Cultural Epistemology in America

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Absract

In this article, I define a cultural epistemology as a set of socially reinforced assumptions about how knowledge and truth are produced. Unlike a philosophical epistemology, a cultural epistemology is largely the product of culture and largely invisible[1]. As products of culture, cultural epistemology are relatively unquestioned and, in many cases, philosophically unsophisticated. There are three common types of cultural epistemologies, influenced by who holds power in a given society: an epistemological monarchy, an epistemological oligarchy and an epistemological democracy. A given cultural epistemology subsequently influences the legitimacy of culture and government itself. I argue argue that Americans tend to hold an "epistemological democracy" with two distinct facets: a trust in consensus, linked to living in a democratic republic, and a trust in their own self-interest, linked to market economics and capitalism more generally. These two facets combine, interact, and even oppose each other to legitimize and challenge America's political and economic systems.

1 Background

German sociologist Max Weber famously argued that the government is founded and maintained by violence, claiming its sole legitimate use in enforcing compliance to the law [2, 3]. In addition to its ability to threaten violence, people often come to accept the legitimacy of government (and its coercive power) through culture. For instance Robert Bellah argues that Americans symbols such as the Constitution and Declaration are cornerstones of an American civil or political religion [4]. Such a civil religion (often operating in parallel to one's chosen religion) includes beliefs, values, and symbols which are considered sacred and, functionally, reinforce the sovereignty of American government [5]. In this way, government leaders, political structures (such as a democracy itself), and laws themselves can be seen as "sacred" and thus indisputable and absolute.

Put another way, the government's coercive power, and culture's approval its use, may not always involve physical violence or the threat of physical violence.

[1] According to sociologist James Davison Hunter, "culture... is most powerful when it is taken for granted [1]."

Power can also be exercised in a symbolic way, meaning it "frame[s] particular positions as superior to all others... [and] make[s] the reasons for that superiority seem natural [3]." French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu coined the term symbolic violence, explaining it is exercised via the "production of common sense[2] [6]." Furthermore, this influence is not simply one sided: government and culture often influence and, in many cases, legitimize, one another. This is especially true in a democracy or a democratic republic, where citizens can affect who gets to participate in government and which laws get passed.

Culture's ability to determine which questions, answers, and lines of inquiry are legitimate (and which are illegitimate) means it can influence how individuals perceive truth, knowledge, and their relationship. This influence is especially coercive when certain ideas are ruled out *a priori*: not by an act of physical violence, but by making the idea disappear so entirely that people do not even *consider* it. More powerful than dismissing an an idea, which acknowledges its existence and thus legitimizes it to a certain extent, is removing any trace of its existence altogether.

2 Cultural Epistmology

It is in this context that we turn to cultural epistemology. Just as we can have a "cultural truth," or ideas that a given culture suggests are true, we can also have a cultural epistemology, or the ways a given culture suggests knowledge is produced. Similar to cultural truth, cultural epistemology need not be objectively true or rationally warranted - it simply must be culturally accepted. Furthermore, the more widely accepted a cultural epistemology is, the greater its coercive power at ruling out alternatives.

There are many different cultural epistemologies. Some, for instance, involve an appeal to religious leaders who claim privileged access to knowledge and thus truth itself. I call such cultures "epistemological monarchies," as the power to produce cultural knowledge remains mostly in the hands of a single individual with political and cultural power. Others cultures have a collection of elites whose vocation or position are seen as truth conducive, such as in cultures who turn to scientists as knowledge bearers. I term these cultures "epistemological oligarchies." Finally, there are cultures who claim claim individuals have a more equal access to knowledge. I call these "epistemological democracies." It is my argument that epistemological democracies will often lead to a relativism towards truth claims given the assumed equality of all individuals' knowledge.

America's cultural epistemology is largely skeptical of epistemological monarchies for historical reasons. As a result, American cultural epistemology involves elements of an epistemological oligarchy and an epistemological democracy. Furthermore, individuals may vary in the extent to which they fall on the oligarchical or democratic side, perhaps in part due to specific pockets of culture.

[2] It is important to distinguish Bourdieu's use of the term "common sense" with the epistemic version discussed in Section 3. Bourdieu uses "common sense" to refers to beliefs that are unquestionably accepted, regardless of whether they are epistemically justified.

Catholics, for instance, may be more likely to accept tenants epistemological monarchy due to the influence of the Pope and the structure of Catholic belief. With this being said American Catholics may lean more towards epistemological democratic than those who live in Vatican City. It is important to note that perhaps no culture is a perfect example of any of the three types detailed above, and most cultures will likely involve elements of each.

3 America's Epistemological Democracy

Those of us who live in the United States are subject to consensus, as our leaders are elected on the basis of a popular vote. For the most part, the legitimacy of consensus is unquestioned: we (usually) accept the sovereignty of election winners even when the winner is not the person we voted for. This can only be done if we trust the legitimacy of democracy itself – not simply that our polling machines work properly, but that the majority opinion is one worth listening to and trusting.

As obvious as it may seem to us, the idea that majority opinion is a good guide to decision making is absent for much of western history. Instead, monarchs were considered to have sovereignty over political matters [7]. It was the didactic (or Scottish) enlightenment's articulation of the common man's "common sense" that formed the logic of America's democratic republic [8]. According to historian Mark Noll, scholars following the didactic enlightenment claimed "all humans possessed, by nature, a common set of capacities — both epistemological and ethical — through which they could grasp the basic realities of nature and morality [9]." The United States used these principles to justify its break with Great Britain, such as with Thomas Paine's influential pamphlet "Common Sense [10]."

