

PRIVATE TRUTHS, PUBLIC LIES

*The Social Consequences of
Preference Falsification*



TIMUR KURAN

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Falsification*

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*To my parents,
Aptullah Kuran and Sylvia Stockdale Kuran,
for the gift of curiosity*

Preface

While in the thick of writing this book, I sent a segment on the fall of East European communism to a Czech scholar I had met at a conference. He wrote back that he found the argument sufficiently compelling to wonder whether I myself had experienced totalitarian rule. I replied that I had spent my life in Turkey and the United States, countries that have spared themselves the ravages of totalitarianism.

The question deserved a more thoughtful answer. I have lived under governments tolerant of criticism, though the principle of free speech is interpreted more broadly and enforced more consistently in the United States than in Turkey. In both countries the press features debates on a host of matters, and criticisms of official policies enjoy wide circulation. Contrast this openness and competition with a totalitarian system, where the government systematically persecutes dissenters. Fearful of official reprisals, potential critics refrain from saying what they think, from revealing their misgivings about government policies, from calling for reforms. It is this dimension of insincerity—of what the East Europeans characterize as “living a lie”—that prompted my Czech reader’s inquiry. He wanted to know how, unless I had first-hand experience with totalitarianism, I could appreciate the significance, much less understand the dynamics, of “preference falsification”—the act of misrepresenting one’s wants under perceived social pressures.

But despotic government is not the only source of fear, the only obstacle to overt and candid discourse. A more basic factor is public opinion. For one thing, despotism is unsustainable without at least the tacit consent of public opinion. For another, public opinion is itself a

determinant of people's willingness to reveal their innermost selves. Even in democratic societies, where the right to think, speak, and act freely enjoys official protection, and where tolerance is a prized virtue, unorthodox views can evoke enormous hostility. In the United States, for instance, to defend the sterilization of poor women or the legalization of importing ivory would be to raise doubts about one's civility and morality, if not one's sanity. To be sure, time and again the courts have ruled that unpopular views, no matter how outrageous, are protected by the law. Yet a person may be free under the law to enunciate despised views without enjoying the same esteem, in the eyes of others, as people with widely accepted views. However strictly enforced, freedom of speech does not insulate people's reputations from their expressed opinions.

Precisely because people who express different opinions do get treated differently, individuals normally tailor their expressions to the prevailing social pressures. Their adjustments vary greatly in social impact. At one extreme are harmless, and possibly beneficial, acts of politeness, as when one tells a friend wearing a garish shirt that he has good taste. At the other are acts of spinelessness on issues of general concern, as when a politician endorses a protectionist measure that he recognizes as harmful to most of his constituents. The pressures generating such acts of insincerity need not originate from the government. Preference falsification is compatible with all political systems, from the most unyielding dictatorship to the most libertarian democracy.

To return to my colleague's inquiry, one does not have to live under a tyrannical regime to commit and observe acts of preference falsification. Nor need one know the history of communism to sense that such acts have important consequences. Thus my own point of departure was not communist repression but the taboos of contemporary American politics. I had just immersed myself in modern political economy, having spent my student years studying economic development and microeconomic theory. It struck me as a weakness of the literature that it generally failed to recognize, let alone explain and interpret, that some issues are more open to discussion, and some viewpoints better tolerated, than others. For the evidence, one did not have to go beyond college campuses: many free-speech advocates who were quick to condemn the McCarthyism of the 1950s were pro-

moting efforts to deny a public forum to speakers whose views they found offensive, such as eugenicists and representatives of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

My first two essays on preference falsification, technical pieces drafted in 1983 and published four years later in *Public Choice* and the *Economic Journal*, sought to bring realism to the economic theory of politics through insights from sociology and psychology. As my thinking progressed, it became apparent that preference falsification touches every area of social thought. Accordingly my research expanded in scope and became increasingly interdisciplinary.

