

Reviews

TIMUR KURAN. *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995
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About two years ago I joined a small E-mail discussion group made up of friends to share candid exchanges on politics, economics, philosophy and general information about the academic community and current affairs. For about a year the conversation on this list was basically restricted publicly to the group of friends and a few additions of individuals well-known to this group. During this time, unbeknown to some, many others joined the list though did not contribute to the conversation. Because newsgroups are a relatively new phenomena, the norms governing conversation were unclear. On this group, because most of the members likely knew the others, the conversation was often spirited and at times alternated between tongue-in-cheek and deadly serious. In other words, it was assumed that the conversations were “public” private exchanges among confidants.

This all changed one day when it was revealed that the posts were being archived. Now, one realized, the exchanges did not have the fleeting history of public life that was the core assumption to the conversation, but were part of an accessible public record. This fact was brought home in a very direct manner when one who had recently joined the group produced a critique of the discussion by referencing in detail to posts that had been made over the past year. A debate followed on how E-mail posts to the discussion group should be treated. In the language of Timur Kuran’s wonderful book, *Private Truths, Public Lies*, people were concerned with whether their reputational utility would be undermined by their intrinsic utility. When the group was intimate, individuals felt safe to express their private preferences (intrinsic utility), but when it became common knowledge that many were following the discussion and thus the list had become a public forum, it was then obvious that an individual’s reputation was at stake (reputational utility). And these concerns were expressed over an E-mail list devoted to the discussion of primarily academic ideas, not socially controversial ideas such as one’s opinion on affirmative action or one’s true assessment of their colleagues. Just imagine how antsy one can get when the conversation touches upon issues related to our deep beliefs on race, gender, sexual practice, political affiliation, religious conviction, etc.

This conflict between what we believe and what we reveal has profound implications at both the individual and collective choice level. Conflict is not always bad. The TV show *Seinfeld* demonstrated in one episode the rather hilarious discomfort that emerges when someone always reveals exactly what they believe (in this case the character Kramer just blurted out his opinion about the necessity of George’s female friend to get a nose job). Social norms that teach us to hold our tongue promote civil society. The taming of passions is a vital component of social cooperation. But Kuran’s book, while certainly cognizant of this aspect of preference falsification, is mainly focused on the “dark side” of

the divergence between our beliefs and our public affirmations. Communities in which the public space is restricted in a manner that discourages the expression of private beliefs can be subjected to sudden and unpredictable change. Even in such environments we know that some individuals, in fact, will risk life and limb to express their private beliefs in public forums (expressive utility). It is the play between our intrinsic, reputational, and expressive utility (and the social rules of the game within which this play occurs) that forms the basis of Kuran's model. In social intercourse we face the trade-off "between openness and concealment, between self-assertion and social accommodation, between maintaining your integrity and protecting your image" [p. 4].

In this model it is often rational for us to withhold our true beliefs because the loss in reputational utility is too great. But because our reputational utility is a function of what we believe other people believe about the subject, the discrepancy between our private beliefs and our public statements can be swept away in an instant should our perception of others' beliefs change. When there are certain tipping points in public opinion, what was once thought unthinkable becomes thinkable—witness the revolutions of 1989 throughout Eastern Europe (a subject to which Kuran pays particular attention). Kuran does not just postulate a rational calculus where the agent weighs the costs and benefits (rendered in terms of intrinsic, reputational, and expressive utility) against given constraints. He models this balancing act as one where the social environment feeds back to affect one's utility function. Choices, in other words, are a function of social conditions, including pressures felt from other people. Kuran's is a welcome modification to the standard rational-choice model. The payoff of this modeling strategy by Kuran is that it allows him to analyze knowledge dissemination, and its role in both social upheaval and social stasis, in a rigorous manner.

