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# The Social Theory of Mass Politics

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## Abstract

*This paper argues the study of mass politics is currently weakened by its separation from debates in social theory. A preliminary attempt at reconnection is made. The implications of an interpretative turn in social theorising are explored, and the interpretative perspectives of mentalism, intersubjectivism, textualism and practice theory examined in detail, in particular regarding how they and their equivalents in political study differ on units of analysis and how to understand one of the key social practices, language. It is suggested that text- and practice-oriented perspectives are well placed to sidestep common difficulties of voluntarism or social determinism, the mysteries of individual consciousness, and the metaphor of language as medium, and that they offer rich and relatively unexplored possibilities for empirical study based on examining patterns of routinised behaviour, their evolution, and reflexive individual responses to them. Arguments are made for their wider application to the study of mass politics, in conjunction with a number of compatible research methods.*

Democracy is widely understood to entail at least some degree of political involvement on the part of ‘the people’. Popular sovereignty, as the principle constitutive of this type of political arrangement, implies some level of engagement in the practices of collective self-rule. It is hardly surprising then that, since the early twentieth century at least, the political dispositions of the citizenry in modern democracy have been a topic of considerable interest for the social and political sciences. Yet how to study empirically these dispositions represents something of a puzzle, for the reason that ‘the people’ is a rather open idea that can be conceptualised in quite different ways. To list just some, the object of study might be conceived as a certain aggregate of individuals, as a unitary collective, a communication system, an ensemble of practices, or perhaps just another piece of raw matter upon which material forces exert themselves. The politics of ‘the people’, as an empirical phenomenon, has therefore been subject to widely different approaches.

To a large extent the evaluation of these approaches must take place at the level of normative political theory. Whether one chooses for instance to conceptualise ‘the people’ in individualist or collectivist terms must depend in large part on the kinds of political philosophy and attendant ideas of popular sovereignty and citizenship one wishes to endorse. But debates about methodology are not purely a function of those about the right and the good. They also hinge on competing ideas about the nature and significance of human bonds, the extension of regularities of behaviour, the nature and capacities of human action, and how to understand change over time – questions in other words which have perhaps been more central to debates in *social* than political theory. To note this disciplinary ‘division of labour’ is not to suggest that it is conceptually grounded, since arguably there are common origins to the projects of social and political theory, and good reason to see the problems which they address as entwined (Wagner 2006). It does suggest, however, that empirical approaches to the politics of ‘the people’ may be enriched by reconnecting them to a number of debates in social theory which arguably have been heeded insufficiently by the scholarly mainstream in political methodology. These debates serve to

problematised some of the presuppositions with which a significant amount of empirical research is conducted, and to suggest a number of new avenues for investigation.

This paper aims to explore some of the implications of debates in social theory for the empirical study of the political inclinations of ‘the people’, where this refers to the behaviour and dispositions not so much of those who are professionally engaged in or oriented towards institutional politics (politicians, civil servants, activists, commentators, and the like) but of the wider public as a whole. One may conveniently describe the field as *mass politics*, encompassing the conventional sub-areas of political behaviour and public opinion, though the term should be read with an awareness of its potential drawbacks, notably the danger of a negative marking vis-à-vis ‘elites’, and of the presumption of a high degree of regularity across citizens.<sup>1</sup> The field takes in a variety of research agenda, with explanation (in various forms) and prediction conventionally the most prominent goals, but also involving social criticism and the identification of contingency and transformative potential.

In reading the study of mass politics through debates in social theory, it may be useful to draw on a typology recently proposed by Andreas Reckwitz (Reckwitz 2002). This begins with a basic division of social theory into classically modern theories on the one hand, which treat behaviour largely in terms of causal regularities, and late modern theories on the other, which emphasise the importance of human interpretation. In the first category the two key approaches are the economic and the sociological, while in the second the paradigmatic approaches can be termed ‘mentalist’, ‘intersubjectivist’, ‘textualist’ and ‘practice-oriented’. In what follows, we shall see these approaches can be linked to a series of analogous ones in the study of mass politics: the classically modern economic and sociological traditions find expression in rational-choice and norms-and-values approaches to political behaviour, while the interpretative perspectives of mentalism and intersubjectivism find expression in political psychology and deliberative democracy. Text- and practice-oriented approaches are also present in the study of mass politics, though so far their adoption has been rarer.

Establishing this link to wider social-theoretical traditions allows a better understanding of the different positions occupied by approaches to mass politics on a number of crucial debates, and allows an exploration of the critiques to which these positions may be subject. As one moves through the different traditions, it becomes possible to chart the arguments for a series of theoretical shifts, first from a focus predominantly on strongly determined regularities of behaviour (whether seen as a function of individual rationality or societal norms and values) to a greater concern with reflexive interpretation, and then from an emphasis on individual cognition to shared structures of symbolic meaning. Further, one may discern the arguments for looking not just at the *communicative* possibilities these shared structures enable, but at the tacit knowledge and routinised action they are embedded in.

Having explored the major trajectories of these debates, some of which have yet to make their presence fully felt in research on mass politics, the paper considers their implications for research methods. The suggestion is that the enduring dominance of quantitative opinion polling does not reflect an equivalent ascendancy in theoretical discussion of the methodological assumptions that underpin it. This invites discussion of a number of alternative methods, broadly associated with text- and practice-oriented perspectives, whose application could usefully be extended. In a field where the greater part of research has tended to model itself on one scientific ideal in particular – generally, the verification or falsification of propositions – the full potential of empirical work to inform the development of new ideas has been realised only thinly, something these alternative perspectives may be well placed to remedy, albeit with sensitivity to certain enduring challenges. While some such perspectives have their origins in critiques of the established approaches, their potential is nonetheless for a strongly positive contribution to the field, on the one hand by expanding the set of resources with which research is imagined and conducted, on the other by sharpening the claims that are made for it.

### An Interpretative Turn

For the purposes of overview, classically modern theories of the human world can be grouped in two broad traditions. In the one, extending from the utilitarianism of the Scottish Enlightenment to modern-day rational choice theory, the individual's pursuit of interest is taken to be the basic principle of human behaviour, and action is understood in terms of a purposeful, consequentialist logic. Man is viewed as a rational *homo economicus*, maximising his 'utility' according to interests generally treated as unambiguous. In the second tradition, regularly presented as antithetical to the first, and associated in particular with the work of Parsons and the later Durkheim, social structures are understood to be the basic ordering phenomenon, with action guided by a convergence of norms and values.<sup>2</sup> Just like individual interests, these are treated as objectively given rather than subjectively appraised, and are taken to produce regularities of behaviour across the given unit of population, often referred to as 'society'. The behaviour of *homo sociologicus* is norm-oriented rather than purpose-oriented, but the significance of interpretation is again downplayed: in these classical sociological accounts, social order is founded on a normative consensus that permits little space for reflection and reappraisal (Reckwitz 2002).

