Conceptualizing Politics: Strategic or Communicative Action?

Erik Oddvar Eriksen and Jarle Weigård *

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Introduction

In the decades following the second World War the social sciences have gone through a *behavioral revolution*. The consequence has been a stronger emphasis on empirical propositions and piecemeal mapping of social events. As a result, politics is depicted as the outcome of adverse, self-interested behavior. Today, most scholars see politics as the effect of factors such as group pressure, individual interests, and preferences stripped of any ideal approximations. This approach has undoubtedly improved the analytical

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Introduction

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precision in the hypotheses and the empirical foundation of the conclusions. But at the same time the selected scientific tools have surely favored one particular way of understanding politics (Almond 1990). One of the classical perspectives, conceptualizing politics as the art of solving common problems and at the same time shaping a collective identity, is easily excluded from the "*real*-political" picture the modern approach in political science creates.

The paradigm probably gaining most ground as a result of this development is the *economic* approach to politics; that is, theories with their basic concepts and assumptions about human behavior taken from the science of economy. It all started with Joseph A. Schumpeter's analogies between economic markets and political markets in *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (1942), and continued in an even more explicit way with Anthony Down's *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957).[1] Today, schools like rational choice theory (or, if one prefers, rational *action* theory (Monroe 1991)), public choice, social choice, and – at a purely formal level – game theory[2] all represent continuations and slightly different modifications of the postulate that political behavior can and should be studied as individual, strategically calculated, utility maximizing actions.

This paradigm's simplicity when it comes to basic assumptions and hence its formal elegance in making deductions is striking. The question that should be asked, however, is if not these assumptions in many situations represent an undue degree of over-simplification of a complex reality. The theoretical approach that to us stands out as the most interesting alternative to choice theory as an overall theoretical frame – Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action – in many respects represents qualities opposite to those of choice theory. It rests on rather complicated presumptions, which makes it all that more difficult to accomplish precise deductions and testing of hypotheses. This complexity, though, pays off in a far more realistic and profound understanding of social relations.

There are, however, also some formal similarities between the two paradigms. First of all, both choice theory and the theory of communicative action are *action* theoretical approaches. Unlike "norm sociology" in the tradition from Durkheim and system theory in the tradition from Parsons these paradigms both hold that social phenomena must be understood as the result of conscious human action. But they still have quite different perceptions of human action. Theories with economic origin are based on the principle of *methodological individualism*, that is, that explaining social life consists in showing how it results from individual human action and interaction (Elster 1989a, 13). Communicative action theory, on the other hand, maintains that this is only half the explanation. Although social phenomena can only be the products of individual action, these actions and in fact human individuals themselves must again always be understood as products of society. This theory thus holds on to a form of *methodological*

holism, claiming that social science should reflect the reciprocal relationship between how people shape their social environment and are in turn shaped by it.

Secondly, both theories stick to the assumption that human actions should be studied as potentially *rational* behavior, that is, as attempts to realize specific intentions. But again, the interpretation of what this means is rather different. The choice theoretical approach is based on the concept of the calculating *monological* actor with fixed preferences. To such an actor other people are just external, objective facts of reality, on the line with material things, only with the distinctive quality that they carry out strategic actions too. The communicative concept of rationality, on the other hand, operates with *dialogical* actors who coordinate their plans through argumentation aimed at reaching mutual agreements. This understanding of rationality thus has as its point of departure that people live together in a normatively integrated *life world*, which implies that only a collectively responsible actor is considered to be a rational actor.

A major difference between the two approaches seems to be that while choice theory mainly operates with a two level reality where individual, *subjective* conceptions and actions together add up to the macro level of the *objective* world where causal relationships are in force, the theory of communicative action operates with a three level reality where – in addition to the subjective and objective – the social world is a reality in its own right. In choice theory the individual pursue of self-interest is often thought to be sufficient to keep society together, while in communicative action theory the existence and validity of social norms at the *inter-subjective* level and the ability to reach mutual understanding are the coordinating mechanisms.

A basic problem associated with the economic approach to politics consists in explaining why people actually consent to decisions that they do not benefit from. Why are, for example, distributive policies adopted, and how can they be rationally vindicated? Particularly in the public domain this theory lacks explanatory power (Brennan 1990; Lewin 1991; Monroe ed. 1991; Green & Shapiro 1994). The paramount problem of political theory today consists in explaining social order or political legitimacy in modern democracies from the actor's point of view, that is, as a cooperative undertaking, not as an externally induced order. Especially, the task is to render comprehensible that decisions are respected beyond what is achieved by the principle of majority vote.

Strategic and communicative action constitute two different concepts of rational action and two different approaches to the study of politics.[3] The former denotes how individuals calculate other people into their plans to reach subjective goals, that is, to maximize a function; the latter imply that individuals have to reach a mutual understanding in order to get things done. Hence, a main question of political analysis can be stated like this: Is an

observed pattern of political behavior due to strategic actors estimating the best ways to further their self-interest, or is it due to a reasonable agreement between socially situated participants in a political discourse?

The Rational Choice Approach

The term *rational choice* points to the basic assumption in this branch of theory that when an actor chooses a specific course of action it is because he thinks it to be the most efficient means to realize a certain end. What ends an individual actor will try to fulfill are defined by his *preference ordering* or – with a different expression – by his *utility function*. His actions are aimed at maximizing utility (Elster 1989a, 23).

