. Specifically, this essay identifies the points at which a sociocultural story undercuts, or alternatively enfolds and enriches, the utilitarian portrait of the mechanisms underlying patrimonial political equilibria. For example, I have argued that political elites, who as male family heads became lineally identified with intergenerational privilege, invested those sentiments in particular political arrangements. On that basis, patrimonial political principals organized or undermined collective political deals among early modern male elites. Thus, peculiarly familial concerns and discourses structured those negotiations and struggles.²⁸ My argument further diverges from rational-choice theory when patrimonial elites face a choice be-

²⁸The ideologies centered around the shah in early twentieth-century Iran, analyzed in Nader Sohrabi's paper in this book, also had familial dimensions and can be read as presenting some fascinating parallels with early modern Europe.

tween family state privilege and other means of acquiring politicoeconomic resources. I expect their identities, buttressed by their emotional attachments, to be resistant to change, even apparently advantageous change.

This new optic enables us to raise further productive questions about state formation and collapse. I am particularly interested in how and why dynastic attachments were supplanted by identification with generalized notions of fellow ruling principals, state agents, and of course the ruled. To approach such questions, which are essentially about an argument's scope conditions and which are central to understanding changing forms of sovereignty and legitimation, we need to integrate theories of historical cultural meaning into our arguments about economic and political advantage. Along the way, it is important to heed Olson's methodological dictum, even as we are refusing his rational-choice perspective. "What we should demand of a theory or a hypothesis," he cautions, "is that it be clear about what observations would increase the probability that it was false and what observations would tend to increase the probability that there was some truth in it" (1982: 15).

So one general sociological problem to be addressed concerns the place of emotionally charged symbols—including, ironically, "rationality" itself—in various political formations and in the relationships among states. This is obviously an enormous issue, of which this essay has examined only one part. Nevertheless I hope we have made a start.

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