Both of these theoretical traditions form the basis for approaches to the study of mass politics. Perhaps the classic rendition of *homo economicus* in the political-science literature is found in the work of Anthony Downs, who proceeds from the assumption of man's instrumental rationality to elaborate a theoretical scheme intended to account for a variety of patterns of engagement and disengagement in mass politics (Downs 1957). Based on the deductive method, and with a strong set of starting assumptions concerning how 'rational man' behaves, Downs' theory does not lend itself easily to empirical study; nonetheless it has been influential for a sizeable body of research which looks at the accuracy with which economic interests can be used to explain political behaviour such as voting (Lipset 1959; Verba and Nie 1972). Drawing instead on the holistic classical sociological tradition, a large number of authors emphasise the extent to

which mass politics is guided by societal norms and values. Empirical research has looked at questions such as the changing values of western societies, or in the European context at the degree to which the populations of the EU member-states share common values such that one may speak of a 'European identity'.<sup>3</sup> *Homo sociologicus*, who acts according to the logic of appropriateness, is thus counterposed to his consequentialist cousin, setting off a string of debates about whether the individual or societal structure should be taken as the basic unit of an explanatory account.

One of the major trends in latter-twentieth-century social theorising alerts us to the fact that these two traditions have rather more in common than their tendency to position themselves against one another might suggest. Crucially, both approaches, by drastically underplaying the role of human interpretation and relegating the ideational to epiphenomenal status, exclude from view much that is indispensable to an understanding of the social world. One can illustrate some of the difficulties this may lead to by looking at how these two approaches make sense of one of the most basic elements of political behaviour: voting. The problems of a rational-choice perspective on voting have been well-documented. Given that interests are essentially ambiguous, any 'thick' conception of rational choice which seeks to remove non-material factors altogether tends to fare badly, and empirical studies are often unable to avoid bringing in the interpretative dimension: 'attitudes' usually make an appearance as an 'intervening variable' to explain how interests guide behaviour.<sup>4</sup> More fundamentally, even 'thinner' formulations of rational choice which, while maintaining the emphasis on *utility*, acknowledge the unpredictability of preferences, struggle to account for the willingness of large numbers of citizens to go to the polls at all in the face of the miniscule probability that their vote will be decisive (Green and Shapiro 1994; Friedman 1995). Conventional cost-benefit analyses suggest that this expenditure of time and energy for such a remote chance of payoff hardly constitutes a 'rational choice' – yet many a citizen, whom these accounts assume to be rational, still votes on a regular basis. Suggesting, as some have done, that the citizen's decision to vote is rational because it maximises the satisfaction

that accompanies the performance of civic duties merely points attention away from the individual to the embedding milieu in which her sense of duty takes shape (Riker and Ordeshook 1968).

Given that in order to account for why the act of voting should bring psychic rewards one needs a theory of the social significance attached to voting and of the emergence of expectations concerning good citizenship, this may seem to point to the superiority of a perspective more in tune with the model of *homo sociologicus*. Citizens might then be seen as inclined to vote because of societal norms which cast voting as a civic duty (Knack 1992). Yet such a perspective is severely problematic too, since the emphasis on regularities of behaviour is liable to obscure the variety of meanings attached to the act of voting, and the variety of reasons for which it may be pursued. Voting may be understood variously for instance as a matter of expressing attachment to a particular political party, of expressing support for a particular representative, or of expressing appreciation for the opportunity to vote. Considerable disagreement about the meaning of voting may be masked by any attempt to reduce it to the outcome of a normative consensus. Likewise, a helpful approach to the study of mass politics should be able to make sense not just of voting itself but of the decision *not* to vote. While rational choice may be too swift to explain this in terms of a short-term cost calculation, classical sociological approaches may be too quick to read non-voting as evidence of a shift in values away from the public to the private sphere, or the decline of norms of public engagement. Such possibilities should not be discounted, but there is a danger that one overlooks the contrary possibility: that the decision not to vote is made precisely because of its symbolic significance as a divergence from commonly held expectations. The politically important element of protest is crucial if one wants to understand acts of voting abstention: how people *play* with social expectations and use them for political effect is critical, yet is missed if one focuses solely on purported overarching norms and values as these are inferred from behavioural regularities, just as it is missed if one looks only for means-ends rationality. The type of classical sociological approach is liable to be blind to the meanings attached to non-conformist behaviour, with the risk of marginalising individual agency and falling prematurely into social determinism.



For those whose goal is to *predict* human conduct, these concerns will be insufficient to warrant a re-examination. One may feasibly enough state one's main task as the search for behavioural regularities without inquiry into their origins, in the manner of the behaviourist tradition. Such an approach, insofar as it produces suggestive findings and does not mistake regularities for imperatives, may have considerable instrumental value for the identification and response to large-scale trends: for the design of public policy, one might want to know for instance whether levels of voting abstention correlate with racial background and/or levels of income. Moreover, it may be that the heuristic application of rational choice or classical sociological models may usefully guide such research.<sup>5</sup> However, the study of mass politics cannot be reduced only to the search for regularities, since there is much that such regularities do not reveal, indeed may disguise. Nor do the models of *homo economicus* and *sociologicus* suffice as the means to a closer understanding of behaviour. The recognition that these two traditions in fact have rather more in common than their mutual opposition might suggest provides the opening for a series of interpretative approaches.

In social theory, the interpretative tradition sometimes goes under the heading 'culturalist', and finds extensive elaboration in the field of cultural sociology; but 'culture' is here understood not in terms of a tightly structured system of rules, in the image of classical sociological approaches, but rather with reference to the ideational resources for interpreting the world available to people as part of the social environment they inhabit and expressed in their practices of meaning-making (Swidler 1986, 2001b) (Wedeen 2002).<sup>6</sup> Unlike in the reasoning of the individualist-consequentialist perspective, a certain accent is placed on the importance of transpersonal phenomena – with language often the most celebrated, but not the only, example – yet in contrast to the holism of traditional sociological approaches there is an emphasis also on the possibility of human beings actively to renegotiate their cultural milieu rather than merely be constituted by it. The language of 'identity', with its implication of cross-spatial and cross-temporal sameness, is abandoned or sharply problematised (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Perhaps

most generally, one can say that the human being is re-endowed with a basic level of reflexivity, and is no longer taken to be the passive agent of instrumental rationality or social structure. One can speak of a new emphasis on the *creativity* of human action (Joas 1996). For those interested in mass politics, this is likely to be a welcome shift, since it accords well with a normative concern for the principle of collective self-rule and the possibility of political change.