Rational choice theory does not specify what utility is except that it is whatever an actor sees as valuable. The theory cannot explain why certain agents come to hold certain values as these are seen as *exogenously given*. Since rational choice theory is derived from the micro-economic theoretical paradigm, "*rational man*" is a close relative of "*economic man*." Therefore, self-interest is the classical value to be maximized, based on the presumption that most actors are driven by egoism most of the time. Still, it is not wholly justified to equate rationality with egoism. An agent can act *altruistically* and still be rational. He may maximize another person's interests if that is coherent with his own preference ordering. Rational choice allows benevolent actions as far as they are pursued for individual purposes (Scalia 1991, 207).

The basic axiom of rational choice theory is an actor who chooses an action by comparing his conceived goal with the available alternatives. The individual makes choices and acts upon them. Choices are rational when they can reasonably be expected to advance the actor's objectives. What is worth noticing is the proclivity by some theorists to use the neo-classical framework to explain all kinds of social phenomena: "all human behavior can be viewed as involving participants who maximize their utility from a stable set of preferences and accumulate an optimal amount of information and other inputs in a variety of markets" (Becker 1976, 14). Correspondingly, rational choice theorists depict democracy as a process of authoritative decision making based on the actions of self-interested individuals. Policies reflect people's interest because everyone acts in his own interest, and reelection is dependent upon representatives being successful in maximizing voters' preferences. In the political domain self-interest serves the beneficial function of securing that policies reflect peoples' interests (Downs 1957; Riker 1962). There is, however, no mechanism comparable to the *invisible hand* of the market in the political domain that regulates self-interested behavior to achieve public ends (Whitehead 1991). Still, game theory represents a con-ceptual framework that promise a solution to the problem of collective benefits.

The achievement of game theory compared with that of traditional neo-classical economy pertains to the concept of strategic action relative to the former notion of parametric rationality. Parametric or instrumental rationality assumes that an actor is rational as far as he adjusts effectively to a stable environment. A strategic rational actor, on the other hand, does not treat his environment as a constant but as (partly) made up of social actors similar to himself. Strategic rational actors "not only make choices on the basis of expectations about the future '*but also on the basis of their expectations about the expectations of others*' " (Elster 1979, 19). *Strategic rationality* represents a sophistication of the concept of instrumental rationality, and assumes that decisions must be made not only in the face of uncertainty but also while taking into account the presence of other decision makers, capable of making rational choices on the basis of interests that may be opposed to those of ego (Rapoport 1959). In a game a rational actor calculates his strategies relative to other actors' options.

Game theory is a deductive theory about the content of rational decision making, and what conditions it has to meet to be consistent and coherent. One of the challenges of this theory consists in identifying an optimal equilibrium point, because an actor has to consider not only all other actors' strategies but also their possible reactions to his own decisions. The fundamental prediction of non-cooperative game theory is the so-called Nash equilibrium: Given the choice of player 2, player 1 is doing as well as possible, and given the choice of 1, player 2 is doing as well as possible. Consequently, nearly everything may be the outcome of a game – there may be one simple equilibrium point or multiple equilibrium points (Elster 1979, 118; Bendor & Hammond 1992, 307ff). Game theory can thus not be said to have provided an answer to the fundamental problem of how a social or political stable order can emerge from strategically, individual actions that is generally adequate. Many rational choice theorists have instead turned to the study of institutions for a solution.

Institutions

For a long time rational choice theory tried to omit the reference to social institutions or norms as explanatory devices as this seemed to conflict with the main strategy of treating outcomes as simply the result of aggregated individual preferences. But in the last one or two decades more and more theorists have acknowledged that many political situations cannot be explained without the incorporation of institutional variables, and we have seen a turn in neo-institutional direction (Grafstein 1991). This, however, raises the new problem of how the existence, influence, and change of institutions can itself be explained within a choice theoretical framework.

A first answer is that rules and institutions exist to reduce complexity and uncertainty as it relives the actors of many decisions.[4] But as this is merely a reference to their positive effects, we need another explanation of why and how they are created to avoid the functionalist fallacy. From the theoretical account of self-interested behavior the answer is: They are upheld because of their "distributional consequences" (Knight 1992, 210; cf. Shepsle 1989; Eggertsson 1990, 79). Douglass North argues that "it is the bargaining strength of the individuals and organizations that counts. Hence, only when it is in the interest of those with sufficient bargaining strength to alter the formal rules will there be major changes in the formal institutional framework" (North 1990, 68).

Such explanations are opposed to (norm sociological) theories of collective benefits as they point to the micro level processes of social life leading to the construction of institutions. Institutions do not come about because we as a society or collective need them but because they distribute goods in a way that are in somebody's interest. Although social institutions may be justified with regard to collective benefits, there is no need for normative arguments, as they may be explained solely in empirical terms: They result from social interactions and the relative power that competitors in a bargaining game posit (Knight 1992, 145).

