Mirror Images? Three Analyses of Values in England and the United States*

H. WESLEY PERKINS AND JAMES L. SPATES

Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Geneva, New York, U.S.A.

ABSTRACT

In his studies of cultural evolution, Talcott Parsons suggested that, in the modern era, core Western values were essentially unified and stable. This was most particularly the case when considering England and the United States, two societies from the same cultural "stock." But the evidence Parsons used to substantiate his claims was selective and the empirical literature comparing values in England and the United States disagrees as to whether value similarities or differences are predominant. Indeed, some of that literature suggests that value comparisons can take place on at least two different levels, allowing the possibility of simultaneous diversity within unity. Consequently, hypotheses concerning the (1) unity, (2) diversity, and (3) stability of value patterns in these two countries are explored using three distinct cross-national data sets—interviews with a cross-section of adults in two matched urban settings, questionnaire surveys administered to students at colleges and universities, and a content analysis of mass-circulated magazines and counter-culture literature sampled in time periods from 1937 to 1979. Results provide strong support for all three hypotheses and suggest that the empirical variation of values is much more complex than earlier theory supposed.

Introduction

WHAT MAKES SOCIAL ORDER POSSIBLE? The answer, Talcott Parsons claimed (1961), lay in the phenomenon of cultural values—those "conceptions... of the desirable which influence the selection of available modes, means, and ends of action" (Kluckhohn, 1951: 395). While perhaps idiosyncratic to a particular group when originally formulated, the most important values tended to generalize over time and become accepted by more

* The authors would like to thank Wendell Bell, Janet Grigsby, Candace M. Kruttschnitt, Gordon F. Lewis, Michael Mann, Robert V. Robinson, Robert H. Ross, Tracy Spates, and Burton Wright for their essential contributions to the data sets presented in this study. Financial assistance for this research was provided by the National Institute of Mental Health (Grant No. 5-T01-MH12133), the Concilium on International and Area Studies, Yale University, and by Hobart and William Smith Colleges Faculty Research Grants.
people (Parsons, 1966, 1971). Modern western society was a case in point. Although some differences continue to exist among Western publics, Parsons believed that the nations of Western Europe and North America agreed on their fundamental values—a legacy of cultural orientations that originated in ancient Israel and classical Greece. This might be called the unity hypothesis. This thesis was taken further by his suggestion that Western values have been essentially unified and unchanged since the time of the Industrial Revolution—a stability hypothesis. Parsons made his case most strongly when comparing the value profiles of England and the United States (1971: Chs. 5-8). From the 1600's on, he saw the former society as a sort of value exemplar or "lead society," institutionalizing and codifying the Western value system for other nations. With England's decline as a world power, the mantle of "lead society" passed to the United States.

Unfortunately, the evidence Parsons marshalled to support his thesis was woefully inadequate (Spates, 1983: 33-39). His reading of Western history was selective and impressionistic, and, considering the supposed unity of English and American values, the evidence which does exist is ambiguous. For example, Snowman (1977) essentially agreed with Parsons regarding the value unity of the two countries, but Lipset (1963: Chs. 6-7) demurred, characterizing the United States as dominated by egalitarian and achievement values while Britain focused primarily on elitist and ascriptive concerns. Hyman (1953) found Britain more politically tolerant than its North American counterpart. Inkeles' (1960: Tables 10, 12) study of "Industrial Man" provided evidence that value similarities and differences coexisted between the United States and Great Britain. In Almond and Verba's (1963) survey of political values in five countries, the overall political orientations of the U.S. and Britain emerged as extremely similar—indeed, more similar than the political values of either nation were to those other nations in the study (Germany, Italy, Mexico). Nevertheless, Americans were more interested in political "participation" while Britons were more politically "deferential" (Almond and Verba, 1963: 440-69).

Results from more contemporary research provide an equally mixed picture. Using survey data from nine European countries and the United States, Inglehart (1977: 38, Tables 2, 3) found that the U.S. and Britain, despite differences in areas like "specific goals," had essentially similar percentages of people subscribing to "materialism" and "postmaterialism," his two overarching value categories. In a questionnaire study of students in eleven countries, Klineberg et al. (1979: 146, Table 6.5) also turned up value unity and diversity. For example, similar percentages of British and American students diverged from their parents in terms of the importance they accorded money, "communion with nature," and religion; in contrast, respondents in the two countries varied considerably in the importance they accorded success, leisure, and drugs in their lives. Bell and Robinson (1978) and Robinson and Bell (1978) found matched urban samples of adults in each country alike in that egalitarian attitudes appeared in "underdog" populations (nonwhites, those with low prestige, low incomes, or from lower or working class backgrounds).