Following the typology referred to above, it seems possible to find analogues in the study of mass politics for the interpretative social-theoretical approaches of mentalism, intersubjectivism, and text- and practice-oriented approaches. The first of these, in which the ideational or symbolic world is conceived in terms of the structure of individual minds, finds expression in the field of political psychology, an approach to mass politics which emerged in the US in the early 1960s assisted by advances in the fields of sampling theory and psychology.<sup>7</sup> As the self-description 'psychological' implies, the approach is strongly subjectivist and maintains a firm focus on the individual and that which is in the individual's head: a conventional layout of key terms specifies the subject matter as beliefs (deeply held ideas), attitudes (general orientations), and opinions (expressly formulated views on a particular subject) (Kavanagh 1983). No strong *a priori* position is taken on what the contents of these mental states may be, but they are generally taken to be the key elements in a causal account of political behaviour. In the words of one scholar, there is 'a golden hierarchical assumption of the study of political behaviour: the idea that for every individual, his beliefs influence his attitudes, which, in turn, influence his actual behaviour' (Bruter 2005, p.3). While recent approaches in the field of political psychology have looked increasingly at how environmental factors outside the mind, such as the media or political parties, may influence the structuring of mental activity, and have shown growing concern with the role of emotion in political cognition and the processing of information, the approach still remains strongly individualist and, as we shall discuss in a later section, generally relies on research methods which require this.<sup>8</sup>

The second approach, intersubjectivism, has been linked directly to political study through the work of Jürgen Habermas (Habermas 1984, 1989, 1990, 1996). The model of deliberative democracy he proposes is informed by his (intersubjectivist) theory of communicative action, in which agents are conceived as expressing their individuality in the context of social relationships of communication (Habermas 1984, p.17) (Cooke 2003). Rationality is central to this perspective, but now understood in terms of a social process of argumentation and reason-giving leading to enlightened and ultimately consensual opinion-formation. Unlike in the models of *homo economicus* and *sociologicus*, the capacity of citizens to reappraise and revise their political inclinations in the light of reasoned social interaction is given emphasis. As a normative model of democracy, the deliberative approach has by no means been elaborated always in an empirical mode, nor has it been addressed primarily to *mass* politics: indeed, its emphasis on a particular style of rationality has led to the charge of an inherent elitism (Sanders 1997). But the feasibility of its claims has been the subject of a considerable body of recent research (Chambers 2003).

Text- and practice-oriented approaches,<sup>9</sup> in which the symbolic world is located in the meanings immanent to sets of routinised practice (with language usage a prominent one) also find expression in the study of mass politics (Wedeen 2002), though they have perhaps never acquired the mainstream status of political-psychological and, to a lesser extent, deliberative-intersubjectivist approaches. We shall refer later to a number of approaches informed by the ideas of social theorists, cultural sociologists and anthropologists such as Anthony Giddens, Clifford Geertz, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu.<sup>10</sup> Such approaches tend to define themselves in opposition not just to the classical economic and sociological theories but also to the two interpretative traditions mentioned, and so they will be outlined in greater detail when discussing below some of the substantive points of debate to have emerged in their encounter. Like interpretative approaches more generally, they place emphasis on the symbolic world and the various kinds of knowledge which inform and constrain actors' behaviour, but the accounts they give rise to are generally less universalist in their intended scope, and less oriented to the study of

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causal relationships. This points to the study of mass politics as a project of ‘thick description’, involving the analysis of the political implications of prevalent forms of practice rather than the search for law-like regularities and causal mechanisms that govern the social world as a whole (Geertz 1973; Schatzki 2002, pp.xi-xii).

While it makes sense to link these three approaches together under the heading of an ‘interpretative turn’ so as to underline their divergence from the models of *homo economicus* and *sociologicus*, this can only be a prelude to looking more closely at the points of difference between them. Their shared concern to reduce reliance on non-interpretative approaches appears to this author quite valid, but some of the perspectives put forward in substitute have been shown equally susceptible to critique, with further theoretical divergences as the result.

#### Units of Analysis: From the Individual Mind to Language and Practice

The mentalist focus on the individual mind has been challenged by social theorists on a number of grounds. A first question which arises is whether it makes sense to take the individual mind in isolation as an object of study, and to ascribe to it a causal status for behaviour (Schatzki 2002, 1996). From the perspective of intersubjectivist and textualist/practice-oriented approaches, this will seem a curious move, since it implies that mental states are independent of given situations and the social relationships and material phenomena of which these are composed. According the mind this kind of transcendental status may seem redolent of the much problematised Cartesian mind-body dualism, a kind of secularisation of the Christian world-view in which the individual is reified as an independent unit so as to make sense of doctrines of free will and personal responsibility. Even if one wants to set aside issues of consistency across contexts, and propose that in the given situation mental states do have a causal effect on behaviour (in Davidson’s terms that a person’s ‘holding a belief’ can be the explanation of their subsequent action (Davidson

2001)), one will inevitably face difficulties concerning how to conceptualise the possibility that there is no one-to-one correspondence between beliefs and courses of action. An individual may simultaneously hold multiple beliefs which do not all point to the same course of action, or, precisely because they do point to the same action, it may be hard to associate that action with a particular belief. Moreover, it may be that much behaviour has a routinised quality, and that the kind of knowledge which informs it cannot easily be expressed in the purposive, propositional form implied by a desire-belief model (Schatzki 2001).

A second question posed to the mentalist perspective asks how, even if one takes seriously the ontological and/or methodological priority granted to the individual mind, one is to gain access to its contents. The conceptual problems just noted reappear as epistemological ones: mental phenomena such as beliefs resist definitive description because they are underdetermined by the opinions which an individual articulates (Barnes 2001, p.17; Schatzki 1996, chap. 2). One can infer as many beliefs as one wishes from a given stated opinion, rendering the reconstruction of an individual's beliefs a matter of strong conjecture. Furthermore, by probing them in a certain way, one is establishing a particular context, one that may influence the findings. When an individual is asked to report his/her beliefs and reasons for action, the response is never a straightforward description but a 'speech act' in a new exchange, perhaps self-justificatory in its logic (Austin 1962). In advance of significant developments in cognitive science (the point would still be contentious) there is an unavoidably metaphorical aspect to any claim that an individual 'holds' a certain set of beliefs, and reason to be cautious about assuming a causal effect on behaviour.

Arguably many of the challenges which have been encountered by researchers in political psychology are traceable to these problematic underlying assumptions. A research question typical of the discipline in its formative years was the extent to which people's beliefs and attitudes reproduce the coherent and stable ideological structures associated with elite opinion such as the left-right divide. Philip E. Converse set as his object of enquiry 'the nature of belief systems in mass publics', defining a belief system as 'a configuration of ideas and attitudes in which the

elements are bound together by some form of constraint or functional interdependence' (Converse 1964, p.207). The important conclusion of Converse's study was that, other than for those he termed elites (the top 10% or so), beliefs about politics tended to be unstable and weakly integrated: 'the net result, as one moves downward, is that constraint declines across the universe of idea-elements, and that the range of relevant belief systems becomes narrower and narrower' (Converse 1964, p.213). While this was a sophisticated study and its results were widely received as significant, it exerted an agenda-setting influence which was by no means entirely positive.<sup>11</sup> The approach relied on the strong assumption – again, metaphor one might say – that inside the individual's mind there are attitudes and beliefs which (s)he carries around and deploys in like manner from one situation to another, regardless of the context, so as to form an opinion. Converse defined constraint in its 'static' version as 'the success we would have in predicting, given initial knowledge that an individual holds a specified attitude, that he holds certain further ideas and attitudes.' (Converse 1964, p.207) Ideas and attitudes are thus described as though they come in a specifiable unit form, like the songs which make up a record collection, possessed or not possessed. Having set up the question in these terms, and having discovered little in the way of such constraint in the course of his empirical study, the natural consequence was a polemical debate about whether 'attitudes' or '*non*-attitudes' are the norm amongst non-elites (Converse 1970). Adhering to the terms of this debate, John Zaller was able to reach the conclusion that citizens perhaps respond to opinion polls according to whatever happens to be at the top of their minds: his suggestion that they 'make it up as they go along' was successfully provocative (Zaller 1992) (Sniderman et al. 2001, p.256). The shadow hanging over the mainstream in political psychology has therefore been the lingering suspicion that, taking individual minds as the unit of analysis, the target of enquiry may be too amorphous to be worthy of study.

