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Cultural Failures as Choices of Rational Individuals*

Rasyonel Bireylerin Tercihi Olarak Kültürel Başarısızlıklar

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Abstract: I argue, in this paper, cultural failures can be analyzed as choices of rational individuals against the theories of primordialism and essentialism which tend to label acts of failure as irrational, even pathological. The application of public choice theory to culture helps us see failures as part of instrumental rational process in which individuals are concerned with maximizing their own interest and conflict forcing the sides to seek cooperation and compromise over new cultural norms. This application allows us to coin a new term which I call culture failure, to explain some behaviors of cultural actors based on public choice theory. Keeping this term in mind, I focus on behaviors and interactions of individuals, leaders, groups, and governments under the following titles: Cultural conflicts, instrumentalisation of culture through multiculturalism, and government intervention and free-riding.

Keywords: Cultural failures, public choice theory, instrumental rationality, cultural behaviors, conflicts.

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Introduction

In cultural studies, two opposing models, *monotype identity* and *multiple-identity* were the dominant paradigms of the last century. In order to achieve the status of nation state, governments promoted the model of monotype identity and tried to homogenize their cultures seeing them as an ideal *glue* to keep their citizens together. The homogenized culture not only facilitated ruling of citizens but also blocked socio-political demands of various social groups and classes. Against the model of monotype identity, the postmodern trends developed the concept of multiple-identities (sometimes called "lack of identity") arguing that identity is never a fixed and stable phenomenon, and that it goes through certain changes and transformations in the political and cultural life. Accordingly, the idea that individuals can be defined with a single identity no longer appealed to the taste of these postmodern intellectuals. So, neither primordialism nor post-modernism seems to provide a comprehensive approach and a satisfactory solution for the problems of identity; the ongoing battle between these two approaches leaves an open space for a more tangible approach, perhaps a third model. This third way is expected to strike a balance between the requirements of rationality and the demands of individual and social liberty. I assume that questions and decisions concerning cultural domain can be explained in this novel way through the application of the public choice theory (from now on PCT). And this application can give us insights about cultural actors, their behaviors and the causes and consequences of failures in the domain of culture.

1. Cultural Conflicts

Culture as an anthropological concept is defined as shared meaning, values, symbols and institutions (Ross, 1999). The key term *sharing* in this definition seems to imply an agreement and cooperation among individuals and societies. However, culture is also associated with certain themes that relate to conflict and contention (Laitin &Wildavsky, 1988). Living in the same culture does not necessarily lead to agreement and cooperation on each and every issue; rather, living in a group is in itself a source of conflict because of the *scarce resources*. The conflict of interest in the behavior of individuals and groups in a cultural market, in which individ-

uals exchange cultural goods voluntarily, can be explained through the following two assumptions based on the PCT:

[i] If rational individuals construct their culture and identity to get benefits in cultural market through exchanges, then the cultural conflicts can be explained by their strategic decisions based on rational calculation. [ii] If an existing conflict seems not rational from point of individuals, then the leaders of groups can play a role in the emergence of conflicts to maximize their own utility.

The first assumption implies two points: first, the conflict can be a choice of rational individuals; and second, individuals expect benefits as a result of their choice of conflict. In this respect, conflict is not necessarily a negative event to be dispensed with, but is a source of increasing individual utility such as development, creativity and career. Let us consider a controversial cultural norm that creates conflict among individuals in a society. This cultural norm will lead to ongoing debates, anger, discussion and frustration for a long period of time. Even in these undesirable situations, people can calculate and choose freely to involve in conflict by valuing the process and its consequences. They may consider the conflict as unavoidable and take advantage of it by gaining conflict solution skills that would equip them better for future conflicts. Truly, this is not an easily acceptable assessment for cultural conflicts.

Contrary to this assessment, some essentialist theories interpret cultural conflicts as deviation from the established and shared norms. These theories assume a set of fixed number of essential characteristics for a culture. This sort of analysis perceives diverse elements in a culture as a risk and considers them substandard. From this point of view, identity is developed through an opposite and interactive relationship between the "self" and the "other." This means that we build our identity by excluding the characteristics that do not belong to us. As it has been pointed out by an author "ethnic, racial and religious classifications can be used to provide material benefits to those who are included and materially injure those who are excluded" (Grafstein, 1999:48). This essentialist perspective, however, cannot go further than that, and offers some non-rational reasons for explanation of conflicts such as similarities and differences. Respectively, it presumes that individuals are just passive creatures behav-

ing in accordance with their given identity and culture by cooperating with persons who have similar characteristics and defecting from those who have a different culture (Hechter, 1996). After dividing people according to their similarities and differences, the essentialist perspective add fear, bias and prejudices to enhance group solidarity. Then the people are convinced that conflicts are based on such non-rational reasons. It is obvious that there are two explicit disadvantages of this perspective: first, it is not able to explain changes in a culture; and second, it fails to predict accurately cultural behaviors of rational individuals over time.