This book thus offers a theory that synthesizes approaches and findings from social-scientific traditions that have developed more or less separately. In the tradition of economics, the theory incorporates the concepts of optimization and equilibrium. Like political science, it assigns to political pressure groups a key role in collective decision making. As in sociology, it treats humans as social beings—creatures who learn from one another, care about others, and worry about what others think of them. Finally, along with various branches of psychology, it recognizes that the mind has limitations and that it is a seat of tensions. In keeping with its hybrid origins, the theory yields propositions embodying observations now sequestered in disparate fields of inquiry.

All these disciplines, along with philosophy, have provided insights into the phenomenon I am calling preference falsification. I try in this book to reconcile and unite these insights. Specifically, I seek to provide an integrated account of the role of preference falsification in guiding, distorting, stabilizing, constraining, and changing the social order, including the knowledge that undergirds it. More than the individual mechanisms I describe and analyze—preference falsification as a source of rigidity, as a shaper of ideology, as a cradle of surprise—the book's theoretical significance lies in the linkages it posits among the particular mechanisms.

A book purporting to analyze a universal social process must justify its claim to generality by testing its thesis in diverse contexts. It must connect facts previously treated as unrelated by identifying common patterns in geographically distinct, temporally removed, culturally specific events. I have therefore woven three case studies into the argument. They involve India's caste system, communist rule in Eastern

Europe, and racial affirmative action in the United States. In each of these studies the focus is on linking diverse facts. The same logic runs through each set of explanations, demonstrating the theory's generality. The case studies were chosen because of their social significance and because they offer striking illustrations of the book's theoretical claims.

Had I focused on a single case the added detail might have enhanced the book's standing in the eyes of some, but the theory's generality would have remained poorly demonstrated. The book might have given the impression that its relevance is limited to a single culture, society, or historical episode. There are vast differences, of course, between the cultures of India and Eastern Europe, between a system of segregation and a political regime, between an ancient religion and a modern secular ideology. But one can recognize such differences without overlooking the similarities. In fact, the study of differences may benefit from the identification of universal social processes that account for them. Where differences fascinate, says Stephen Jay Gould, generalities instruct. Anyone who has seen a tiger and a leopard knows that one is striped and the other spotted. It is a general theory, the theory of natural evolution, that accounts for the origins and stability of this intriguing difference.

We live in an age of escalating intellectual balkanization, a time when professional scholars can scarcely keep up with developments in their chosen specialties, let alone trends in other specialties and disciplines. For nonscholars the problem is even less manageable. The growing integration of the world economy is compounding the need for nonlocal knowledge, yet as individuals we all remain terribly constrained in our capacity to process information. There exists an acute need, then, for broad syntheses, for tools of conceptualization, for studies that identify hidden patterns. It is in this spirit that the present work was composed. I have sought to illuminate a universal phenomenon. The examples are of interest in their own right, but the book's main objective is to develop a simple framework for thinking about the mechanics, dynamics, and consequences of preference falsification.

Because preference falsification is an act that conceals information on the forces behind social trends, readers may wonder whether the theory has any predictive value, and also whether it furnishes refutable

implications. I will answer these questions head on, but only after the argument has been developed in full. I ask the reader to judge the theory initially by its internal coherence and plausibility, trusting that questions of measurement, testability, and predictive potential will receive attention in due course.

To immerse oneself in the study of a particular phenomenon inevitably raises one's awareness of its manifestations in daily life. In this case, I found myself increasingly conscious of human hypocrisy and insincerity. I began seeing the signs of preference falsification everywhere: in faculty meetings, at social gatherings, watching political debates, in the press, in my students' exam books. I also became increasingly self-conscious as I noticed it in my own behavior. Fortunately, my preoccupation with the darker side of human nature was not without reward. I became more sensitized to the independent streak in the human character, to the spirit that gives one the courage to say "no" when the pressures of the moment demand a "yes." With a heightened appreciation for the complexity of the human personality, for the tensions we all endure in trying to mediate between our needs for social approval and those for self-assertion, I gained more respect for the nonconformist, the pioneer, the innovator, the dissident, even the misfit. It is my hope that the reader will come to share in this appreciation.

In writing *Private Truths, Public Lies*, I benefited from the assistance of many organizations and individuals. While it would be impractical to name them all, I cannot omit mentioning those who made the most significant contributions.