Political psychology has evolved as a discipline, and most scholars in the field no longer seek the kind of over-arching belief system which Converse was looking for. The more recent literature tends to downplay the possibility of global constraint (i.e. integrated beliefs across the

range of political issues) and to focus on domain-specific ideational packages structured not so much by sharply-defined ideology as by heuristics and schemae (Johnston Conover and Feldman 1984) (Sniderman et al. 1991). Yet the emphasis on the individual mind persists. Partly one can link this to the political theory which underpins this approach, specifically its aggregationist conception of public opinion (Price 1992). For as long as public opinion is conceived as the sum total of individual opinions, there will be the inclination to reify opinions, beliefs and attitudes as individual phenomena which are 'in there somewhere' so that there is something which can then be aggregated. These have to be seen as acontextual, since absent the assumption that there is only one proper way for these to be formulated and described the logic of numbers would break down and the resultant aggregations would be meaningless.

But more generally the difficulty is rooted in the individualist ontology this perspective maintains (admittedly a more interpretative one than that of *homo economicus*). Albeit in the name of polling *public* opinion, respondents are questioned in private, are encouraged to make up their own minds without help from the interviewer or from acquaintances, and are guaranteed anonymity of response, all lest their answers be distorted in some way. The goal is to minimise the intrusion of 'context' (sometimes referred to as 'bias' or 'framing effects'). When empirical findings do not invite unequivocal conclusions, it is often these situational factors which take the blame, resulting in more debate about whether 'real attitudes' are being missed because of the distorting effect of framing, and whether the attitudes which have been documented are not in fact 'non-attitudes' masquerading as attitudes.<sup>12</sup> These debates are forced upon the discipline by the problematic starting assumption of the acontextual individual mind as the unit of analysis.

The difficulties of the mentalist approach seem to suggest the need to move away from a strong emphasis on the unitary individual. To be sure, empirical research of considerable value may still be generated while adhering to this perspective: correlations between verbal statements, or between statements and voting patterns, may be richly suggestive, especially when used comparatively to flag up variations across time and space. The language of beliefs and attitudes

will often be a natural one in which to make sense of empirical findings of considerable consequence. Nor is it plausible to seek to dispense altogether with the idea of individual mental states: any interpretative approach which is not wholly determinist must make space for innovation and individual creativity, even if one avoids phrasing this in cognitive terms (Hollis 1994, p.196).<sup>13</sup> But an approach which gives centre-stage to the consciousness of the individual will inevitably have little to say about the underlying symbolic patterns and broader schemes of meaning into which putative mental states fit, and which may enable and constrain individuals in their opinion-formation and political action.

Clearly the answer cannot be simply to revert to holism in the manner of the classical sociological approaches mentioned above, with their emphasis on law-like societal norms, since this would revive the same tendencies towards social determinism. Rather, it may be that it is the dichotomy of society and the individual which needs to be overcome, so as to enable a focus instead on what might be called specifically the *social*: the domain of transpersonal coordinated activity, where agents are linked by the mutual responsiveness required to maintain shared practices.<sup>14</sup> Such a perspective allows one to ‘decentre’ the individual mind by seeing it as interdependent with wider processes of human interaction, whether one conceives these in terms of a transpersonal orientation to rationality, in terms of the disciplining effects of discourse(s), or the conventions of practice that interpersonal coordination demands. By seeing the individual as drawing upon ideational resources or ‘repertoires’ which predate her and constrain the possibilities open to her, yet which she redeploys in new ways and whose reproduction she actively shapes, the voluntarism implied when each individual is conceptualised as constructing the ideational world from scratch can be avoided without reverting to a social determinist perspective which reduces the individual to the passive bearer of structure (Sewell 1992, pp.7ff).

This move can be associated with both intersubjectivism and textualist/practice-oriented approaches, though these diverge in ways we shall examine. One of the natural objects of study is then language. The study of discourse seems to hold out the possibility of dissolving the



dichotomy of individual and society, since discourse plainly cannot be understood purely in terms of individual actions and intentions or collective structures: the sentence is not ‘owned’ by the speaker, since it requires borrowed vocabulary and grammar to be meaningful, yet vocabulary and grammar would neither exist nor evolve but for the incessant creativity of the speaker. The speaker is both master and slave (Barthes 1982).<sup>15</sup> In addition to this useful starting-point, a focus on language invites particular emphasis on the context in which opinions are formed, the process by which they are developed, and the meanings in which they are embedded, all of which are neglected in the mentalist approach. It also invites sensitivity to a wider field of political behaviour than simply the ticking of boxes on questionnaires and voting slips. Language is not however the only site of activity that one might want to explore empirically. A wide range of social practices might be susceptible to examination, including patterns of cooperation and collective action, practices of conflict and conflict avoidance, or the enactment of local knowledge.

Before looking more closely at the kinds of research programme for mass politics that might derive from a focus on the *social* rather than the individual or the structural-societal, let us look more closely at one of the key points of contention between intersubjectivism and text-/practice-oriented approaches: how one should understand the nature of that social practice on which they are generally agreed is of notable importance, language.

### From Rational Communication to Presuppositions and Routinised Practice

The classically modern theories discussed in the first section, and the mentalist approach discussed in the last, are based on an ideal-language perspective: they assume that there is no reason to doubt the possibility of a perfect correspondence between the phenomenal world and our descriptions of it, so long as we use language properly. It is assumed for instance that ‘interests’, ‘values’ or ‘beliefs and attitudes’ are susceptible to correct and incorrect description, and that through

empirical study the researcher may inch towards the former. This is the logic of the scientific method, as derived from a certain understanding of how the queen of the sciences – physics – has progressed in the modern period (albeit an understanding which contemporary physicists might be wary of) (Murphy 1995). The intersubjectivist approach, while according language a more privileged status than simply the medium of description, and while insisting that the individual not be isolated from the context of discursive interaction, maintains a similarly idealist perspective on the nature of language, and attracts far-reaching critique from text- and practice-oriented approaches for this reason.