Even if there are serious problems attached to the traditional sociological explanatory strategy, the weaknesses of the choice theoretical approach seem even more devastating. The essential question is how institutions, which are introduced into this theoretical framework basically as a modifier of the unrestrained self-interested behavior, possibly can fulfill this purpose if they themselves are the expression of specific interests. "The catch is to explain how these instruments bind the people who employ them." (Grafstein 1991, 262) An institution that comes about only because it maximizes some actors' interests are fundamentally unstable as tomorrow the shifting constellations of interests might go for some other institutional arrangement that then seems to give the powerful a better prospect. "So long as institutions are continuing objects of choice, the choosers, in the end, will not be the objects of institutions" (ibid. 263).

The explanation of the significance of social norms and institutions can accordingly not be that actors choose to respect them because and to the extent they are advantageous to their interests, but rather *that they command respect from the actors*. In other words, we must be willing to give these entities a status of relative autonomy from specific actors in a way that is difficult to accept within the framework of methodological individualism. There are, however, large differences between different kinds of institutions as to whether or not they possess a force that is morally or emotionally binding in its own right. Many institutions lay in the direction of conventions that obviously are just practical arrangements, held up either through mutual

agreement about their advantageousness or through the use of coercive power. North thus makes a distinction between formal institutions, which he, as we saw, perceived as dependent upon interests and their bargaining strength, and informal institutions like socially sanctioned norms and internally enforced standards of conduct, which only are expressed through social practices. Although he finds that also many in this last category "can be modeled in the context of wealth-maximizing models and therefore lend themselves to treatment in neoclassical (and game theory) frameworks" (North 1990, 40), he admits that "[s]till unexplained is a very large residual. We simply do not have any convincing theory of the sociology of knowledge that accounts for the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of organized ideologies or accounts for choices made when the payoffs to honesty, integrity, working hard, or voting are negative" (ibid. 41).

Two remarks have to be made about this categorization of institutions and the way to explain them. The first is that even though formal institutions often do not express the same moral ethos as, e.g., social norms of behavior, they all the same cannot be seen as upheld solely by calculated interests, even mutual interests among partners. This contract theoretical approach is still open for the old Durkheimian criticism that it neglects the non-contractual element of the contract (Durkheim 1893, 212). As the Prisoner's Dilemma example shows, in most social situations there has to exist a fundamental mutual trust or confidence before a common interest can be realized. And even where institutions' efficiency depends on the use of coercive power, as is the case with penal law, they obviously do not take all their strength from the command over sanctions, rather from being seen as *legitimate* in these specific contexts.

Secondly, even in the incidents where the economic approach can give us a formally trustworthy reconstruction of how the social order problem *could* be solved, it is often far from any intuitive understanding of how the problem is *actually* solved in real life. Some informal, normative institutions might very well be shown to have a positive effect on certain actors wealth-maximizing efforts, but this can none the less be far from the terms in which these actors themselves understand their own rule-abiding behavior. The choice theorists acknowledge that their explanations often are "*as if*" explanations but do not always seem to realize the problems involved with a theoretical strategy that in many respects depart so fundamentally from the actors' point of view.

Rationality and Norms

There is a need for an action frame of reference in dealing with norms because the *homo sociologicus* runs into the problem of reification. The actors are seen

to be "pushed" by quasi-inertial forces (Gambetta 1987). The problem of reification is, however, also deeply involved in the *homo economicus* approach as long as outcomes are not explainable from real persons' point of view. Another theoretical approach is needed to make sense out of the binding power that institutions and norms wield over its members.

It is certainly true that norms have a grip on the mind because of "the strong emotions their violations can trigger" (Elster 1989b, 100). But as we have seen with North, unless they are upheld by self-interest, choice theory fails to give an explanation of what the basis for these norms and the emotions behind them are. They just become an inclination by the individual to feel in a certain way about certain things. The theory of communicative action, on the other hand, brings the explanation several steps further by showing that also normative opinions have a rational, cognitive core. These opinions have an inter-subjective rather than a mere subjective basis.

So, when people feel emotionally upset by a specific conduct and the violation of specific norms, in the standard cases it will be because the conduct in question *is repulsive*. There may be different opinions as to what behavior is contemptible and what is laudable, but it is evenly important to see that moral opinions and norms are not reached randomly. In the conflict between ethical rationalism and irrationalism the dominant parts of contemporary moral philosophy seem to have converged to the former position, thereby confirming that moral beliefs are not just a matter of personal taste but a matter of knowledge, logic, and reason that concerns the rightness and justice of actions. Although we may never arrive at the one and final truth in these matters, many points of view can at least be excluded as unethical or unmoral by rational means. Such normative standards are established in a society by the use of open argumentation in a normative debate. The theory of communicative action takes this as a point of departure in explaining that a particular order of social interaction, an institution, has a normative core that makes for the stability.

