

# Preference Falsification and Cascade

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*Commentary*

Tech entrepreneur Marc Andreessen [posted](#) the following: “We are living through the most dramatic preference cascade of my life. Every day I am hearing the most amazing things.”

What an unusual phrase, I thought, so I looked it up. It comes from a book written 30 years ago: “[Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification](#),” by Duke University economist Timur Kuran.

I downloaded and read it. It’s brilliant. It seems to explain everything. Maybe it explains too much. Regardless, Kuran has given us a language to describe a remarkable feature of our times.

How is it that only a few months ago, people were afraid to wear MAGA hats and then Trump, having survived multiple assassination attempts, won not only the Electoral College but also the popular vote, sweeping the House and Senate in with him?

How can it be that during this transition time, people widely assume that the president and vice president is already not Biden/Harris but Trump/Vance?

How can it be that foreign leaders are making pilgrimages to Mar-a-Lago while Royals praise him as a great leader?

It all changed in an instant. Or seemed to. Maybe the preference for regime change was already in the air but just not revealed. It took a fair election with secret ballots to show the truth.

Kuran speaks of preference falsification, which is “the act of misrepresenting one’s genuine wants under perceived social pressures.” It is different from self-censorship because people outright lie about what they really think. When the lie persists long enough, people begin to believe the lie and essentially live fake lives, proclaiming fealty to one idea while holding another one in their heart of hearts.

He starts the book with the most mundane example of wall paint. You are invited to a friend’s house the walls of which have been repainted

in fashionable starkness of which the owner is very proud. Your opinion is solicited. Instead of saying what you think, you simply go along and proclaim it to be just great.

You have falsified your preferences. “Preference falsification aims specifically at manipulating the perceptions others hold about one’s motivations or dispositions,” he writes, “as when you complimented your host to make him think that you shared his taste.”

It’s a tiny case but the problem is ubiquitous. It’s all about social pressure, peer expectations, the desire not to stick out, the drive to conform. It’s the problem of the Emperor’s New Clothes. Everyone says they are beautiful even though he is naked. The story sounds rarified but in fact it is a driving feature of current society and probably all of human history.

The intriguing feature of Kuran’s book is that he is writing as an economist but rejecting the usual economist toolkit, relying instead on psychology and sociology. In this way, the book is old-fashioned such as one would read in the 18th or 19th centuries, a treatise by a learned man that draws on many disciplines, sort of like Adam Smith’s [“Theory of Moral Sentiments.”](#)

Such books rarely garner professional praise because that is not how we “do science” today, but they can end up sticking in popular culture.

The preference falsification of the economics profession says that such books are not really economics. The author of this one rejected his own tendency to write as his profession expects and instead wrote a book of huge meaning.

He closely examines the case of India’s caste system, the rise and fall of communism, and the case of affirmative action in the US. In each case, the establishment was on one side and everyone knew how to fit in and falsify preferences.

In either event, public opinion was solidly on the side of the regime. But in each case, something changes and the mood changes. The

hidden truth becomes exposed. The esoteric becomes exoteric. People start speaking their minds and acting according to their actual views. In each case, the regime lost control and the prevailing orthodoxy collapsed.

This is what Kuran calls the moment of the preference cascade. It can happen all at once. Seemingly out of nowhere, people reject the caste system, communism, and DEI hiring, behaving as if each system was always awful and had to go immediately.

A good example is the collapse of the Berlin Wall. One day it was heavily enforced, essential to national security and national identity, guarded with killer weaponry, and approved of by everyone on one side. The next day, it was like no one really cared anymore and the cars raced through and the thing was torn down while the soldiers watched and then joined in.

That is a great example of falsified preferences turning suddenly to a preference cascade.

We can think of this thesis as Thomas Kuhn's "[Structure of Scientific Revolutions](#)" as applied in the world of social change. The cascade comes when anomalies make the orthodoxy unsustainable in polite society. There is a new scramble in pre-paradigmatic times to find a new way forward, a new operations manual for the thing in question.

In the Kuhnian view, science progresses only with the funerals of the old guard but in the Kuranian view, it happens all at once because people simply decide to stop lying.

The lying in this model is necessarily public and shaped by social pressure. When you go to the store, you buy only what you want or decline to buy at all. But when you are at a group banquet or at someone's house for dinner, you are more inclined to go with the crowd. This of course is reinforced by many social psychology experiments from the 1960s which repeatedly proved the power of the crowd and peer pressure.

We don't usually think of this as applying to whole societies, much less all political systems in the world at once. But that seems to be happening. There was a headline last night that the German government had collapsed but I had to do a double take. The story could have been written about Canada, France, Spain, Brazil, Israel, and innumerable others that are quaking with pressures from within.

The themes are the same: people vs. the establishment.

As one must, let's speak of the preference falsifications around COVID. A mucky cloth mask at six feet is going to stop you from getting a medically insignificant respiratory virus? Did anyone really believe this?

A sterilizing shot invented in no time that had never existed for this kind of infection? Really? And there were even more absurd examples: no singing, playing instruments only in sealed tents, dousing yourself with sanitizer, banning skateboarding and surfing, quarantining on either side of the state line for two weeks, and so on.

It was all outrageous and people were willing to put up with the Kabuki dance for a time. But at some uncertain point, and maybe in various iterative rounds, the people grew incredulous. Nearly five years later, we know that they were lying, as we've argued in great detail in a thousand articles for four years. Brownstone played a crucial role in making this happen.

And then we ask that telling question: what else have they been lying about and for how long?

That's the salient issue of our time. The desire to pretend to believe seems to have been shattered. Falsification has turned to a truth cascade, one that might just barely have started and certainly has an uncertain end.

This is why Kuran's book is newly in play. I highly recommend it, and further recommend other books in this genre, including Mattias Desmet's "[Psychology of Totalitarianism](#)." These books help us

understand ourselves and our times, turning seemingly random and mysterious phenomena into recognizable patterns, allowing us to see world events with more clarity than before.

May the preference cascade continue until all that is worth knowing is known.

*From the [Brownstone Institute](#)*

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