For intersubjectivists, language is the crucial means by which communication between individuals becomes possible and, of particular political significance, the means by which free public reason can be exercised (Habermas 1984, p.99). The perspective is generally linked tightly to a critical-theoretical stance which emphasises the possibility of overcoming distorted views through reasoned debate. It is assumed that discursive interaction which is free and fair will produce a rational consensus on truth – perhaps even that such a rational consensus can be *defined* as that which emerges when conditions for free and fair discursive interaction are achieved (Habermas 1990).<sup>16</sup> Where these conditions fail, it is assumed to be for empirical rather than theoretical reasons. The possibility of language to express a universal form of reason is axiomatic. Text- and practice-oriented approaches, on the other hand, abandon the ideal-language perspective. Meaning is taken to be rooted in language *usage*, and there can be no comprehensive system of rules by which to regulate uniformity of usage since rule-following requires interpretation, and depends ultimately not on theoretical propositions but on the practical know-how of competent actors. Meaning is possible not because there is a universal grammar which anchors language practice, but because language-users tacitly ‘know how to carry on’ based on – though never quite reducible to – their cultural familiarity with like situations (Schatzki 1996).<sup>17</sup> In this view, treating language as purely a medium is to severely downplay the significance of routinised practice and the taking-of-things-for-granted. As James Tully has emphasised, drawing on the insights of the

later Wittgenstein, not everything on the basis of which people think, argue, and act as they do can be justified (Tully 1989, p.181). There is always a point at which justifications are exhausted, when bedrock is reached and ‘my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: This is simply what I do’ (Wittgenstein 1976, §217). Indeed, it is precisely the *impossibility* of shaking off all features of particularity, and the rootedness of speakers in conventional practices, which establishes the ‘rough ground’, as Wittgenstein calls it, upon which discursive endeavours like communication, deliberation and opinion-formation can be achieved. It is therefore the tacit dimension (Polanyi 1967) that deserves particular attention as one examines the social world, since it is here that the terms of debate are set, and where the constraints on political change may be found.

This fundamental point of disagreement notwithstanding, both intersubjectivism and text- / practice-oriented perspectives are attractive for the study of mass politics in that they direct attention towards phenomena which are readily susceptible to empirical exploration rather than towards the invisible phenomena of the cognitive realm.<sup>18</sup> Both might take for instance an everyday discussion on matters of political relevance as their object of study, with the discursive interaction itself rather than the individuals party to it as the principal point of interest. But the two approaches then point research in different directions. Intersubjectivists, insofar as they follow a Habermasian critical agenda, will want to examine how closely the interaction approaches the deliberative ideal. Of importance for them will therefore be questions to do with how the discussion evolves, the extent to which preferences seem to change in the course of discussion, the validity of the reasoning strategies adopted, the kinds of consensus which emerge, and the extent to which the opinion generated can be said to be of better quality than that which emerges from traditional polling. Text- and practice-oriented perspectives on the other hand will be more concerned with the unintended and tacit aspects of the discussion, and their enabling and constraining effects. There may be less focus on opinions as such and more on the common-sense assumptions which underlie these and which, by restricting the sphere of agreement or disagreement to a manageable size, make possible the exchange of views. Researchers may

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explore the kinds of topic brought up in conversation, the reference-points invoked in their discussion, the usage of key concepts, and the assumptions made about political agency. Also, rather than seeing the discussion as the achievement of distinct individual subjects, they will be interested in the kinds of subjecthood the discussion makes possible: the 'I's', 'we's' and other roles or 'subject positions' routinely invoked, the power-political implications of these, the different patterned discourses in which these are embedded, and the contradictions which arise as different discourses are drawn upon. Researchers may be interested in silences or bodily expressions, including mannerisms of deference or authority, and the acceptance or rejection of these. Stepping back from the particular case, they may also want to explore how far such discussions are naturally occurring in everyday life, and the situational factors which may hinder or facilitate them.

### Implications for Research Methods

The opinion poll or survey has generally been the research method of choice for those studying mass politics from the perspective of classically modern theories or the more interpretative individualism of political psychology. It is the logical operationalisation of the assumption that individuals and/or their mental features can be considered in isolation. Insofar as the link we have made to certain debates in social theory suggests the need to be cautious on this, what does this imply for the method itself? Certainly there need be no automatic association between methodological or ontological individualism and quantitative methods, and while quantitative polling methods have a natural affinity with aggregative approaches (since both prioritise the numerical) this association could in principle be weakened.<sup>19</sup> The polling method might be used with a view not so much to revealing what are taken to be the respondents' context-independent preferences, beliefs or values, but so as simply to explore what responses they are prone to give to

particular questions, and how these correlate with other responses or behavioural tendencies. The method can also be used to seek such patterns at a collective level, thus bypassing the problem of unstable dispositions at the individual level (Page and Shapiro 1992). One does not have to assume, in other words, that the propositions on which answers are given correspond to discrete idea-elements in the heads of respondents.

However, not only would the necessity of such a move probably be disputed by most scholars in political psychology, but there are problems with the polling method which are not easily overcome. Survey questionnaires have justifiably been criticised as instruments of power, in the sense that they presuppose which are the important questions to be asked, and may indicate to the respondent what an appropriate answer might be. They also remove from the researcher's view much of the most interesting material – the process of engagement with a question, the meanings attributed to its vocabulary, the hesitations, the indifference, the side-comments, discussion with others, and variation in discussion across contexts. Opinion polls and related quantitative approaches are not designed to study contextual interaction; quite the contrary, the point of using polls is usually to neutralise the importance of situational cues and thereby get at the supposed pre-interactional attitude, belief (etc.) as directly as possible. Furthermore, aggregative approaches based on opinion polling can be insensitive to differences in the relative importance of different political issue areas, and to differences in the relative importance of the opinions of different individuals or groups (for famous critiques, see (Blumer 1948; Wright Mills 1940; Taylor 1994; Bourdieu 1979; Adorno 2005)). Whilst innovations in method – including the use of pre-poll interviews – can to some extent alleviate the first of these blind-spots, the second is bound up in the logic of random sampling, the point of which is to be blind to such differences. This may indicate a need to move away from strong reliance on numbers-based research methods based on the aggregation of individual units.

One of the standard defences given of opinion polling is that, for all its faults, it still usefully mirrors the mechanisms which are employed as part of the democratic process to 'capture

public opinion': electoral voting and referenda. These latter are also based on the principle of aggregation and the secrecy of ballot, and those who criticise polling are therefore close to criticising the democratic process itself. There is indeed some truth in the idea that the two are linked: one can plausibly imagine that, in liberal democracies, a certain conception of public opinion is reified so as to give meaning to the idea of popular sovereignty, and that polling is embraced as another means to lend solidity to this. Hence what Blumer called 'the narrow operationalist position that public opinion consists of what public opinion polls poll.' (Blumer 1948, p.543) And for as long as this conception of public opinion remains institutionalised in democratic voting arrangements, opinion polls undoubtedly will be important tools of research. However, even if one sets aside their normative role in sedimenting what is ultimately a problematic conception of public opinion, they should not be accorded a *special* status, not least since they are erratic as predictors of political behaviour and since their findings may be of ambiguous significance. To pick one example, in March 2005 the polling organisation Eurobarometer released figures suggesting that 48% of the French population and 63% of the Dutch population were in favour of the EU Constitutional Treaty, with 17% and 11% against it respectively. It moreover suggested that these high levels of support corresponded to a high level of knowledge about the Treaty, with the populations of both countries featuring in the top five of the EU-25 on this measure (Eurobarometer 2005). The results of the referenda a few months later were rather different of course: 55% of the French vote and 62% of the Dutch was against. Although it is quite possible that 'public opinion' changed rapidly in the intervening months, or that the referenda themselves failed to capture that opinion, both possibilities raise strong questions about exactly what it is that is captured at any one moment and aggregated.

