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What Do People Really Want?

Timur Kuran's Private Truths, Public Lies

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LOREN E. LOMASKY

It is astounding how many of the most elegant and penetrating theories of political economy grow out of ideas so simple as on first blush to seem prosaic. Adam Smith's Invisible Hand is a metaphorical illustration of the idea that the uncoordinated self-interested activities of a diverse multitude can regularly generate an order that serves the common good. The model of the Prisoner's Dilemma is a sort of obverse, revealing that individuals who act with impeccable rationality can generate outcomes inferior to what would have come about had they all been less rational. Malthus created a stir that has not yet subsided by observing that arithmetic growth in food production does not go at all well with exponential increase in population, and Marx narrates the epic rise and fall of Capital as the inexorable playing out of the destiny of an economic system that dies unless it can continuously feed on surplus value expropriated from labor. Each of these ideas has been the fount of a voluminous literature that has invigorated economic science. It does not, of course, follow that an intellectually

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beautiful and stimulating idea is also true.

Timur Kuran's central insight in *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) is also delightfully simple. People, he reminds us, often have reasons to express preferences they do not genuinely hold. If midway through his dinner party my boss asks me if I'm having a good time, I am apt not to reveal my conviction that the tastelessness of the food is matched only by that of the guests. Rather, I remark with all the sincerity and enthusiasm I am able to muster how delighted I am to be in attendance. If at that party a group of the guests is ruining the low quality of television fare and remarking that they tune in only to Public Broadcasting Service programs, I may choose simply to nod and go along rather than reveal my preference for a broadcast episode of *The Simpsons* or *X-Files* to any number of Masterpiece Theatre episodes. Whether for fear of some setback to one's material prospects or from apprehension about what people might think of one, the gate to the recesses of one's beliefs and attitudes may be kept securely locked.

What one chooses to reveal to others is what Kuran calls a public preference. Public preferences may vary systematically according to the particular public with whom one communicates and how much frankness toward that party is deemed desirable. If a private preference is to be strictly parallel, then it will be what one reveals to oneself. Perhaps because he finds such a notion of self-revelation opaque, Kuran instead defines a person's private preference as "what he would express in the absence of social pressures" (17). Although the force of the contrast will usually be clear enough, this way of expressing it is somewhat defective. First, people sometimes disguise their private preferences for reasons other than social pressure; one may wish to amuse others or to be thought a bold and unconventional fellow or to conceal something for the interlocutor's own good despite not being pressured in any way (except internally) to do so. Second, and more important, one's own private preference structure can incorporate significant ambiguities. I shall say something about the latter point in the concluding paragraphs of this essay.

A divergence between public and private preferences, according to Kuran, constitutes preference falsification. For two main reasons, it tends to be costly. First, normally by expressing a preference one is causally efficacious to a greater or lesser degree in bringing about the object of that preference. If you prefer pancakes to eggs and accurately reveal that preference to the waitress, then it is pancakes you will get. If you vote for holding the company picnic in August rather than June, you increase the probability of an August picnic. Preference falsification thus sacrifices causal efficacy. Second, we often find dissembling distasteful, especially when the need to do

so seems imposed by external circumstance. As anyone who has written a letter to the editor, cheered at a sporting event, or carried on a vociferous bar-stool debate knows, truthful self-expression is itself a consumption good. That too is sacrificed by preference falsification.

Countering these costs is the sobering fact that just as you can affect the world, the world can affect you: Recall the part of the world represented by one's boss and the other guests. Dinner parties are small stuff, but affairs of state exemplify a similar cost structure. In tyrannous regimes one unfortunate instance of allowing a private preference to slip out can result in a trip to the Gulag. In liberal democratic societies consequences are rarely so dire. Nonetheless, there too preference revelation is constrained. Being regarded as someone who holds deviant views typically is costly even when state functionaries do not exact those costs. Moreover, the efficacy benefit of revealing your true preferences over social outcomes will often be close to zero when yours is just one small voice in a chorus of millions of people. (Compare the likelihood that one vote will tip the balance in an American presidential election.)

Some people place great value on expressing their true preferences. They may stand in parks on soapboxes from which they harangue the crowd or spend hours dialing and waiting on hold for a few minutes of exposure on a talk-radio show. More elevated examples are the Christian martyrs who suffered torture and death rather than falsify their preferences concerning the relative merits of Christ and Caesar, or Eastern European dissidents who, prior to 1989, bore extreme hardships for the sake of bearing witness to regime evils. These individuals are exceptions. Most people are neither heroes nor fools and so are amenable to stifling preference expression when the costs of doing otherwise are substantial. Therefore, they will often publicly acquiesce to what is politically fashionable even when they harbor serious qualms.