Unlike the essentialist theories, the application of the PCT may offer a new approach to understand how and in what sense cultural groups cooperate, get into conflicts and resolve their conflicts. In other words, I argue that in cultural markets, which is the area is based on voluntary exchange among individuals to increase their benefits, people prefer to be in conflict both for material goods and for abstract or symbolic gains. People as rational and goal-oriented individuals can engage in and even promote conflicts to maximize their utility through establishing new cultural processes and rules.

In the case of immigration, for example, the identity of immigrants becomes an issue of conflict and confrontation in the host country. This conflict is usually accepted as inevitable and irreconcilable, since it is believed that as long as the different characteristics are retained they would stimulate further conflicts. However, those who are involved in immigration-related conflicts calculate their present cost and benefits by comparing their current circumstances with future opportunities. For example, while residents welcome immigrants as cheap labor, they hold exclusive the high level administrative positions for themselves. Since the citizens do not want to lose their privileges, they prevent minorities from governmental positions. They take advantage of immigrants to obtain more benefits and fiscal surplus but at the same time they think the immigrants already receive more benefits than they deserve. Furthermore, while they calculate the value of high skilled immigrants with respect to whether they are single or married, male or female, young or old and their impact on their countries' wealth, they enjoy social and cultural contributions of immigrants from cuisine to arts. These calculations show that the

residents face two options: either they accept immigrants because of the advantages or refuse them depriving themselves from cheap skilled labor and other benefits that the immigrants can bring.

Similar to the residents, the immigrants face two options and make their choice on the basis of cost-benefit calculation. Either they stay in the host country to get more benefits by accepting the status of minority or return to their country and live as members of the majority with lower life standards. Therefore both sides, residents and immigrants, can decide which option is more rational for them as shown in the following matrix:

		Resident	
		Using Public Services	Not-using Public Services
Immigrant	Using Public Services	2,-2	5,-5
	Not-using Public Services	-7,7	0,0

Figure 1: Immigration as Zero-Sum Game

I construct the matrix as in the form of a zero-sum game, that is, the total amount of the two players is equal to zero. When immigrants get 2, residents will get -2; or when immigrants get 7, residents will get -7. Residents consider the gain of immigrants as their own loss. The matrix shows that if two sides do not use public services, they will get 0; if immigrants do not use public service, they will be worse, -7, and the residents will get 7.

If immigrants have a chance to get higher level jobs, for example, residents would consider them as taking opportunities away from them. If immigrants are unable to contribute to the host country, then residents see immigrants as free-riders. So, immigrants calculate the advantages and disadvantages of living in a new state which is sufficiently generous in terms of public services, job opportunities, legal security and freedom of speech, etc. As long as they work in the host country, they will expect to get shares from national resources which create opportunities for them to pursue their self-interest. Therefore, the first assumption

[i] helps us to see that conflicts can appear as a process in which culture and identity are negotiated and modified by rational individuals who want to maximize their benefits. If the public goods are sufficiently enough for everyone and if both sides know and trust each other, then the conflict will decrease and eventually may even cease to exist. If the culture market becomes imbalanced and lead to *failure*, then the cultural actors would try new ways of distribution and sharing until they feel safe in terms of utilities.

The second assumption [ii] expresses that even if individuals consider conflicts not for their benefit, leaders drag followers to the conflicts to retain their power. Leaders, as rational actors, take the issue of identity and culture as given in conformity with their interests and put stress on cultural differences (Fearon&Laitin, 2003). In certain cases, they encourage people to overcome stereotypes and obtain new identities. Akerlof and Kranton exemplify this tricky situation, "Mohandas Gandhi's Salt March sparked the Indian independence movement and a new national identity. The French Revolution changed subjects into *citizens*. The Russian Revolution turned into *comrades*" (2010). Even if this is the case, how is it possible to provoke and maintain conflicts without support of population?