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A number of my chapters draw on materials published in provisional form. An earlier version of Chapter 2 appeared as "Private and Public Preferences," *Economics and Philosophy*, 6 (April 1990): 1–26. Parts of Chapter 5 were included in "Mitigating the Tyranny of Public Opinion: Anonymous Discourse and the Ethic of Sincerity," *Constitutional Political Economy*, 4 (Winter 1993): 41–78. Chapters 10 and 11 build on "The Unthinkable and the Unthought," *Rationality and Society*, 5 (October 1993): 473–505. Scattered portions of Chapters 7, 15, and 16 are based on "Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989," *World Politics*,

44 (October 1991): 7–48. Some segments of Chapter 16 draw on “Sparks and Prairie Fires: A Theory of Unanticipated Political Revolution,” *Public Choice*, 61 (April 1989): 41–74. And parts of Chapter 19 have appeared in “The Inevitability of Future Revolutionary Surprises,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 100 (May 1995): 1528–1551, © 1995 by The University of Chicago, all rights reserved. I would like to thank the publishers of these articles for permission to use them here.

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I

Living a Lie

1

The Significance of Preference Falsification

Imagine that a person in a position to alter your career invites you to a party at his home. When you arrive at the party, the talk of the moment seems to be about the living room's pale neutral colors, the latest trend in interior decoration. The look does not appeal to you, but you would rather not say so, lest your host be hurt. Feeling pressured to say something, you compliment his "sophisticated taste." A while later you find yourself in a conversation on wasteful development projects in Latin America. Someone pompously asserts that under socialism there would be no waste. Although you find the claim preposterous, you let it go unchallenged, to avoid sparking a divisive debate.

With the advancing hour, you get bored and start itching to leave. A voice inside objects that it would be imprudent to be the first to make a move. So you stay on, hoping that somebody else will comment on the late hour and signal a readiness to depart, giving you an opportunity to slip out without becoming the focus of attention. At long last someone stands up to leave, and to your secret delight, the party unravels. Thanking your host for a "marvelous evening," you head for the door, grateful that it was not you who initiated the exodus.

Your evening contained several instances of *preference falsification*, the act of misrepresenting one's genuine wants under perceived social pressures. In admiring the bland decor, remaining silent on Latin America, delaying your departure, and stating that you had a delightful time, you conveyed impressions at odds with your private

thoughts and desires, at least partly to avoid disapproval. On each occasion, you faced a choice between openness and concealment, between self-assertion and social accommodation, between maintaining your integrity and protecting your image. There were always good reasons to opt for insincerity, advantages that outweighed the benefits of being uncompromisingly and assertively truthful.

Preference Falsification as a Specific Form of Lying

Why introduce a complicated term like preference falsification? Wouldn't "lying" do? While always a form of lying, preference falsification is a more specific concept. Consider a person who, as a soldier, followed orders to massacre unarmed civilians. Years later, he denies taking part in the crime. If he was personally opposed to the atrocity, and participated solely to avoid being court-martialed for disobedience, his lie about his involvement does not misrepresent his sentiment toward his victims. Given that he felt no antagonism toward them, he would not be falsifying a preference. Preference falsification aims specifically at manipulating the perceptions others hold about one's motivations or dispositions, as when you complimented your host to make him think that you shared his taste.

Nor is preference falsification synonymous with "self-censorship," the suppression of one's potentially objectionable thoughts. In this instance, preference falsification is the broader concept. Had you merely kept quiet during the discussion about the decor, that would have been self-censorship. In pretending to like it, you went beyond self-censorship. You deliberately projected a contrived opinion.

Two other common terms with which preference falsification has close affinity are "insincerity" and "hypocrisy." I will sometimes use them where the context leaves no room for ambiguity, just as I will refer occasionally to lying. But no such term is sufficiently precise for the topic at hand. What gets falsified may be a preference, one's knowledge, or a value. For analytical clarity, it will often be essential to distinguish among various forms of falsification.

A phrase that captures the meaning of preference falsification exactly is "living a lie." It was developed by East European dissidents during their long winter of communist dictatorship, because they, too, found their existing vocabulary inadequate. To live a lie is to be bur-