The preceding remarks may appear so obvious as not to bear repeating. In *Private Truths, Public Lies*, however, Kuran employs these concepts to generate theoretically rich results that are far from obvious. Perhaps the single most significant is that the aspiration of social science to offer robust predictive theories on the model of the hard sciences is apt to be more elusive than practitioners hope. Indeed, it may be impossible in principle. That is not simply because the variables are numerous and complex; much the same can be said about meteorology. Rather, it is because these variables include the preferences of individuals who often have reason to conceal their true direction. Empirical investigators will regularly be stymied because the objects of their attention are approximately as smart and resourceful as they themselves are and very likely have more to lose if unsuccessful in their designs.

It follows, contrary to some formerly dominant and still widely subscribed-to theories in the philosophy of social science, that prediction and explanation are asymmetrical. For many events, especially those of profound historical importance, such as social revolutions, it will be impossible for even the sociologically shrewdest, best informed observer to predict their occurrence until they are actually unfolding, yet after the fact their explanation will be child's play. Despite the best efforts of those who seek its clues, history will remain surprising and fast-breaking until after it has happened.

Viewed from a different angle, this asymmetry may amount not to slip-page by the social sciences from the lofty standards achieved in the hard sciences but rather to rapprochement. Even those of us who understand nothing more of chaos theory than the remarkable hurricane-producing potential of that famous butterfly flapping its wings in the Amazon rain forest have been made aware that deterministic causal models may prove unattainable even in their native precincts. Although Kuran does not borrow directly from chaos theory, some of his models have a similar structure. For example, he elegantly demonstrates in several contexts how micro causes can have macro effects. As in the movie *Network*, one irate man standing up and yelling "I'm mad as hell!" can set off a chain reaction that topples an entire regime. That potential exists because individuals appraise their own preference revelation options by reference to their estimate of the preferences held by others. Someone close to the margin between remaining quiet and speaking up can be pushed over the edge by the evidence this one performance provides. When she adds her denunciation, that may be enough to bring in the third person, and so on until the balance tips from quiescence to revolution. If, however, underlying expressive preferences are slightly altered by making the third person in line just a bit harder to influence, the process dies aborning. There is some absurdity to the idea that momentous turnings of the tide can hinge on such trivial underlying phenomena, and so theorists have resisted drawing such conclusions. The cogency of the model developed here will make it difficult for them to continue to do so.

The persuasiveness of the preference-falsification theory is enhanced by the wealth of illuminating examples. Kuran's remarkable erudition takes him from the world of medieval Islam to the antebellum South to Nicaraguan Sandinismo, with various stops in between. However, the three test cases repeatedly presented in alteration with more theoretical chapters are the abrupt collapse of Communist regimes across Eastern Europe during the wonder year 1989, the persistence over many centuries of the Indian caste system, and the scarcity of open opposition in the United States to affirmative action, despite considerable private unease with a system of preferences and quotas. While these treatments are not equally successful, the fact that

one theory can help resolve conundrums over so wide a range of phenomena attests to its richness and power.

Kuran is on firmest ground in dealing with the anti-Communist revolution. I know of no other analysis that simultaneously so well explains why the revolutions took by surprise not only area specialists but also their primary instigators such as Václav Havel; why cautious, tentative initial demonstrations of protest by a daring few so quickly snowballed into almost universal open opposition; why hard-nosed authoritarians who had not previously shown themselves to be overburdened with humanitarian compunctions meekly acquiesced on this occasion to their own overthrow; how the outpouring of opposition to the regimes significantly affected individuals' private political preferences; and other facts, too. The explanation by way of progressively unveiled preferences may receive useful supplementation, but I do not think it will be supplanted.

Kuran's discussion of the stability of the caste system contains less abundance of detail but contributes another important theme: the victims of a system may themselves be induced to support it publicly and to turn on its detractors in order to represent themselves as ardent exponents of the regnant orthodoxy. Kuran downplays alternative accounts of the buttressing of caste such as belief in the doctrine of karma, which holds that one's station in this life is a function of desert accrued during prior incarnations and that how well one bears up under the constraints of the current station will determine one's position in a future life. Kuran indicates that he believes the doctrine was designed to serve as an opiate of the masses, but in this he may fail to take seriously enough the independent power of ideas. After all, it is not only within Hindu theology that we observe an attempt to offer some justifying account of the vagaries of a fortune that sets some men up high and drags others low. Job, for instance, was not an untouchable. Dynamics of social exploitation duly noted, there seems in addition to be some well-nigh irresistible need on the part of human beings of all ranks to understand their world as morally making sense. Perhaps in this case, then, private and public preferences are more congruent than Kuran wishes to allow. Nonetheless, it is hard to deny that preference falsification plays some role, perhaps a dominant one, in the persistence of caste.