Ideas, for example, that are considered "unthinkable" may become "unthought" as social pressure forces into exile these private opinions. As Kuran puts it: "An unthinkable belief is a thought that one cannot admit having, or even characterize as worth entertaining, without raising doubts about one's civility, morality, loyalty, practicality, or sanity. An unthought belief is an idea that is not even entertained" [p. 176]. At this point one would move from "living a lie" to a more stable equilibrium of "collective conservatism". In developing this idea, Kuran contributes significantly to our understanding of the transmission of ideology in a society and its impact on the underlying political-economic structure *and* the individual reality of participants within that structure. Kuran analyzes both the structure of rules and the strategies developed within any given set of rules. But he also shows why some strategies are not even on the menu of choice under some circumstances. It is not just that people are prudent in their decisions to reveal their true beliefs and choice of strategies in the game of life. Rather, the way they perceive the game of life, and the beliefs they adhere to, affect what they consider to be prudent. Human beings are calculating, and creatures of habit—rule makers and rule followers; the social oppressors and the socially repressed. Kuran's multidimensional model of human action enables the reader to see how the conflict between private beliefs and social acceptance, and the internal battle between private beliefs, shape the manner of our interactions in the various arenas of everyday life. In doing so he establishes not only why revolutions are unpredictable (and will remain so), but also why certain structures may persist even when they could be judged as undesirable.

Kuran pushes our understanding of the resistance to reform beyond either straight interest

group explanations or those based on the use of the threat of force by political authorities. Surely both explanations from power and explanations from narrow self-interest account for the resistance to reform in undesirable political-social-economic regimes. But a theory of institutional *acceptance* and change is required if we hope to illuminate social processes. Kuran opens our eyes to the way that social pressures feedback on the individuals utility function to influence beliefs, and then shows how beliefs are transformed into social practices. He overcomes both the characterizations of “undersocialized atomism” often found in economistic accounts of social processes, and the “oversocialised determinism” often evident in functionalist accounts of the social world.

The causal arrow runs in both directions in Kuran’s analysis—from the individual to the social, and from the social to the individual. And in pursuing matters in this way he is able to illuminate not only mundane everyday behavior (like how we address a colleague at a cocktail party, or the politician’s practice of floating “trial balloons”), but profound matters (such as 1989’s sudden collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe), and pressing issues that we must learn to cope with (such as the affirmative action debate in the United States). This style of analysis illuminates, but it also provides wise council about the dangers of certain political arrangements. If our public space, for example, is one which discourages the free expression of our beliefs, then we can expect individuals to withhold their private truths by speaking only public lies. Public opinion (based on these lies) will distort knowledge and may lead to political-legal-social arrangements that undesirably restrict our freedoms. Social pressure can thus become a serious obstacle to liberty. On the other hand, social pressures that discipline behavior are important ingredients in the mix that makes liberty possible. So the political economy task again is one of finding a constitutional structure that empowers, yet disciplines, public discourse. To use the metaphor of science (which Kuran also discusses), we must grapple with the “essential tension” (Kuhn’s phrase) of respecting the tradition evident in convergent thinking, yet permit the possibility of its complete overturning by divergent thought. Dissent is essential, but we may also justifiably dismiss the dissident. Not all ideas should be thinkable, but none should become unthought. How this balance is achieved in the public sphere remains one of the great challenges for liberal theorists.

Kuran’s book is proof that often the best theorizing in the social sciences is accomplished by taking a simple idea (in this case the idea that we don’t reveal our true preferences—in other words, we strategically lie) and pushing it persistently and consistently to see where it may go. A simple idea with broad implications is what is desired, rather than complicated ideas with little implications. Scholars such as Buchanan, Coase, and Olson have pursued this form of theoretical minimalism and advanced our knowledge of political-economic life considerably. Kuran’s work is in this vein. By drawing on the disciplines of economics, sociology, cognitive science, politics, history and philosophy, Timur Kuran’s *Private Truths, Public Lies* offers one of the most rigorously argued and relevant multidisciplinary works we have seen in a generation.