Variants of choice theory presume a self that is very "thin" and only capable of making "weak evaluations": "A subject who only evaluates weakly – that is, makes decisions like that of eating now or later, taking a holiday in the north or in the south – such a subject we might call a simple weigher of alternatives" (Taylor 1985, 23). To solve the theoretical problem of political order there is, accordingly, a need for a concept of the individual as capable of "strong evaluations." That is, an individual that does not only discriminate between different solutions to the *pragmatic* questions of what to do but also on *ethical* and *moral* questions. Man is a self-interpreting and self-governing being that has the capacity to change behavior and act differently both from what is normatively prescribed and what is in his personal interest (Giddens 1976). Man is able to direct his behavior according to standards superior to those of desire, interests, and need. From

pragmatic questions that involve only weak evaluations (and which is captured in the utilitarian frameworks), we may distinguish moral questions that concern the actors' obligations to the interests of others (Kant), and ethical questions that involve the problem of identity and conceptions of the good life (as it is framed in the Aristotelian tradition) (Habermas 1993, 1ff). Man has the capacity to take hold on his life and act according to moral standards and qualitative judgments. This makes it possible to explain why people may consent to agreements detrimental to their own interests, and why a stable and solid social and political structure emerge out of social interaction. The viability and durability of an institution are conditioned upon the arguments presented in its favor (or on the condition that the normative core is not being challenged). The micro level foundation of this theory thus relates to the power of arguments. In conceptualizing action we then have to shift the focus from actions coordinated by self-interested, to argumentative coordinated actions; in other words a shift from goal-directed behavior to understanding-oriented actions.

Communicative Action

The roots of the concept of communicative action can be traced back to Aristotle who conceived of politics as *praxis*, that is, as a kind of activity that has a purpose in itself and is deliberation in relation to a common good. It is, however, also strongly influenced by the Kantian insight about practical reason and the pragmatism of Peirce and Mead. The concept of communicative rationality is based on the fact that people coordinate actions by communicating through significant symbols and by mutually respecting validity claims. "And what is paradigmatic is the intersubjective relation that speaking and acting subjects take up when they come to an understanding with one another about something." (Habermas 1984, 392) By arguing in relation to inter-subjective standards of truth, rightness, and sincerity participants can reach an agreement and a base for judging what are reasonable choices. To accomplish this, the actors have to make the same claims on themselves that they are asking of others. They have to be consistent and recur to neutral rules and disinterested arguments in order to solve conflicts. In such a discussion different viewpoints are communicated and scrutinized to harmonize different plans of action so that goals may be achieved in a legitimate way. The only way to solve conflicts in a valid manner, and the only way to find reasonable solutions to practical questions, is a free discussion among all affected where no force but that of the better argument prevails (Habermas 1990, 41ff). Rational decision making, then, means that the validity of the argument rather than instructions, rules, votes, force, manipulation, tradition etc. governs the choices.

However, this does not mean that a consensus is always (or even normally) reached and that conflict and dissent are not dominant elements in politics. Rather, the point is that the basis for agreement as well as for disagreement only can be clarified through examination in a free discussion. It further means that anyone who enters a discussion with a sincere attitude, must do so with the intention of seeking a mutual agreement; that is, by holding the possibility open that one can be convinced by better arguments, as well as expecting one's dialogue partners to be open for conviction the same way. The concept of a rational consensus also represents a standard for evaluating existing agreements. In this respect a consensus will not be fully qualified if not "everybody's" voice has been heard, if it does not endure public scrutiny, etc.

The concept of communicative rationality pertains to the idea that not only empirical evidence but also the norms themselves have to be critically assessed and justified. An actor is only rational when he is able to put forward an assertion and, when criticized, is capable of justifying his actions by explicating the given situation in the light of legitimate expectations (Habermas 1984, 15). The criterion of rationality, then, is whether the actor is able to defend his/her choices against criticism; i.e., whether or not the choices endure a public examination.

Communicative rationality contains a minimal normative content concerning the reciprocity of interaction. An agent must be able to apply a norm equally to himself and to others. Such a reciprocity dimension of interaction is rooted in the immanent obligation to provide justification. Implicitly, this is always involved in communication in the sense that one who is uttering something must be prepared to defend it. Otherwise, one is not considered a "sane" or rational actor. In breaking this rule, one is guilty of "a performative contradiction." If one is going to defeat this principle one will have to confirm what one is going to deny. This illuminates the normative force of the better argument and a model of justification concerning generalization or universalization. That is, a norm that regulates actions is legitimate when it can be justified from the perspective of all affected – from the perspective of the generalized other (Mead 1934).

Communication has the basic function of establishing a mutual understanding among different actors, that is, to make them see things the same way. If one of them makes a statement that the others do not immediately accept as valid, we will typically have a sequence of *arguing* where objections are put forward and responded to. Actors who challenge a validity claim can either try to convince others in favor of their own view, or they may simply *seek conviction* by getting the first speaker to explicate the premises that underpin the statement.

The ideal outcome of an arguing sequence is a *consensus*. It means that at least one of the actors involved has learned something new through the

process that has brought about a change in the original position. One or more actors have been convinced by one or more others, or they have mutually adjusted to each other's views so that some common opinion on the matter has been reached. One way of describing the difference between a compromise and a consensus is to say that while different actors will give different reasons for why they adhere to a compromise, they will give identical reasons for why they adhere to a consensus (Habermas 1996, 166).

A consensus can on the one hand be an agreement on factual conditions about what the *truth* is. On the other hand, the agreement can also be normative, concerning the *rightness* of a certain standpoint or course of action. The latter raises the question of what kind of rational standard normative positions can be measured against. How can possibly two actors, who might have conflicting personal interests in a dispute, reach an agreement through rational argument?