Shifting away from the purely mentalist perspective points to a number of possible alternative research methods. Emerging predominantly from the intersubjectivist tradition, 'deliberative polls' and citizens' juries, in which participants are convened in a group environment and provided with informational resources with which to enrich a debate about policy proposals,

are a well known and promising substitute for individual polling, even if one remains ambivalent on whether rational consensus can or should be the expected outcome of such exercises.<sup>20</sup> There are also a number of interesting possibilities for studying, more in the text- and practice-oriented tradition, the ideational resources available in a given society, how people engage with and adapt these, and what the political implications may be. Group discussions again provide a useful setting: in contrast to one-to-one interviews, the role of the individual interviewee's whimsy in setting the course of discussion may be curtailed, since each is accountable to others for what they choose to talk about, and that which is collectively deemed inconsequential is likely to be drowned out in discussion.<sup>21</sup> Group discussions, both convened and naturally occurring, provide the opportunity to examine what ideas are invoked spontaneously by participants in the absence of a structured questionnaire, and how these are handled and interpreted in mutual coordination.<sup>22</sup> This then enables the application of a range of analytical techniques. Frame analysis and discourse analysis can be used to look at the ideational tropes or 'interpretative repertoires' which enable and constrain actors in their political discursive practice, at the construction of collective subjects, and at a range of acts of legitimisation and delegitimisation.<sup>23</sup> Drawing on cultural sociology, the study of 'symbolic boundaries' provides a further perspective from which to analyse how the routinised invocation of ideational resources can produce collective subjects of political significance (Lamont and Molnár 2002). Modes of justification represent another important subject of enquiry, for which the work of social theorists Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot is of particular relevance. Following their exposition of the different 'orders of worth' by the logic of which justificatory arguments can be made, and on which some degree of tacit agreement is required in order for conflicts of opinion to be adjudicated, one may explore how these are invoked in the conversational context (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999; Lamont and Thévenot 2000).<sup>24</sup> For all such topics of analysis, which become of particular significance as one shifts away from a focus on the individual mind to sites of social activity, the study of group environments is superior to the use of survey questionnaires.

In addition to the study of artificially convened discussions, participant observation represents a valuable research method because it allows the researcher to explore not just political engagement but political withdrawal, and the sense in which this is pursued. In the context of a downward trend in voting turnouts across western democracies, this focus on how the practices of everyday life may carry depoliticising effects seems of particular significance, and is a question on which conventional research methods are weak because they immediately direct the respondents' attention towards matters political. Nina Eliasoph provides an impressive demonstration of the application of participant observation in her study *Avoiding Politics*, exploring how, in certain social situations, norms of etiquette are used to render inappropriate the discussion of political topics. Furthermore, invoking Erving Goffman's distinction between 'frontstage' and 'backstage', she explores how people in private contexts may feel fully able to articulate collective interests whilst in public contexts may feel constrained to adopt the more parochial language of a particular 'identity'. Her approach highlights the importance of social norms for understanding how political participation emerges or fails to emerge, yet by looking at how these norms vary across contexts and how they rely on individual choices for their maintenance, she avoids resurrecting the passive figure of *homo sociologicus* (Eliasoph 1998) (Cf. (Cramer Walsh 2004)).

While acknowledging the insights such approaches can produce, some scholars trained in quantitative methods will no doubt retain concerns about the scientific status of such findings. It may be suggested that while qualitative research of this kind can lead to interesting new ideas and theories, ultimately it falls to quantitative approaches to establish their genuine significance, thus pointing to a methodological division of labour between qualitative 'discovery' and quantitative 'verification'. Perhaps those sympathetic to Popper's critique of early positivism will prefer to speak of *falsification* rather than verification, but the implication would be much the same. In response, many qualitative researchers might argue that such a separation of tasks is not easy to maintain, even if one accepts the objectivist perspective implied.<sup>25</sup> Their commitment to studying



meaning in context is not easily replicated using quantitative methods such as opinion polls, since the very attraction of the latter is that they allow the rapid accumulation of data without recourse to close observation. What is 'verified' or 'falsified' may therefore not be the same as that which was 'discovered' by alternative methods, and many questions of interest to qualitative researchers relating to important but abstract concepts such as *power* may resist the formal 'operationalisation' required by verificatory quantitative research. The matter is complicated further by the fact that many qualitative researchers will be sympathetic to Quine's suggestion that theories are under-determined by empirical data (i.e. that the implications of new findings are never clear-cut) and therefore that strict notions of verification or falsification are misleading (Quine 1951).

Rather than a division of labour which sees quantitative methods as the underpinning of the scientific enterprise, arguably what is needed is a variety of approaches whose findings are then placed in dialogue. Insofar as text- and practice-oriented theoretical approaches abandon an ideal-language perspective and a search for the one true description as the purpose of scientific research, they do point to a certain pragmatism and pluralism, discouraging the researcher from a methodologically missionary stance which seeks to convert all scholars to a single approach. Methods should be judged then not according to which corresponds unambiguously to 'the facts', or according to their capacity to test a theory conclusively, but according to the types of research project they make possible and the extent to which they offer new ways of conceiving and tackling research problems. Quantitative methods will retain important uses, such as to study declarations of voting intention (as above) or levels of knowledge on a specific topic, and adherents of quantitative and qualitative methods will benefit from a disposition of mutual curiosity. Just as dismissal of competing methods is ill-advised, so there is little to be gained from the veneration of a particular method, styling oneself e.g. a 'frame analyst' as opposed to a 'discourse analyst', as though such terms each implied a clear, distinct and settled activity. Such fields should instead be treated as providing useful indications of how relevant research might be undertaken, to be

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engaged with rather than blindly followed. In the words of Alexander Pope, ‘fools admire, but men of sense approve’ (Pope 1973 Part II, l.190).

### A Few Enduring Problems

By making a connection between empirical social science in the field of mass politics and a number of debates in social theory, the previous sections have underlined the larger significance of some of the theoretical and methodological choices researchers need to make, and have indicated where a reappraisal of approaches may be necessary. At the end of a chain of approaches, as if in the position of ultimate insight, we have placed the text- and practice-oriented strands of a wider ‘interpretative turn’. The attraction of these approaches lies in the opportunities they provide for sidestepping the slide into voluntarism or determinism, in their willingness to seek the symbolic world in observable rather than cognitive phenomena, and in their avoidance of a reduction of language to the medium of conscious communication, focusing instead on its unintended and tacit aspects, and the political effects of these. But so as to dispel the implication that these approaches mark the end of theoretical debate, it may be as well to examine some of the challenges which they leave remaining.

