Ian Stewart, “Vanishing Points: Three Paradoxes of Political Culture Research,” in J. Everitt and B. O’Neill, eds, *Citizen Politics: Research and Theory in Canadian Political Behaviour* (Toronto, 2002)

**Overview**

Paper reviews some of the key conceptual, methodological, and theoretical problems that plague the study of political culture in Canada. Nonetheless, Stewart remains supportive of the sub-field, arguing that it illuminates many of the central features of Cdn politics.

**Background**

Interest in Cdn political culture may well be undergoing a “renaissance” – however, for some, this field has promised more than it delivered. And practicing political culturalists are likely to be bedeviled by three paradoxes:

1. The *nuance paradox*. The more nuanced the understanding of a particular political culture, the less useful that understanding will be in comparative analysis
2. The *anchor paradox*. The more anchored the understanding of a particular political culture, the narrower the explanatory power of that understanding
3. The *acceptance paradox*. The more accepted the understanding of a particular political culture, the more suspicious one should be of that understanding

Conceptual Issues

* While most scholars in the area employ the concept of ‘political culture,’ their understanding of what is meant by the concept varies widely
* Stewart conceptualizes the concept as “a collectivity’s fundamental orientations and assumptions about politics”
* Political culture is an holistic concept – individuals have beliefs, values, and preferences; only collectivities can have culture.
* Ds
* In short, it is most useful to conceptualize political culture as: (1) *an orientational,* but not behavioural, attribute; (2) that subset of culture which focuses on *power and the state*; (3) *holistic* rather than merely aggregate, where necessary; and (4) consisting of *enduring* rather than transitory value attachments

Overview of the debate:

* **Hartz** (1964) attempted to characterize the political culture of all “New World” societies. According to Hartz, the original settlers were not a representative sample of the source population, and thus did not represent the full range of ideological diversity. On the contrary, the founding (European) fragment was unusually homogenous. In the case of New France, that founding fragment was feudal in characteristic, while in British North America, the founding fragment was essentially liberal. The orientations of this first immigrant group congealed into the dominant political culture, and later waves of immigrants either conformed or were marginalized
* **Horowitz** (1968) took issue with the characterization of ideological homogeneity of English Canada (in Hartz’s pan-North American approach) though he was largely supported Hartz’s original analysis. To Horowitz, liberalism has indeed been the dominant thread, but it has had to coexist with minority conservative and socialist strains. The Hartz-Horowitz model has two main virtues: (1) it has sensitized students of political culture to the importance of values brought to this country by founding fragments; and (2) it has called attention to the idiosyncratic cultural complexity of Canada. Not only were there 2 founding fragments, the English fragment was atypically heterogeneous – this throws light on the absence of a definitive national identity, as well as on the willingness of Cdns to tolerate diversity
* Seymour **Lipset** – political cultures are profoundly shaped by “formative events” which can shunt a culture indefinitely onto a different direction. Lipset believes American Revolution is such an event (along with Cdn counter-revolution) – forever dividing the political cultures of these to nations
* **Simeon and Elkins**, meanwhile, sensitized us to the attendant dangers of blurring orientational diversity – using cross-national comparison to show differences in provincial political culture

**Conclusion**

There are particularly distinctive aspects to the study of Cdn political culture, three of which are worthy of note:

1. Neo-Hartzians analysis continues to be in vogue
2. Students of Cdn political culture, following the lead of Simeon and Elkins, remain particularly sensitive to regional subcultures. Region continues to be seen as the most salient political cleavage in Canada – even with the objective erosion of some of these differences, the subjective perception of such differences remains dangerously (and in one sense, erroneously) high.
3. Cdn political culturalists have recently been turning their analytic attention to the impact of institutional change

* Ultimately, political scientists must continue to employ the political culture approach, notwithstanding its conceptual, methodological, and theoretical frustrations
* “Only the most vulgar of materialists believes that culture is completely epiphenomenal, that orientations do not in some measure play an autonomous and determinate role in political affairs”
* Students of political culture must think more deeply about the paradoxes that confound their analyses