The answer that follows from communicative action theory is that one of the positions may objectively have a more *legitimate* status than the other, and that this has to be acknowledged also by the party whose interests are not favored by it because of the binding forces that are inherent in the praxis of argumentation itself. What distinguishes legitimate interest from just factual interests is that the former can be *generalized*. This means that it does not contradict the common interest if realized. A bare factual interest, on the other hand, can only be defended by arguments that could not add up to a rational whole if they were used by everyone else in a similar way. In a debate it becomes obvious that arguments from the position of a private interest have no value at all. Such arguments do not convince *anyone* that these interests should be favored. Only private interests that can be defended from a *neutral* position, that is, convincingly portrayed as common interests can rationally be accepted as legitimate interests.

Altruism and Communicative Action

A main problem of rational choice theory is how to deal with actions that are not motivated by narrow self-interest. Many analysts have preferred egoistic explanations to altruistic ones and have therefore often tried to see apparently altruistic behavior as subtle forms of self-interest (Elster 1979). It is relatively easy to understand the reason for these difficulties. A human nature dominated by the pursue of self-interest is indeed among the key assumptions of this whole theoretical tradition, and it seems intuitively harder to comprehend why actors should behave strategically towards one another if not driven by that natural force of antagonism inherent in self-interested emotions, which were Adam Smith's point of departure. Besides, there is a methodological point: "If self-interest is *not* the heart of the model,

if rational action is merely consistent goal maximization – and outside observers can know the goal only through an actor's revealed preference – then the model becomes tautological. Anything and everything can be explained by it; but nothing can be definitively tested and disproved." (Monroe 1991, 11f; cf. Whitehead 1991) Still, most analysts in the rational choice tradition, seem to agree that we are confronted with classes of solidary or other-regarding actions that cannot be adequately described as disguised egoism. This paradigm therefore has a problem that requires another set of conceptual tools.

One possibility consists in taking the concept of communicative action as an explication of the old notion of altruistic behavior. After all, the theory of communicative action seems to have a better grip of the kind of behavior that is not directed by egoistic utility functions but by considerations where other actors' interests play a significant role. Jon Elster, among others, seems to have made similar assumptions (Elster 1992b). However, the difference between the strategic and the communicative way of reasoning is actually of a more fundamental nature.

This difference can be traced back to the atomistic presumptions that go with the methodological individualism of rational choice theory on the one hand, and the holistic perspective on social action employed by the theory of communicative action on the other. In the first approach, decisive factors for the outcome of a sequence of actions are the *motives* of the agents in a given situation. Are they motivated by egoism or altruism? In the second approach, this question is more or less ignored, while the attention is on the normative and institutional arrangements confronting the agents in a specific context. Are they led to act strategically or to seek a mutual understanding? A meeting may, as we know, in one situation turn out to be an argumentation where viewpoints are launched and scrutinized and where a consensus that the participants have identical reasons for supporting is reached. In another situation, this may be impossible, and the result may be a negotiated compromise. Why this turn out one way or the other, is not reducible to the motives or preferences of the particular actors. The form of interaction, what direction it takes, what kind of knowledge is employed, and how parties respond to each others' utterances have to do with the institutional setting of the situation – how the situation is defined and what kinds of procedures are deployed – more than what can be pinned down to the outcome preferred by the participants.

Opportunistic Argumentation

Politics presuppose language as it has to do with establishing agreement among humans about what has to be done. From the vantage point of rational

choice theory this sort of cooperation is conceptualized as a strategic venture. Actors are seen as trying to overrun or beat each other with words. By threats and warnings the rational actor seeks to move his contestants to accept his claim. Discussion is reduced to persuasion and social interaction to bargaining.

Strategic action often involves communication among the parties. Giving and receiving orders between supervisors and subordinates is a typical example. The process of *bargaining* between representatives of conflicting interest is another example. In this case, the object for each of the parties is to get a maximum outcome for their own interests, and for this end they have to be able to persuade their counterparts that, if necessary, they have the resources needed to force their interests through. An aspect of this is to convince that they also have *the will to employ* these resources. Use of hidden or open threats and warnings are therefore often central elements in bargaining situations (cf. Schelling 1960). Jon Elster says about the topic of bargaining in a context of debates in a constituent assembly: "To bargain is to engage in communication for the purpose of *forcing* or *inducing* the opponent to accept one's claim. To achieve this end, bargainers rely on threats and promises that will have to be executed outside of the assembly itself." (Elster 1992a, 15) The typical (positive) outcome of bargaining is a *compromise*. That usually means that none of the parties get exactly what they want, but that each regards the result as better than no agreement at all. How much the various actors have to deviate from their opening position depends on the strength of their bargaining power, i.e., the resources at their disposal, and on their ability to conduct the bargaining process in a (for each of them) favorable way.