Abandoning the notion of an ideal representational language reaffirms the embeddedness of the researcher in the social world – a principle which has become a familiar one in contemporary social science. In contrast to a certain reading of the science of physics, the researcher is not assumed to be the detached observer of facts. An alternative perspective presents new challenges however. Consider for example the empirical question of how one might go about identifying a ‘discursive resource’ or a ‘practice’ with a view to assessing its political implications. The researcher needs to balance two competing demands: there is the need on the one hand to be sufficiently alien to the subject matter in question so as to be ‘struck’ by its distinctive features (the

danger being that the researcher takes these for granted just like the actors themselves, and is therefore unable to discern and analyse them) and yet there is the need also to be sufficiently embedded in the subject matter as to be able to interpret and make sense of what is found. It is possible to alleviate the one danger (e.g. by conducting research in locations where one is ‘culturally foreign’) only by accentuating the other, and either such move will have implications for the number and the kind of resources and practices considered worthy of record (Turner 1994, pp.19-24). Moreover, the extent to which these competing demands have been successfully balanced is not something which the researcher is in a position to assess: ultimately this judgement must fall to the research community as a whole, whose members he or she must seek to persuade.

This raises the matter of by what criteria superior and inferior accounts of the social world are to be distinguished. If one conceives the researcher as an interpreting actor who depends on skills of perception and sense-making, and the research community as second-order interpreters, there may be difficulties in relying purely on naturalist notions such as intersubjective reliability. Certainly there may be cases where studies and findings can be usefully replicated by secondary researchers, but there may also be cases where interpretations are contestable and where the desire for scientific consensus would restrict insights to the level of the banal. Nor can the coherence of a representation be treated as an indicator of its superiority, since many cultural ensembles will include contradictory elements that no sophisticated account may ignore (Geertz 1973). A more plausible argument, as concerns text- and practice-oriented approaches, holds that the mark of a high-quality reading of the social world is that it opens up new ways of posing and engaging with research problems. It makes convincing sense of the empirical material at hand, and in addition its methods and concepts show themselves promising, perhaps with some amendment, for application to new sets of material. Often it will draw further credibility by resonating with the findings achieved by other methods, and thus may usefully be *probed* with these, even if not confirmed or refuted. Ultimately, the study’s success in achieving sustained support from a reflexive audience is also like to be important (Kratochwil 2007). But these points notwithstanding, taking

hermeneutical ideas seriously does mean accepting that to demonstrate a given reading's superiority beyond reasonable dissent may not be possible, and therefore that disputes about its contribution may be ongoing.

The researcher who wants to make claims for the wider significance of her findings will also face the challenge of how best to think of the empirical data she draws out: as embedded in a larger grammatical structure (a *parole* embedded in a *langue*, in Saussure's terminology), or as simply one of several utterances or practices bearing a resemblance to one another but not structured by a larger whole? If the former, then how does one study grammatical structures when all one can access are particular utterances – how does one derive the nature of the category from the item? – and how does one give these verbal rendition? If the latter then what is it that allows a connection between utterances to be made; how does one generalise one's findings? Many discourse analysts and practice theorists describe themselves as post-structuralist and reject the idea of grammars (Potter and Wetherell 1987, p.173; Davies and Harré 1990). Whilst this is a coherent perspective, it makes difficult something which can often be of great interest in the analysis of any given empirical situation: that is, consideration not just of what was said or done but of what was *not* said or done, yet might well have been given the patterns of action culturally familiar to the relevant actors. When Boltanski and Thévenot adopt the term 'grammars of worth', it is precisely this possibility which they enable, albeit at the risk of reifying structure once more.

Next, one may need to think about the extension of the repertoires and practices one identifies, i.e. how best to describe the set of people who take them up. Here one encounters the old problem of 'groupism', whereby one is tempted to infer arbitrarily that the boundaries of the circle of repertoire-users correspond to the boundaries of a recognisable group. The problem is more fundamental than methodological nationalism (Chernilo 2006), since it arises with regard to units other than the nation, whether it be cities, ethnic groups, professions, or sexes. Clearly one wants to avoid linking the use of particular discursive repertoires with a pre-defined collectivity, both because a neat overlap of this kind is empirically implausible and because for normative

reasons one wants to avoid arriving at a perspective which does not allow for the possibility that individuals may renounce some of the patterns with which they are confronted. To some extent it may be possible to circumvent the difficulty by means of careful phrasing of research goals and conclusions, so that one studies for instance the uneven territorial distribution and ‘availability’ of discourses and practices rather than their adhesion to particular social groups (Lamont and Thévenot 2000, pp.6-9). It is likely though that language itself makes some kind of problem unavoidable, since whatever noun ones uses to describe the participants to an empirical study will imply some act of inference to a larger population. A combination of cautiously phrased and consistently problematised generalisations probably represents the most sensible means by which to continue empirical research in the face of this challenge.

Finally, while a focus on the *social* rather than the individual or the societal may allow one to avoid binary thinking on the structure-agency problem, the problem itself does not fully disappear. Swidler’s suggestion that culture be understood as a ‘toolkit’ represents a move away from the social determinism associated with seeing culture as determinative of values. Humans can be understood then as active ‘problem-solvers’ rather than as passive bearers of structure, but without sliding to the polar extreme of the radically autonomous individual since they work within the constraints of their inherited cultural resources. Similar considerations are undoubtedly behind several of the approaches we have considered.<sup>26</sup> Yet arguably none of these approaches is able to give a satisfactory account of how such a process of strategic choice between possible lines of action works. In particular, there is a danger that, in presenting actors as consciously able to select different frames, resources or repertoires of action according to whatever goals they wish to realise, one reverts on the one hand to means-ends rationality and a disembedding of the actor, and on the other one resurrects the idea of a meta-language in which competing options are constituted, evaluated and selected.<sup>27</sup> One risks sacrificing the possibility that the cultural configurations of which people are a part shape their motivations and attachments to certain goals more than they, as ‘toolkit users’, are able to say. These difficulties can be avoided if one abandons the attempt at

causal explanation, which is at the heart of the structure-agency problem, but it is a move which many are naturally reluctant to make.

Drawing these strands together, one sees the extent to which future work in the field of mass politics needs to remain connected to social-theoretical debates. Neither a retreat to naïve empiricism, nor a conscious limitation of the research agenda to those topics deemed susceptible to naturalist approaches, are adequate means by which to escape these challenges. On the contrary, there is a sense in which empirical researchers are particularly well-placed to contribute to the advance of these debates, since the challenges emerge most sharply in the context of practical research problems. Theoretical debates are usefully disciplined by the experiential knowledge of seasoned researchers. Yet such an outcome requires continued theoretical self-awareness. What one takes to be a research problem depends itself on one's theoretical presuppositions, and there should be no expectation of general principles of good method that can be applied mechanically without sensitivity to broader questions of the kind discussed.