Incomplete information can be seen as a major factor of their manipulation for conflicts. Leaders take advantage of this situation by breaking out new conflicts between groups to increase their political power. Their strategy is that the more identity and culture issues become contentious, the more followers will believe in the necessity of initiating a conflict. They act "as if they believe that emotional appeals are more powerful than rational ones, especially in periods of war mobilization, when rational self-interest calculations are likely to weight most strongly against contributing to a national goal" (Stern, 2000: 107). In fact, it is easy for the leaders to pursue this strategy, because people generally believe that their leaders do not initiate these conflicts for self-serving purposes and therefore, they are not responsible for them. Furthermore, not only leaders but also individuals may promote their interests by involving in conflicts. These strategies show that conflict sometimes manifest itself as a tactic of leaders or followers. So, the idea that conflicts result from

irrational behaviors of community seems misleading. Rather, leaders usually assess the situation, evaluate available options and then rationally decide for an action that will produce success for their own causes. If that is the case, it follows that there is an exchange relation between leaders and their supporters that as long as individuals obey their leaders they are *culturally* in safe. The rational strategy for people is to follow their leader. If the leader wants to be in a conflict with a certain cultural group, then the rational choice for people is to involve in it by obeying their leader. If the rational option for leaders is to promote peaceful relations with different entities concerning the identity issues, then, as convinced by their leaders, people will choose to be in peaceful relations with these entities.

This argument seems helpful in terms of drawing attention to the leaders as rational actors but it does not clarify how a criterion can be formulated to separate leaders from followers. Furthermore, the exchange between leaders and followers seem to imply that there is a distinction between leaders and ordinary individuals; as if while ordinary individuals possess bounded rationality, the leaders are fully or strategically rational. Due to the fact that there is no such distinction in the rational choice models, some argues that the leaders are not different because of their supposedly superior cognitive capacities compared to those of ordinary people. Rather, they live, as a small number of actors, in spheres that involve novel situations and they have exceptionally great incentives to be well-informed and to behave strategically. However, previous explanations sound as if followers support their leaders, whatever requires, passively and unquestionably. To avoid this risk, the more moderate explanation of exchange between leaders and followers would be like: since individuals prioritize rationally their own interests, they will not easily go after the interests of the leaders, unless they are dissatisfied with the present situation that is disadvantageous for them. First, they should be unhappy about the present situation that is not optimal for them. Otherwise, as long as the costs of the conflict appear very high, they will not risk all their gains. If they believe that cooperation is better than conflict in terms of getting more benefits, then they will adopt new norms and rules concerning their identity and culture.

This shows that the conflict processes on cultural norms can be ana-

lyzed as choices of rational individuals. This idea opens a venue towards understanding cultural domain as rational, contrary to traditional theories. While conflicts, according to previous theories, are mostly understood in terms of tension, war and hostility, the PCT interprets them as social opportunities and strategies of rational individuals to reach a compromise and agreement in culture market.

2. Instrumentalization of Culture through Multiculturalism

Similar to the cultural conflicts, the policy of multiculturalism can be understood by utility maximization of cultural actors. Two different policies deserve to be labeled as failure of cultural actors. One policy is based on the monotype or homogeneous cultural model and the other is on the multiple or multicultural model. The first model assumes that there is a single dominant culture in society that consolidates its existence with its members and their similarities. Until recent years, states have developed the first monotype or homogenous culture model along with the areas of activity such as creation of welfare state, equal distribution of wealth and social and political security. The idea of welfare state predicts that if the prosperity spreads all over the society, then any difference of opinions regarding identities will decrease. The goal has been to ensure the integration of individuals into a national and unique identity to make it easier to rule them. This is assumed as a viable strategy for the interests of political actors and for the interests of the majority as well. Baumann describes this strategy as super-ethnic which takes almost mystical and religious character (1999: 39). So, modern nations have rejected multiple identities and cultural divisions to impose a dominant concept of ethnicity on all parts of the society. According to Baumann, this strategy failed because while the states imposed a single cultural identity or legitimized a single cultural group, usually legitimatizing the dominant majority, they excluded other groups and identities. And those who are excluded find marginalization as a way of surviving. This failed strategy burdens on nations to find new strategies to keep people together, particularly those who have different identities or those whose identities are sensitive to the changing times.

Recent times witness the development of multiple and multicultural

models as the second model for nations. Over the last decades, states that consist of various ethnic, social and cultural groups are encouraged to redesign their cultural policies to embrace and integrate diverse groups. Moreover, they began to give financial assistance to the underprivileged groups in order to protect their identity and cultural rights. Why?