Despite the analytical gems contained in these two treatments, I would be very surprised if the third does not attract the lion's share of response. Many commentators will dispute Kuran's claims that criticisms of affirmative action are relatively scarce and that deleterious reputational effects attach to overt expressions of opposition to the doctrine. Perhaps Kuran's prolonged exposure to the norms of the academic environment (not to mention those of hip Los Angeles) has led him to overstate the public hegemony of affirmative action. This observation may, though, be less a genuine bone of conten-

tion than a matter of timing. Like many authors before him who have written on topical concerns, Kuran has been overtaken by the rush of events. If affirmative action was once sacrosanct, it surely is no longer. As I compose this review, the Republican Party is gathering in solemn assembly to nominate Bob Dole for the presidency and to furnish him with a platform that takes affirmative action severely to task. Simultaneously, the state of California is gearing up for a citizen's referendum on the question of dismantling policies of racial preference within its borders. This rising wave of anti-affirmative action sentiment is, of course, entirely consistent with and, indeed, supports Kuran's theory of the sudden unraveling of ingrained habits of preference falsification.

There will be time enough to see whether, like communism, affirmative action implodes under the weight of the falsifications it engenders. I wish to turn instead to a different issue suggested by the affirmative action discussion: whether Kuran's understanding of the nature of private preferences is too monolithic. In an interesting discussion of the preferences of black elites (elected public officials and officers of civil rights organizations) versus those of common citizens, Kuran cites confidential opinion polls that show sharp divisions over affirmative action policies and related issues. He then observes, "Yet black public opinion remains highly supportive of the national black leadership.... Fear-induced preference falsification explains the paucity of public black opposition. However, it leaves unexplained why orthodox black leaders repeatedly win elections decided by secret ballot" (151). Perhaps because he perceives the potential for significant embarrassment to his theory, Kuran offers four possible explanations. Even cumulatively they carry little conviction. For example, he concludes his response by offering, "Finally and perhaps most significant, because almost all candidates for high office in major civil rights organizations and in heavily black districts support the conventional black agenda, voters rarely get much of a choice on affirmative action" (151-52). But this simply begs the question. Why are choices so restricted? If latent opposition to elite ideology is widespread, what accounts for the market failure in the political domain? Why don't entrepreneurial vote-harvesters emerge to take up the opportunity to offer citizens a broader range of alternatives, thereby serving their own interests?

I believe that the problem is largely insoluble within the framework to which Kuran restricts himself. To get beyond it we need to recognize that private preferences do not come in just one flavor. Rather, they are multifarious; they differ with regard to the conditions that bring one or another to the fore; not infrequently they clash among themselves. Perhaps the simplest example of private preferences jostling is the philosopher's venerable phenomenon of *akrasia*, "weakness of will." When I vow to myself that I

shall eat with moderation at the dinner party and then later find myself unable to resist consuming the sixth éclair, my preferences are at odds with themselves: not private versus public preference but a conflict within the private realm. I desire both to dine sparingly and to eat until I cannot swallow another bite. Similar predicaments include the tobacco addict who desperately wants to quit but lights up over and over again; the endlessly postponed trip to the dentist; the person who tells herself she will start a program of regular savings “any day now.”

Kuran is an economist by training, and economists do not like *akrasia*. It upsets what would otherwise be perspicuous and simple models of rational decision making. So instead of attempting to explain it, they prefer to explain it away. For example, the éclair windfall will be reinterpreted not as conflicting preferences but as changing desires; early in the day I wish not to eat lots of éclairs but later in the day I do wish to eat them. For various reasons, this attempt to maintain the tidiness of the theory of preference fails: a chief obstacle is that even as the person gives way to desire, she can be fully aware that she is acting counterpreferentially. This happens if someone prefers X to Y but also prefers that her preference ordering were Y over X. The conflict involves desires operating at different levels: ground-floor desires, desires about which desires one will have, perhaps even additional levels.