A political system cannot make any explicit ontological or epistemic claims on its own. However its legitimacy is often justified on philosophical grounds: just as the divine right of kings was justified on the authority of God, a democracy is legitimized if it is believed that common sense (more than the rich or privileged) is a good guide to decision making. Put another way, Americans are sovereign to the representatives elected by the majority sentiment of voters. Majority sentiment is a good guide to decision making under the assumption that people have common sense: if most of the population has generally reliable cognitive facilities, then polling public opinion will produce epistemically justified results. Even if some do not posses common sense, these opinions will be drowned out by the majority, and the process of electing leaders can still lead to optimal results.

Of course, the founding fathers of the United States were nuanced in their appeal to consensus. John Adams coined the term "Tyranny of the Majority" in his 1787 book A Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America [11] to argue against a single unicameral elected body. James Madison warned against oppressive majority factions in Federalist Papers No 10 [12]. Furthermore, Alexis de Tocqueville [13] and John Stuart Mill [14] thought

consensus could lead to the oppression of minority groups. As a result, concerns about the "whims of the masses" justified a government composed of different branches with checks and balances.

Even with checks and balances, America's representative democracy puts more trust in the common man's "common sense" than a monarchy, oligarchy, or dictatorship. And compared to the monarchy of Great Britain, this was a radical idea at the time of the nation's founding. However this trust in the common man's "common sense" and the desire to poll and quantify public sentiment extends to other areas in our culture beyond politics. Voting, for instance, is ubiquitous, reflected in everything from school elections (meaning children are socialized into the process) to research surveys to "liking" content on social media to even reviewing purchases on websites like Amazon.

We often take the result of consensus into account whenever we make a choice. For instance, many use the star ratings (votes) on a website like Yelp or Google Maps to decide whether or not to eat there. Rather than relying on the recommendations of friends or family members, many make their eating and buying decisions based on a numeric representation of the aggregate sentiment of strangers. This illustrates the trust (whether conscious or not) many have in the cultural power of consensus[3].

Appeals to consensus and common sense are everywhere, embedded into America's cultural framework. However, the legitimacy of such an appeal is not only historically contingent but also logically dubious[4]. The unquestioned nature of Americans' trust in consensus serves a functional role: maintaining the validity of democracy. Doubting whether consensus is a good guide to decision making is, in effect, doubting the legitimacy of the government and American political system as a whole. The power of America's cultural epistemology acts as a "defence mechanism" for democracy, in the sense that it provides certain answers while silently ruling out dissenting possibilities.

In sum, the legitimacy of democracy rests on certain assumptions about truth and our ability to find it. Yet the state may not need to justify such assumptions on philosophical grounds to be considered legitimate. Instead, socialization and the dynamics of power contribute to a "cultural epistemology," that can justify a given political system. At times this cultural epistemology functions like an immune system, protecting the government from challenges to its legitimacy by defining what considered "normal [15]." As Hunter explains,

> The capacity of a social group or movement to make its particular preferences and practices seem natural is the key to its control; these particularities become standard throughout society while shrouded in a cloak of neutrality [3].

[3] One could also say this argument rests on induction, however induction in this case relies on consensus to be valid, since we have not experienced the restaurant in question yet.

[4] An appeal to consensus is often an argumentum ad populum fallacy, and few, if asked can give a consistent ontological or epistemic justification for "common sense."

4 Self-Interest and Capitalism

The same year America declared its independence from Britain, Scottish enlightenment philosopher and economist Adam Smith published his influential treatise The Wealth of Nations [16]. This book was read and cited by many of America's Founding Fathers: In a speech in Congress on 2 February 1791, James Madison cited it to argue against establishing a national bank [17]. Thomas Jefferson claimed it was one of the best books on economics, recommending it to John Norvell in 1807 [18]. Pangle [19] argues Franklin, "developed a robust faith in what Adam Smith would later call the "invisible hand[5]."

The invisible hand was a metaphor used in The Wealth of Nations to describe how individuals, pursuing self-interest, can lead free markets to optimal results. Smith argues,

> Every individual is continually exerting himself to find out the most advantageous employment for whatever capital he can command. It is his own advantage, indeed, and not that of the society, which he has in view ... [however] by pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it [16].

My argument in this section is living in a culture informed by market economics (which in turn relies on the self-interested pursuit of profit) lays the groundwork for an epistemology rooted in personal choice. A belief that optimal *economic* outcomes result from individuals pursuing their own self interest suggests that pursuing personal choice can lead to optimal outcomes in *other* areas as well, including philosophy, religion, and morality. The overarching message is "you do you."

When it comes to morality, we see a shift from "character" to "values," perhaps uncoincidentally reflecting a change in what we believe grounds our moral beliefs. As Hunter remarks, "The very word "value" signifies the reduction of truth to utility, taboo to fashion, conviction to mere preference; all provisional, all exchangeable [22]." David Hume, a friend of Adam Smith, remarked that morality was not related to fact but "determined by sentiment [23]." Perhaps it should be no surprise that the metaethical theories of emotivism and non-cognitivism were first articulated in capitalist nations[6]. The message is clear: find a moral system that works *for you*; that makes *you* feel good, not one that is necessarily true or good.

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