The PCT again can help us to see the rationale behind these policies and shed light to the utility maximization of policy makers who follow this strategy. As rational actors, policy makers provide financial assistance to certain cultural and ethnic groups in order to keep them in a way that they were before, i.e., pro-social and law abiding. While they maintain to provide on-going support for the majority to expand their territory, they strategically support other cultural groups to exclude them from majority and weaken their positions in the society. This can be called *policy of divide and rule* with significant repercussions in the cultural domain. Through financial support, the policy makers can decide which cultural element is worth of promoting. Due to financial incentives, therefore, the minority groups would politically be controlled and they would be permitted to live in ghetto with their approved culture and identity. This, of course, redesigns the cultural features of the minorities and transforms them into easily manageable groups, and it does it in a disguised way without much notice from the rest of the society.

The individuals who have different identities from majority also have some tactics to gain benefits in the exchange with states. For example, a person who is a member of minority knows that if she wants to live a wealthy and easy life, she must be a part of majority. Although in some cases she may chose to remain as a member of the minority group whatever it takes, she may also prefer to be loyal to both minority and majority, depending on her political and financial interests. By adopting two cultural identities, she can both benefit from career opportunities, power and security as a part of majority and she can continue to identify herself with the minority to keep relations with her inner circle. It seems that if there is a balance, this exchange relation is continual.

One consequence of this strategy is an exchange process between states and individuals. Since governments must get the support of voters in elections in order to survive and enlarge, they are forced to compro-

mise about welcoming the votes of different identity groups and cultures, even if unwillingly. Thus the electoral process becomes a market in which everyone, regardless of their culture, ancestry and ethnicity, has an opportunity to live as long as they vote for continuation of the present political structures and contribution to general budget. Otherwise, it would be challenging to keep every different identity together and to ensure their continuation to vote for the system. Baumann's statement supports this fact: "the world order of nation-states would have collapsed long ago, had not state elites bought off the poor and the minorities" (1999:32).

Intriguingly, however, political actors give supports and some privileges to different identities that are outside the majority not in bulk but in pieces. The application of the PCT gives a reason for this behavior that states need to make individuals dependent and integrated so that governments and individuals interact in the long run. This can be called a strategy of multiculturalism or remote controlling. This strategy has been developed in order to increase the power of inclusiveness of the states, implying the official recognition and acceptance of different identities and cultures and their rights. However, one of the disadvantages of this strategy is that it accepts only those identities which have been approved by the governments. So this also brings a limitation on present identities and cultures. Second, the strategy regards culture and identity as stable and permanent entities. These two suppositions cause to separate minorities from majority permanently in terms of their allegedly characteristics and capabilities (Kymlicka, 2002:352). Moreover, this strategy by imposing a certain lifestyle for future generations interferes with their choices and hinders the natural and voluntary changes. In this way, while a certain minority forgoes the advantages of majority to have some cultural, social and economic rights on the grounds of keeping their own identity, in return, they risk becoming a restrictive and immobilized community which is ready for manipulation and subversion (Taylor, 1992). In that sense, multiculturalism is promoted by nations for political and economic reasons. This supports our previous assumption that cultures and identities are subject to rational evaluation, or cost and benefit calculation in the culture market in which the actors compete with each other to maximize their benefits and to minimize their costs.

3. Government Intervention and Free-Riding

Government intervention and free-riding are seen as main causes of failures not only in the political and economic domain but also in cultural domain. It is true that government plays a considerable role in producing and providing cultural goods that are suitable for national goals through which language, identity, and attitudes are formulated and produced. The main motivation behind this is that private market cannot produce cultural common goods appropriately and cheaply in a way available to all members of the nation. However, who knows what is worthy to spend on what? The challenge is to find out legitimate reasons with which governments fund and support some specific aspects of a culture while leaving others. Culture, in that sense, can be instrumentalized in a similar way to other common goods such as hospitals or roads. Interestingly enough, the intervention of government to cultural market is not unilateral. Individuals ask for government intervention to enjoy more cultural products for free, since traditional cultural elements are not beneficial in terms of economic return. This automatically leads to a situation in which governments will expand their area of activity by growing constantly for the sake of allegedly common cultural goods. The individuals, on the other hand, as long as they benefit from the common good, they continue to be part of the audience who benefit from them until the imbalance in the market; otherwise they will choose to adapt themselves to a new culture and identity by starting new exchange processes.