Correspondingly, Elster has focused on what he calls "strategic use of communicative behavior" (Elster 1992b, 132). By that he means opportunistic use of factual or normative statements. This is respectively understood as "a misrepresentation of facts for self-serving purposes" and "a self-interested claim dressed up as an impartial one" (Elster 1992a, 18). As an example of the latter he says: "In political argumentation, conservatives may appeal to liberty and fundamental rights when defending the interests of private business, while socialists may appeal to ideals of social justice when defending the interests of their constituents." (Elster 1992a, 18) This is a good illustration of the problems involved with a way of thinking that *presumes* that actors generally have strategic motives for their behavior. It must be called a consistent element in conservative political history that these parties have appealed to liberty rights (in particular the protection of private property), and that businessmen mostly have seen their interests well represented by this line of policy. It is also equally true that socialists *have* appealed to ideals of social justice, and that the first to benefit from this policy has probably been their own underprivileged electorate. But does this

mean that the ideology of these political movements has been just an excuse for furthering private interests, that their history is one of more than a hundred years of continuous opportunism? A more reasonable explanation seems to be that conservatives and socialists appeal to liberty and equality respectively because they hold these values to be truly vital for society. The identity of a conservative or a socialist is probably stronger defined by which of these alternatives they believe will result in *a better society for all* than by a wish to further some groups' private interests at the expense of others.' And the validity of such creeds must be decided from the quality of the arguments that the parties can mobilize. That a certain political principle, beside promoting a society that is freer or more just in general, eventually also benefits the electoral basis of the party behind it in particular, does not disqualify the principle or the universalist arguments supporting it.

Elster also uses other examples to illustrate his position. When the proprietors in the nineteenth century argued that only they should have the right to vote, he sees it as "a clear expression of" their self-interest in keeping the lower classes from gaining political influence (Elster 1992b, 118), although this self-interest was not stated openly in their argumentation. In one sense this is obviously true, but not in the sense that these actors chose to argue in the name of the public interest rather than their private interests out of *strategic* considerations. When they argued the way they did, it was almost certainly with a conviction that their arguments were sound: They really doubted that poor and uneducated people could act as responsible citizens. Given their historical and ideological frame of reference, one can hardly blame them for thinking so.

Another example of strategic argumentation mentioned by Elster (1992b, 119) is that big parties often prefer electoral systems based on majority in single-member districts, while small parties seem to favor systems with strict proportional representation. The real reason for this pattern of preferences, in Elster's view, is that parties of different size benefit from different systems in terms of representation. But publicly they respectively argue that *society* benefits from majority rule system because it secures stabile government, or that *democracy* is better off with proportional representation because it gives each vote equal weight. Although we must give him right in assuming that there is a connection between self-interest and the use of specific non-selfish arguments in these matters, Elster intuitively seems wrong in thinking that the arguments are arbitrarily chosen as a smoke screen to hide the interests by calculating strategic agents. This view lacks psychological credibility most of all. When we – the analysts – judge the arguments as allegedly neutral observers, we must admit that both sides have a good point. It is then all the more likely that the parties themselves, whose judgments surely are *affected* by their biased perception of the problem, will come to believe strongly in the validity of their own arguments. If anyone in the United

Kingdom is really convinced that a system of proportional representation would be a democratic improvement compared to the present system, that would have to be the leaders, members and sympathizers of the Liberal Democratic Party! In general the lesson that can be learned from the studies of rhetoric is that a person who does not believe in his own arguments can hardly be expected to have too much success in convincing other people. The deliberate, strategic picking of arguments one does not hold as credible oneself, only to use them in a public debate to persuade others, seems, based on our own intuitive experience, to be a rather rare incidence without the general importance that Elster obviously attach to it.[5]

In the examples mentioned above, Elster seems to commit a fallacy similar to the one of which he rightly has accused functionalism: Functionalists, from the observation of an unrecognized and positive effect of a certain pattern of behavior drew the erroneous inference that this effect also was the causal explanation of why the behavior existed – without demonstrating any feedback loops (Elster 1979, 32). Elster basically does the same thing. From the observation that certain arguments in the name of the common good may have some positive effects for those who launched them, he comes to the conclusion that these effects are the intentional explanation of why the argument was used. He, in other words, just postulates that we should assume that people act strategic and self-interested when such an explanation is possible at all.

Generalizable Interests

Elster does acknowledge that actors can argue for a policy that favors them for other than opportunistic reasons, as "when women claimed the right to vote, they could ground their claim in widely accepted standards of fairness" (Elster 1992a, 19). This is fundamentally true, although, when the pioneers of the women's movement first made the claim, society was far from ready to accept the consequences of these "widely accepted standards of fairness." But that such standards existed and that this claim was compatible with those standards, while the proprietors claim to keep the right to vote for themselves was not, is probably a main explanation why the first claim eventually was accepted, while the second was not. What it does not confirm, however, is that the proprietors' claim was raised for subjectively opportunistic reasons while the women's claim was raised on the grounds of impartiality and universal fairness.

These examples also enlighten the difference between the concepts of altruism and communicative rationality. Within the framework of strategic rationality, both the proprietors' efforts to restrict the right to vote and the women's efforts to expand it, could be described as self-interested behavior,

because these societal groups had vested interests in them. From a communicative perspective the most conspicuous aspect is the contrast, consisting in that while the proprietors' self-interested claim was rejected through the public debate as an *illegitimate* self-interest, the women's claim was eventually accepted as *legitimate* on the basis of "widely accepted standards of fairness."

