

Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, *Reinventing Political Culture. The Power of Culture Versus the Culture of Power*. Cambridge; Malden MA: Polity Press, 2012.

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In *Reinventing Political Culture* Jeffrey Goldfarb discusses contemporary cases of political power interlinked and mediated through seemingly powerless culture. His point of departure is Tocqueville's contradiction which he challenges—the classic French writer saw a rift between egalitarian politics and hierarchical culture. Instead, Goldfarb describes instances where politics and culture meet to provoke social change from below. His main focus is laid on the transient, subtle elements in everyday cultural practices which lead to the undermining of existing official relations between politics and culture—as they have been described by such authors as Weber, Marx or Foucault. The processes Goldfarb analyzes show that profound changes in relations between politics and culture can, and often do, start on the grassroots level, the margins of political influence.

In his argument, the author focuses on a number of cases in different locations: the Soviet Bloc before 1989, contemporary United States, as well as Israel and Palestine. In each of them main emphasis is put on the tensions between official power and everyday practices. Changes in society, at times profound, which Goldfarb points at often appear to be the result of such tensions. Three of them seem particularly luminous: the idea of “living in truth” in the Communist bloc, Palestinian car service at the Israeli-Palestinian checkpoint, and Barack Obama's style of discussion in American politics.

In the first case the author writes about a political, and in fact existential, strategy adopted by a number of dissidents in Communist countries in Central-Eastern Europe, which allowed them to maintain a sense of freedom in societies controlled and manipulated by state newspeak. The idea of living in truth and the choice to disregard state control in their own work allowed dissident intellectuals to maintain some form of intellectual freedom of thought. On the other hand, Goldfarb stresses that for people to know how to act in the Communist reality, official newspeak had to be made legible by the public, i.e. read between the lines and “translated” into unofficial language.

In the second case, one of the examples Goldfarb discusses is that of an informal Palestinian transportation service system, which allows people to move faster between Palestinian and Israeli territories. While some Palestinians accuse the drivers

of collaboration with Israeli soldiers and thus treason, the author analyzes the story of a Palestinian driver who refused to follow Israeli soldiers' instructions. His refusal was a risky act of courage; the driver did not have to obey the soldiers but doing so made his trade easier. Since the driver used to pass the instructions to all cars providing the same service at the checkpoint, other drivers were also affected by this particular individual's sudden resistance. The refusal proved bad for business but gave him back a sense of subjectivity, of responsibility for his actions.

The retelling of American history by Barack Obama is still another case in which Goldfarb discusses politics interlinked with culture. The author discusses the American president's speech style as an art form, which among other things is used to redefine both the notion of the "American dream" and the contemporary discourse of race, in which Obama is both a change-maker and an example of this very change. Using Arendt's notion that in politics means are the ends, Goldfarb points at how this has been the case in the discourse set by Barack Obama—from inspiring the creation of a movement of sympathizers on the internet who turned into activists campaigning for Obama's vision of change, to the reaction of the political right, such as the emergence of the grass-roots Tea Party movement or the increasing anti-liberal bias of Fox News.

The examples analyzed by Goldfarb, although differing in their locations and cultures, share some common traits. One of them is language as a trigger for action: while it seems most obvious in the case of American politics—words which lead to the creation of laws seem to be politics' main currency—nonetheless strong emphasis is also put on language as an unrestricted medium in the Communist dissidents' reality of "living in truth;" in the case of the Palestinian driver following and later disobeying instructions also take place in the realm of language before they become actions. Reinterpretations of reality, persuasion or dissent all take place first of all in the realm of language and, what's more, they all have the potential of turning into material actions.

Another shared characteristic is the sense of necessity which leads to new interpretations of reality, that is a notion that existing descriptions of the world no longer fit. Whether it is entirely fake official newspeak, a language of military force, or a political vision which does not match the everyday struggles of the citizens, at a certain point it proves unbearable to such an extent that it provokes reaction. In *Reinventing Political Culture* Goldfarb does not present a formula which would indicate how much oppression is necessary to incite acts of resistance, but what he does show are close analyses of different contextual elements which lead to challenging the set realities.

On the other hand, Goldfarb treats *culture* very broadly. It allows him to discuss different acts of resistance in diverse cultural and political settings; it also enables him to put emphasis on the key role of language and actions that follow as tools of *politics*. While this approach may lead to a better general understanding of change in politics, the issue of local cultures, which take part in it—including such aspects as tradition or attitude towards authorities—remains ambiguous. Goldfarb challenges Tocqueville by inverting the contradiction: in his book it is rather hierarchic politics

and egalitarian culture. Through reinterpretations of political, i.e. power, hierarchies, actions taken within the existing realms of culture influence political change. In this view, *culture* does not relate so much to ideas of civilization or education which Tocqueville could have had in mind; rather it comes closer to everyday practices, customs and habits, based on conventional interpretations of traditions, popular history and the contemporary world. In some cases they are made by educated intellectuals, and in others by car drivers. The question is whether change in politics triggered by culture has to be necessarily for the better—particularly today one can think of places where this question still waits to be answered. Nonetheless, in *Reinventing Political Culture* Goldfarb points at instances which show the success, even if only partial, of such transformations.

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Helena Chmielewska-Szljajfer
Institute of Applied Social Sciences, University of Warsaw
New School for Social Research, New York
E-mail: chmih272@newschool.edu