### Conclusion

The general aim of this paper has been to point to some of the arguments with which researchers in the field of mass politics may enrich the consideration and justification of their theoretical and methodological choices. This has been coupled with the more specific aim of offering a corrective to the dominance of certain approaches. The suggestion has been that too much work in this field is weakly attentive to the significance of how people *interpret* the political world, while to the extent this question is explored it tends to be from a strongly individualist perspective. Given that the arguments for doing so are inconclusive, new lines of research are needed. In particular, text- and practice-oriented approaches promise to cast light on the routinised, taken-for-granted aspects of human action which other perspectives generally exclude from view or which they solidify as

law-like norms, and may therefore at the very least be a valuable complement to the growing intersubjectivist literature associated with deliberative democracy and the widely popular mentalism of mainstream political psychology. The emphasis of text- and practice-oriented approaches on the in-depth study of meaning and action in context makes them particularly sensitive to the combined influence of cultural inheritance and individual creativity, that realm of the social which tends to be badly captured in existing accounts. Yet these new approaches will equally need to be handled with a good level of theoretical attentiveness, for they raise distinctive challenges of their own. In the study of mass politics in particular, where the organising concept of ‘the people’ is especially open-ended in meaning, empiricists must be theorists as well, for conceptual choices continue to present themselves. Without wanting to downplay the normative-political character of these, it is likely that debates in social theory can be an important point of orientation.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> A better term may therefore be *lay* politics, expressing the contrast to politics as a professionalised activity, but for reasons of brevity the more familiar vocabulary is used here.

<sup>2</sup> The work of Marx and Weber contributes to both traditions. We may set aside those ‘naturalist’ theories that see social structure in terms of social density (following the early Durkheim) or social ‘forms’ (following Simmel).

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. (Fuchs and Klingemann 2000; Ester et al. 1993), works in the tradition pioneered by (Inglehart 1977).

<sup>4</sup> E.g. (Lipset 1959; Verba and Nie 1972). On ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ versions of rational choice, with their varying degrees of emphasis on the purely material world, see the overview in (Green and Shapiro 1994) In common with all traditions, rational choice is not a bounded entity, and in its more interpretative forms – where ‘attitudes’, ‘beliefs’ and ‘reasons’ are prominent – it merges with the mentalist approaches discussed later in this paper.

<sup>5</sup> For defence of a pluralist standpoint, see (Fay 1996; Fay and Moon 1977).

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion of the interpretative turn in social theorising, see (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Reckwitz 2002; Sewell 1992; Hollis 1994; Taylor 1994).

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<sup>7</sup> Early practitioners sometimes referred to themselves as ‘political behaviouralists’; however, for the purposes of this paper we shall consider their work a variation of political psychology, albeit one of the most central ones. Political psychology has diversified somewhat in recent years – for an account which emphasises its pluralism see (Sullivan et al. 2002).

<sup>8</sup> There are exceptions to this pattern of strong individualism in political psychology, notably where scholars draw on neighbouring disciplines such as social psychology and communications: e.g. (Iyengar 1991).

<sup>9</sup> For good reason these are sometimes treated as distinct approaches (Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki 2001; Neumann 2002). However, while it is true that one version of textualism – the French structuralist kind associated with Saussure and Lévi-Strauss, which emphasises strongly determinative discourses at a macro level – is quite singular in its approach, for reasons of brevity, and in recognition of the common strand which the work of the later Wittgenstein represents, one may group practice-oriented theories with Anglo-Saxon textualist approaches, while acknowledging their differences on the centrality of language and the importance of non-propositional knowledge (cf. below).

<sup>10</sup> Harold Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology has been another important influence, as has discourse theory, emerging from post-structuralism and the language philosophy of the later Wittgenstein – an overview is (Howarth and Torfing 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Before then, political psychology might have developed in a number of directions, perhaps following the more strongly interpretative approach of Robert E. Lane (Lane 1962).

<sup>12</sup> The metaphor of the ‘frame’ is an interesting one: it asks us to think of the objects towards which attitudes are formed as being analogous to pictures, and contextual factors as analogous to the picture-frame and the picture’s setting more generally (neighbouring pictures, the play of sunlight, the art gallery itself, and so on). In the view of art which the metaphor asks us to take up, there is a correct picture-frame, a correct set of neighbouring pictures, a correct play of sunlight, a correct art gallery, etc., and all other variations can only be treated as distortions. This conception of art is not widely held, and raises doubts about the analogous conception of politics.

<sup>13</sup> Arguably one of the weaknesses of *structuralist* textualism (see fnt. 9) is exactly that, by radically diminishing the role of the individual mind, it points to a closed symbolic system with little space for agency and change.

<sup>14</sup> That the society-individual dualism is problematic has been long observed, yet from many social-theoretical perspectives it is hard to shake off (cf. (Dewey 1927, p.191; Schatzki 1996, chap. 1). For a call to focus on the *social* rather than the individual or the societal, see (Barnes 2001, p.24).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the ‘duality of structure’ (Giddens 1984).

<sup>16</sup> For the different positions taken by Habermas on these definitional questions, see (Cooke 2003). Deliberative democracy, it should be acknowledged, has become a pluralised set of approaches and some of these emphasise the



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non-necessity of consensus and the embeddedness of the reasoning process (c.f. (Dryzek 2000) chap. 3), but one may take the Habermasian approach still to represent the core of the intersubjectivist approach.

<sup>17</sup> The same argument can be made of non-discursive kinds of social practice, or – as textualists might prefer – other kinds of social practice can be understood as languages too.

<sup>18</sup> Of course, identifying relevant assumptions requires interpretation. Analysis of this kind is no more a neutral exercise than any other form of empirical research – but it is better grounded than that which relies on hypothesising about invisible states of consciousness. Cf. (Barnes 2001; Swidler 2001a)

<sup>19</sup> (Sanders 1999). Note also Lane’s use of interview methods.

<sup>20</sup> For a review of the empirical work see (Delli Carpini et al. 2004; Luskin et al. 2002; Conover et al. 2002)

Highlighting the potential relevance of a quantitative technique, see (Dryzek 1990) on Q methodology.

<sup>21</sup> On the group-interview method, see (Morgan 1997; Bloor et al. 2001)

<sup>22</sup> See e.g. (Meinhof 2004).

<sup>23</sup> Applying frame analysis to everyday discussion, see (Gamson 1992). For empirical discourse analysis, see (Potter and Wetherell 1987)

<sup>24</sup> Studying the logics of justification invoked in discussion of political problems, see (Perrin 2006) Looking at the management of conflict in discussion, (Duchesne and Haegel 2007) Note also the older idea of ‘vocabularies of motives’, understood as the (partly situation-specific) motives attributed to the self and others (Wright Mills 1940).

<sup>25</sup> For some discussion of the various meanings of ‘qualitative research’, and the problems of equating it with ‘small N’ research, see (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006, Introduction).

<sup>26</sup> Discourse analysts vary on this question, depending on whether they locate power in the discourse or its manipulators, but Boltanski and Thévenot are explicitly sensitive to the *selection* of orders of worth, and Harré and Davies indicate ‘at least a possibility of notional choice’ (Davies and Harré 1990, p.45).

<sup>27</sup> For some discussion, see (Swidler 2001b, pp.24ff.).

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