While egoism and altruism are opposite concepts, this is not so in any absolute sense when it comes to egoism and communicative rationality. Unlike altruism, the communicative or discursive attitude does not demand of *ego* that he favors *alter's* interests more than his own. It only means that in a situation with conflict of interests, *ego* will renounce from the use of *force* or manipulation of any kind to serve his interests. It means that an actor must be willing to examine and revise his private wishes and preferences in order to reach a consensus. He accepts to make the realization of his interests dependent on some sort of neutral or impartial approval, and he expects *alter* to have the same kind of attitude. To get this sort of approval he must be able to show by arguments that the interests are *generalizable*, i.e., that it could be rational to wish that *anyone* in a similar situation had their interests realized in the same way. This also means that private interests only deserve political legitimacy as far as they serve a common end or are the best alternatives from a public perspective.

So, when representatives of small political parties argue that proportional representation is more democratic, the question to be asked from the perspective of communicative action is not whether these parties would benefit from such an electoral system, but whether their arguments for the democratic superiority of these systems really are valid. The same would go for the arguments that conservatives and socialists use to justify political arrangements that will benefit either private business or underprivileged groups in society. The actors' motives for saying what they say come absolutely second to the content of the arguments themselves, although *sincerity* – i.e., that the speaker actually means what he says – is an implicit precondition for meaningful communication. This precondition would of course be broken if people choose their arguments out of strategic considerations, as suggested by Elster.

This sounds all very well in theory, but Elster is right in maintaining that impartiality, generalizability, or "the best alternative from the perspective of the common good" are in practice not always sufficient criteria to choose "the right" alternative. Several options can be said to represent generalizable interests, and it can be hard to know which alternative really is the best from a public perspective. In such a situation, the best way out can still be to draw attention to the agents' possible motives for saying what they say. If one can discredit an argument as presumably a conscious or unconscious expression of the agent's self-interest in the matter, there is a *prima facie* reason for

thinking that the argument should be rejected when it is difficult to decide for sure whether the argument in *itself* is valid or not. But at the same time this represents the danger of rejecting valid arguments on false premises.

The Institutionalization of Strategic Behavior

The rational choice paradigm seems to picture egoism and altruism either as two types of human nature or as two types of attitude to be chosen freely. On the one hand we have the hard, calculating, and "realistic" attitude; on the other the affective, considerate, and "idealistic" (perhaps even a bit foolish). The communicative understanding of the choice between the strategic and the communicative approach takes quite another direction.

First of all, on a basic level there is no choice between the two standards of rationality. When it comes to establishing or reestablishing a common understanding or definition of a specific situation, there is no alternative to a cooperative, communicative effort. No strategic act can clarify the nature of a dispute between hostile parties. People at least have to agree upon what they contend. They have to share a common notion of what is the prize to be won, and what are the rules of the game. In order to vote or strike a bargain they must also be able to sort out and establish alternatives. In short, much of what looks like (and in fact *are*) selfishness and plain egoism still presuppose deeply shared commitments and understandings. And it is this common structure of knowledge, empirical and normative, that makes conflict resolution and cooperation possible at all. Regarding this, communicative rationality is the basic concept in social and political analysis.

Secondly, even when there in principle is a choice between a strategic, self-interested, solitary course of action and a communicative and other-regarding course, the important explanations seem to be found in social institutionalization, rather than in human nature and individual choices. Habermas, here following Max Weber and Talcott Parsons, is concerned with the modern institutions that have made *legitimate space* for strategic action in our society. The "media" of money and power have to a great extent taken over the role of verbal communication as coordinators of action in the economic and the administrative subsystems respectively (Habermas 1987). The medium of communication, aiming at mutual understanding, has the disadvantage of being easily overloaded. It takes time to continue a discussion until everybody reach the same conclusion; sometimes such discussions could probably go on practically "forever." One way of relieving the medium of communication from this overload, is to arrange some "short cut" mechanisms that allow for decisions to be made on the basis of other justifications than a general agreement. Using the market mechanism, providing incumbents with the formal authority to make decisions and

instructions, or taking a vote in political assemblies all involves strategic behavior, within certain limits. Habermas' thesis is that this kind of behavior is becoming prevalent in an increasing number of areas in modern society, and that this is the main explanation of the seemingly dominant role that strategic action has attained.

Deliberative Politics

The ultimate aim of political action is to acquire power and to wield it for the sake of some common good. This implies an asymmetric relation between the citizens where those in office have the right to impose their will on subjects, by force if necessary. Politics has to do with putting social norms into effect and institutionalize power relationships. Whoever struggle for power or wield it necessarily participate in the discussion on what social norms should be attended to and why (Koller 1992, 62). In a democracy the rulers will try to show that their undertaking is rational and in the public interest in order to achieve public support. In this they must necessarily insist that the norms should be respected unconditionally, that is, as an obligation and not because they are supported by power, e.g., majority vote. Then, even if political decision making in modern democracies is restrained by structural arrangements that are not decided by citizens, it has to be understood as deliberation rather than as majority vote (Habermas 1996, 305). The legitimacy of collective decision making is dependent upon the procedures and deliberative processes preceding the vote, which are "just as necessary as the majority principle" (Manin 1987, 360). However, political discourse is constrained both due to the fact of interest diversity and to "the fact of pluralism" (cf. Rawls 1993, 133 ff.). The theory of communicative action also has to deal with the problem of conflict and disagreement in modern societies. Politics is not just a cooperative venture in modern polyarchies, governed by the idea of a just and good society, but a struggle over outcomes by competing interests. (Lindblom 1977, 8).