This sort of complexity within an individual's volitional makeup is fairly familiar in a literature going back at least to Plato. Let me introduce another, slightly different in form and perhaps more relevant to the puzzle raised about the private preferences of ordinary black citizens. Sometimes people believe they ought to act in a certain way but fail to do so because the costs are high. Suppose, for example, that you have been brought up to believe that someone who is relatively affluent is morally obligated to devote an appreciable amount of income to charitable relief of the poor. You may, nonetheless, undertake little poor relief. You make the decision because the opportunity costs are high: every \$100 you donate to a worthwhile beneficiary is \$100 of personal consumption forgone. If, however, you could supply \$100 worth of relief at a cost to you of \$10 or \$1, then you would provide much more of it. Your public performances would then come much more into line with your private moral preference.

Tax deductibility is one way in which the costs of charitable giving are diminished, thus promoting more of it. Another way in which the private and public are rendered less dissonant is by substituting lower-cost expressive acts for higher-cost performances. Whereas giving \$100 to the poor will cost me \$100—or at least \$50 even after taxes—to speak in favor of assistance to the poor or to vote for a policy or candidate promoting poor relief is very cheap. Sometimes such expressive acts are meant to mollify observers.

When that is the case, Kuran's dichotomy between private and public preferences suffices. But sometimes the primary audience for these symbolic affirmations is oneself. To the extent that individuals are rational, if they have a choice between strategies for relieving unpleasant cognitive dissonance, they will choose the least costly one.

A further example may help clarify the point. Many Jews believe that observing the traditional food prohibitions and complying with Sabbath rest requirements are important components of being a good Jew. Yet someone who positively values that status may be almost entirely unobservant. The reason, of course, is that observance is costly: it is paid in ham sandwiches, shrimp cocktails, and Saturday morning golf games forgone. The tension between preference and cost has created an ongoing dilemma for modern-era Jews. In the Conservative Judaism movement a sort of compromise has been achieved. Only a very small minority of regular congregation members abide by the strictures of the religious law; the vast majority dine and disport themselves unconstrained by Talmudic sanctions. However, almost without exception they demand and receive strict patterns of observance from the rabbis they hire. Why? The most plausible explanation I can come up with involves clashing private preferences. These Jews approve of living observantly but also prefer eating the forbidden foods to not eating them: ergo, conflict. This is resolved by a strategy of compartmentalization. The former desire is given effect in their specifically synagogue-related behavior through vicarious association with and endorsement of the rabbi's mode of life, the latter in their secular activity.

I am inclined to account in a similar fashion for the behavior of ordinary black citizens who vote for representatives considerably more radical than they themselves. On the one hand they prefer low-temperature, moderate racial responses, perhaps because they themselves are then less likely to be burned. On the other hand, they harbor genuine grievances against blatant acts of bigotry they and their ancestors have experienced. Thus they are motivated to support incendiary members of their community who denounce past injustices and demand radical compensatory measures. Both peacefully getting by and boldly striking back are valued; the two conflict, however. Because, as noted earlier, voting is typically a low-cost activity, it is not surprising that the conflict is resolved by indulging one of the preferences through one's vote and the other in the non-electoral arenas of private activity.

Note that to identify an individual's private preferences as being in conflict among themselves is not to label him a hypocrite or dissembler. The person who says he desires not to eat many eclairs (or ham sandwiches) or that he believes he ought to make large gifts to the poor is truthfully expressing genuine values. In this respect conflict among private preferences

differs from opposed private and public preferences. But as with that other conflict, how one overtly expresses oneself will be a function of the cost schedules one faces in different settings. The cost of giving effect to the preference not to eat eclairs is highest when eclairs are actually present; the cost of acting on the preference to strike back at white oppression is lowest when one is voting for representatives. Therefore, if we are to advance further in explaining social phenomena in terms of manifestations of underlying preferences, we will need to supplement Kuran's private/public dichotomy by acknowledging an inner complexity in the range of private preferences and by attempting systematically to spell out the sorts of conditions under which these different species of private preference will regularly come to the fore.

That, though, is a task for further stages of the research program launched in this book. Adam Smith had the first word on the Invisible Hand, but he certainly did not have the last, or the most comprehensive. And, heaven knows, the history of the past century would have been far less sanguinary if the theory of Marxism had ended with Marx's own writings. Like these predecessors, Kuran has contrived a fascinating motif on which to construct a theoretical base. To say that it merits an extended life beyond this volume is not in any way to disparage the achievement of *Private Truths, Public Lies*. Few recent contributions to the literature of social science open so many windows. This engagingly written book carries its learning and sophistication lightly; one need not be a specialist to enjoy it and receive instruction. I am pleased to have this opportunity publicly to endorse it—and if someone reading these words should wonder if they correspond with my private sentiments, well, that is a further testimonial to the stimulation this book affords.