



Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification

Timur Kuran

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Preference falsification, according to the economist Timur Kuran, is the act of misrepresenting one's wants under perceived social pressures. It happens frequently in everyday life, such as when we tell the host of a dinner party that we are enjoying the food when we actually find it bland. In *Private Truths, Public Lies* Kuran argues convincingly that the phenomenon not only is ubiquitous but has huge social and political consequences. Drawing on diverse intellectual traditions, including those rooted in economics, psychology, sociology, and political science, Kuran provides a unified theory of how preference falsification shapes collective decisions, orients structural change, sustains social stability, distorts human knowledge, and conceals political possibilities.

A common effect of preference falsification is the preservation of widely disliked structures. Another is the conferment of an aura of stability on structures vulnerable to sudden collapse. When the support of a policy, tradition, or regime is largely contrived, a minor event may activate a bandwagon that generates massive yet unanticipated change.

In distorting public opinion, preference falsification also corrupts public discourse and, hence, human knowledge. So structures held in place by preference falsification may, if the condition lasts long enough, achieve increasingly genuine acceptance. The book demonstrates how human knowledge and social structures co-evolve in complex and imperfectly predictable ways, without any guarantee of social efficiency.

Private Truths, Public Lies uses its theoretical argument to illuminate an array of puzzling social phenomena. They include the unexpected fall of communism, the paucity, until recently, of open opposition to affirmative action in the United States, and the durability of the beliefs that have sustained India's caste system.

Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification **Details**

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Jukka Aakula says

Imagine a situation:

A long time the state of the world changes slowly if not at all - as in the case of the status quo of East European communism - then without anybody being able to predict anything - except afterward - the state suddenly starts to change very fast and status quo breaks down - e.g. in a few months the communism collapses.

One day only a few people protest against the status quo - like the handful of citizens of DDR in the Dresden churches - then a minor change - like the visit of Gorbachev in the 40 years celebration of DDR - makes the protests to first tenfold and then hundredfold. The public opinions of a huge number of people suddenly - in one week - change because they are no more afraid of expressing their private opinions publicly. The leadership of DDR is not any more motivated to shoot on the protesters.

Soon the institutions - like the police and the border control and the communist party leadership - lose their spirit and the whole system collapses. Not even real communists do anymore dare to express their belief in the system. When beforehand the noncommunists falsified their public opinions, now it is the communists who start to say "I always hated the system in my heart!".

Why does the status quo live so long? Why did a huge majority of the people support the system officially - whether communism or the race quota system in US - even if the private opinions did not support status quo. It is basically because any citizen C stays to support the status quo - and falsify his public opinion and even punish other citizens for criticising the status quo - except if a threshold ratio of other citizens $f(C)$ has changed his public opinion first. ($f(C)$ of course depends on the person.)

Thus even if very high percentage of the population is against the status quo, the status quo may live for a long time and public opposition staying say at 0,1% - the threshold value is more than 0.1% for 99.9% of the people. But sometimes even a modestly sized external cause may cause a huge change. First, the opposition extends to 0.5% because people are not anymore afraid. Then next 2% think "I will also protest because so many other people dared". Next day it is 6%, then 12% and soon the streets are full of protestors.

Communism collapsed but the US race quota system - affirmative action - stays even if approximately two-thirds of the US population privately disapproves it. The people are afraid of being labeled as racists. 1999 Kuran said the situation may cause an explosion in US. I think the election of Donald Trump can be seen as such an explosion.

Tom King says

One of the couple best sociology books I've ever read, even if written by an economist.

Robert K says

Amazing.

Elizabeth says

Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification (Hardcover)
by Timur Kuran

get again
ILL from 3/1 to 4/12

Rahul Rajamuthiah says

Timur Kuran brings out such interesting people insights, that too in large groups, where he sounds less like an economist and more like a psychoanalytic. His incisive views are arrived by identifying patterns across diverse societies and ideologies spanning centuries, demonstrates that not only does individuals shape societies, but societies shape individuals; spirals which can at times be inward looking, but turning a net positive across generations.

Phil says

Incredible, path-breaking book that explains events which would not happen for 20 years. The idea of "preference falsification" is simple, powerful, and empirically demonstrable in both our every day lives, ("Yes, I enjoy spending time with my grandfather's girlfriend") and public lives ("Mubarak is great, I am so happy that he's been in charge for the past 30 years"). Mind-altering substance.

Brittany says

3.5 stars rounded up. The theory portions were a solid 5 stars, but the application portions varied between 2-4 stars. Essentially, if you read one chapter into the third part of the book and stopped, you'd get all the useful information you really need. The sections on affirmative action were a pain to read through. I don't know how many times I need to read that race-conscious people are the real racists, or that we have to be wary of the grievances created as a result of affirmative action (but never mind the grievances created without it...apparently one of these is much more important than the other).

"If public opinion reaches an equilibrium devoid of dissent, individuals are more likely to lose touch with alternatives to the status quo than if dissenters keep reminding them of the advantages of change. Likewise, widespread ignorance is more likely in a closed society than in one open to outside influences."

"The disappearance of public dissent can make people increasingly ignorant about flaws of the status quo,

and in turn, their ignorance can make them progressively less prepared to dissent."

"Under the circumstances, civil libertarians reject the freedom to veil in order to safeguard a more precious freedom, the freedom not to veil. For their part, the fundamentalists accept the freedom not to veil, because they expect the freedom to veil to extinguish it."

"The uses of social proof are not limited to matters on which we do not experiment or think for ourselves. Even where we possess independent knowledge, the fact that our perceptions are shared assures us of their correctness."

"From a logical standpoint, mere repetition should not enhance the attractiveness of a choice. In reality, we routinely accord informational value to such repetition. We equate multiple exposures to a single belief with the consensus of a group, effectively substituting reiteration for social proof. This is why repetition is a common instrument of persuasion."

"People whose views are governed chiefly by social proof ordinarily lack a capacity for mental resistance to new social demands. It has been observed that our beliefs are strongest when they have been mildly attacked, for then we have become aware of their vulnerability and learned how to counter criticisms. Prior exposure to mild objections thus produces resistance to later persuasion, which then blocks sharp changes in private knowledge and preferences. By implication, beliefs whose counterarguments were unthought are easier to change than ones who counterarguments, while treated as unthinkable, have enjoyed at least some public exposure. When a revolution challenges many established beliefs, the ones to succumb first may thus be those that had enjoyed the greatest protection from public challenges."