Considering interest diversity, there is a need for conflict regulation or interest accommodation beyond what it is possible to agree on politically, since many conflicts cannot be solved by appealing to generalizable interests. Therefore, there has to be room for bargaining terminating in compromises. In complex and opaque situations, where no common standard or universal interest can be identified, bargaining seems inevitable and also justifiable. Political compromises are common and widespread in our societies and are in the first hand legitimized by procedures securing a fair and just cooperation. The parties must have equal opportunities to further their interests. These procedures themselves are legitimate only if they are

part of a legal system that is itself recognized as legitimate on grounds that everybody can accept in principle.

However, this is insufficient as the outcome of a bargaining process also must be in accordance with public goals. That is, if outcomes have consequences for societal groups and interests, they must endure a public examination. Also when it comes to allocation of resources through negotiations between contracting parties, there is a need to give reasons convincing to others. This stems from the assertion that compromises are only justifiable when they regulate private interests, but it is a disputed question what are public and what are private interests. This can only be decided in a politically constituted group: Only members themselves can decide whether or not something is common (Fraser 1992, 129). The deliberative conception of politics holds that "what is good is fixed by public deliberation, and not prior to it" (Cohen 1989, 29). Compromises e.g. voting results cannot stand alone – they need underpinning, grounding, and legitimacy that is possible only as a communicative undertaking.

But the problem posed by the "fact of pluralism" lingers. There are many ways of life and different ethical outlooks that are rooted in different "general and comprehensive moral views" (Rawls 1987), which makes it hard to reach an agreement on practical matters. Reasonable persons too may disagree. Even persons that are not blinded by self-interest, irrationality and stupidity may disagree upon what is a common good (Rawls 1989, 236). In these cases there is disagreement upon what the public good consists of or what the general interests are. Modern societies are inherently plural with regard to norms and values. This complexity makes the prospect of rational consensus rather bleak. However, this does not imply that the participants should shift to an instrumental strategy as it takes sincere communication to come to grips with the moral and ethical questions of the modern political agenda.

When the agenda consists of qualitative, normative questions like distributive shares and equal opportunities, access to abortion and medical treatment, environmental care, and cultural rights, there is a need for reasoning rather than voting and bargaining. For example, green politics often is a question of all or nothing, and the proponents have nothing to offer in return for concessions (Offe 1985; Goodin 1992). Such conflicts need argumentation rather than negotiating because there is no agreement on the standards to be applied in the contended cases. To solve these kinds of political questions the conflicting parties have to enter a discussion and sincerely try to sort out on what points and to what degree they really disagree and the minimum to which they can consent (cf. Rawls 1988). A conversation like this may not lead to consensus at all, but is nevertheless the only way to deal with these sorts of conflicts, providing the members want to go on living peacefully together and not resort to bare coercion, force,

violence (or pure negligence). This peaceful coexistence is fostered when the members have to justify their beliefs publicly, and it promotes learning, understanding, and tolerance (cf. Mill 1859). Public debate helps to clarify arguments, and it challenges the reasons and motivations that are provided in favor of one proposal or the other. It is possible to reach a mutual understanding about why disputes occur when the deeper convictions and reasons are being explained. For analytical purposes we have to make a case for the possibility of reaching an agreement that is neither a rational consensus nor a negotiated compromise. However, this is a different discussion (see McCarthy 1991, 196; Eriksen 1993, 42ff.).

Conclusion

As a conclusion, we may say that communicative rationality intervene positively in shaping collective meaning and identity. A whole range of questions cannot be settled at all by negotiating a compromise between strategic actors or by voting over alternatives. The important values and the strong cases that really matter in politics stand in need of another approach – both practically and analytically. Especially, there is a need to know the conditions enabling a *polis* to mobilize and reallocate resources for collective goals, and to develop standards for evaluating the legitimacy of the distribution of the socially generated surplus in modern societies. The concept of communicative action is indispensable in political analysis as it renders understandable how agreements can be reached and a stable social order achieved.

This is not to neglect the important role played by strategic action in politics, among other things because, as Machiavelli said, a ruler "who wants to maintain his rule is often forced not to be good" (Machiavelli 1532, 108). Contrary to endorsing romantics, the task from the communicative point of view is to understand the institutional and structural preconditions for strategic behavior, and to try to explain why this kind of behavior in some contexts seems to generate severe problems for the stability and durability of the political order while it in other contexts do not.

Politics is a transformative undertaking that in a peculiar way both foster public meaning and in turn is censored by the *collective conscience*, to speak in the language of Emile Durkheim. Politics both shapes public opinion and is in turn restrained by it. From a communicative point of view politics are deliberation, and the task of political science is to uncover how the interaction between parties – in and between *demos* and *polis* – is conducted, what the outcomes are, what impacts it has, and the possibilities for change. What conceptions of the good life are considered relevant to politics and

which are not? Open discourse both engender political motivations and purposes as well as restricts political behavior.

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