So, it is not a surprise that when culture is seen as common good, the problems of government intervention and of free rider will readily follow. If there are some activities conducted with the aim of common good by governments for free or subsidized, then some people may prefer to benefit from them without paying. But free-rider problem in culture market poses an extra challenge for our application, because there are some counter-examples implying that the free-rider problem is not applicable in cultural domain. For example, if someone visits a public exhibition, even if she does not support art or pay taxes, nothing will reduce the value of the work of art in that exhibition. However, there are still some cases that clearly show that free-rider is indeed a problem for cultural behaviors. Consider, for example, if someone belongs to a minority, does

she willingly contribute to the cultural activities of majority? Even she enjoys living in a foreign country by benefitting from the level of welfare and security, she may object to contributing the majority's cultural activities financed by governments. Some empirical studies indicate that people in more ethnically homogenous communities make larger contributions to public goods, especially for education, than those in more diverse communities. Therefore heterogeneity can be problematic "because people with low levels of participation have an incentive to be free-rider with high average levels of participation" (Iannaccone, 1992). If numbers of free-riders are increasing, then the group will set up another norm to reduce the number of free-riders. However, there is a risk that an increase in the number of free-riders can force other members of the group to go for solo, assuming cooperation and coordination will not be successful. If the coordination problems increasingly arise in different cases, this will lead disintegration of the cultural group. Let us analyze this conclusion in the following matrix:

Player 2	**Player 1**		
		Contribute	Cheat
	Contribute	10,10	5,15
	Cheat	15,5	0,0

Figure 2: Free-Ride in Cultural Domain

In two player free-riding problem, if both players cheat, then each will get 0. If they cooperate, each will get 10. If one of the players cooperates and other cheats, then cooperator will get 5 and cheater will get 15. In the social group context, as long as cheater hides herself, she can continue to live without contribution. This is the classical account for free-riding by choice theories. However, when other people notice the cheating, then she has to face being "punished by social exclusion" (Chiotis, 2015). Exclusion from a cultural group might be costly for an individual. This means that interaction with other people can affect the decision to be free-rider or not. Consequently, cultural actors as rational individuals may choose to be a free rider similar to what happens in the economic and political domain by contributing to cultural failure. This failure is resulted from government intervention to cultural market. As long as

governments support and subsidize cultural domain, they want to ensure unquestioned acceptance of all governmental policies regarding culture and identity.

Conclusion

The economic and political exchange that takes place among individuals in a society with the aim of utility maximization can be analogous to the cultural exchange and cultural failures that takes place among individuals, groups and political constituencies in the field of culture. Although cultural behaviors are described as irrational by some on the ground that they cannot be related to utility maximization purely, they are nevertheless subject to rational evaluation and calculation. Assuming that people are rational and self-interested in matters of decision-making, the PCT can show us that individuals follow a similar pattern of behavior in cultural area as well. Reflecting upon cultural failures, which include conflicts, discussions, debates from the perspective of the PCT, helps us to evaluate the impact and scope of instrumental rationality for all cultural actors.

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Öz: Bu makalede kültürel başarısızlıkları irrasyonel ve hatta patolojik olarak gören ilkçi ve özcü teorilerin aksine bu başarısızlıkları rasyonel bireylerin tercihleri olarak analiz etmenin mümkün olduğunu tartışacağım. Kamu tercihi teorisinin kültüre uygulanması, başarısızlıkları, araçsal rasyonalite sürecinin bir parçası olarak görmeye olanak sağlar –ki bu süreçte bireyler kendi çıkarlarını maksimize etmekle ve tarafları yeni kültürel normlar üzerinde işbirliğine ve tavizde bulunmaya iten çatışma durumlarıyla ilgilidirler. Bu uygulama, kültürel aktörlerin bazı davranışlarını kamu tercihi teorisi temelinde açıklamak üzere kültürel başarısızlık olarak adlandırılabilecek yeni bir kavramın ortaya atılmasına da imkan verir. Bu kavramı zihnimizde tutarak aşağıdaki başlıklar altında bireylerin, liderlerin, grup ve hükümetlerin davranışları ve birbirleriyle olan karşılıklı etkileşimleri üzerinde duracağım: Kültürel çatışmalar, çok kültürlülük yoluyla kültürün araçsallaştırılması, hükümet müdahalesi ve bedavacılık.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kültürel başarısızlıklar, kamu tercihi teorisi, araçsal rasyonalite, kültürel davranışlar, çatışmalar.