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The Politics of Other Citizens

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In all kinds of political action, citizens are confronted with the performances of other citizens. An important guide to political behaviour is therefore likely to be the assumptions people make concerning how others can be expected to behave. This paper explores common-sense ideas about other citizens as potential political participants, drawing on a series of group interviews conducted with taxi-drivers in Britain, Germany and the Czech Republic. I argue the expectations voiced of other citizens tend to be pessimistic in nature, casting them as ignorant, apathetic, passive and/or selfish, notwithstanding the appearance of a more optimistic view which holds they can be expected to follow the lead of those who 'take a stand'. These empirical observations lead to a discussion of the theoretical issues they raise, notably where to locate the origins of such views, and how to appraise their implications for democracy.

All forms of political participation depend ultimately for their outcome on the actions of other members of the political community.¹ From the formation of social movements to the organisation of boycotts, collective action is rewarding to the extent that other citizens can be encouraged to participate. Likewise voting choices vary in their impact according to the choices of others or their decisions to abstain. Citizenship, one may say, is marked by the fact of interdependence. More importantly, this is anything but a revelatory insight. It is something that most citizens themselves are likely to acknowledge, following even the most basic form of political socialisation. The implication is that there are therefore good reasons to explore the assumptions commonly made of other citizens, since what these 'others' can be expected to do is likely to be an influence both on individual acts of engagement and the health of democratic politics more generally.

The potential significance of such views has been noted by a number of scholars. In political psychology and communications, W. Phillips Davison developed the notion of the 'third-person effect' to describe common expectations regarding the susceptibility of others to the negative influence of the mass media (Davison 1983). His suggestion was that people generally overestimate the susceptibility of others to media persuasion while underestimating their own, a phenomenon liable to boost the popularity of censorship and other encroachments on free speech. In the eyes of each, 'I' am immune to such influence, 'you' need to be careful, and 'they' need to be protected from exposure. Popular expectations of others have also been

central to the literature on trust, where the problem tends to be formulated in rationalist terms as one of resource allocation: individuals face the challenge of determining how much trust to place in strangers under conditions where knowledge of their likely behaviour is limited and where excessive or insufficient trust can prove costly (Gambetta 1988) (Stolle and Hooghe 2004) (Hardin 2006) (Offe 1999). Political capital, understood as the conditions necessary to a functioning democracy, is seen as dependent on underlying forms of social capital to do with the incentives and opportunities to trust, interact and display community feeling (Putnam 2000).

This article's focus is slightly different. It casts the net more widely than questions of perceived media influence and their implications for free speech, and in this sense departs from the communications literature. While undeniably of special importance, such concerns reflect the priorities of one political tradition in particular, namely liberal individualism, and a more complete treatment requires one to keep in mind the concerns of other traditions such as deliberative or adversarial republicanism. Then, in contrast to much of the trust literature, the emphasis here is not so much on general dispositions towards others in society but specifically on expectations of others as *political* participants, who do or do not seek to take action on substantive matters of common concern. The focus is directly on the health of citizenship and *political* community, in other words, not society, community or social integration in a general sense.²

Perhaps the most similar approach is found in the work of John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, who as part of their elaboration of the concept of *stealth democracy* explore American public perceptions about the political capabilities and inclinations of US citizens (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002, pp.112ff.). They find high levels of scepticism regarding the political engagement of others, and the empirical observations we shall trace below indicate many of their findings for the US population can plausibly be extended to populations in Europe. That fellow citizens can be presumed to be politically unaware, apathetic, passive and unduly self-interested are views that arise in a series of group interviews conducted by the author with

taxi-drivers in Britain, Germany and the Czech Republic, explored in some depth in what follows.

Yet in addition to drawing attention to a distinctive aspect of our empirical material, in which the possibility of *galvanising* other citizens is raised, we shall explore ways to think differently about the theoretical implications of the findings. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse use their results to support the wider claim that political theorists need to respect the public's desire to remain largely aloof from daily politics. In contrast, here it will be noted not only that participants to the research themselves tend to express a certain dissatisfaction with the negative qualities they identify in others, but that there are good reasons why contemporary observers of democracy should be concerned about the kinds of assumption expressed. The second part of the paper is therefore devoted to thinking theoretically about the nature and significance of the patterns detected, notably their origins and their likely political consequences.

Studying Discursive Practices

To explore expectations of 'the politics of other citizens' requires one first to delimit the research field. In particular, how should one understand the notion of 'other citizens'? There is a sense, after all, in which *any* social category and its related associations can be seen as evoking ideas about other citizens insofar as the category includes as its intended referents other members of the political community. So, for example, social categories such as 'businessmen', 'Muslims', 'Christians', 'police-officers', 'single mothers', 'the unemployed', and 'philanthropists' might all be treated as particular kinds in the generic category of fellow citizen, and thus examined for their accompanying patterns of usage or *category knowledge*.

It may be possible however to mark out for investigation a smaller, distinctive set of expectations linked more closely to the idea of citizenship. These are those expectations associated with the word 'citizen' itself, and with related words such as 'voters', 'followers',

‘others’, ‘people’, ‘people in this country / of our nationality’, ‘the general public’, ‘society’, ‘everyone’, and others of the kind we shall encounter below as they are invoked by speakers when discussing the political inclinations of others. In one sense these are social categories like any other, and it would be mistaken to treat them as overarching ones that incorporate the multitude of social roles according to some principle of generality. To express views about ‘everyone’ is not the same as to express views about people of all social descriptions. Yet from the perspective of the politically interested observer these categories do have a special significance, in that they are amongst those likely to be most salient for many forms of political participation. If practices and concepts tend to cluster with one another (Swidler 2001), one can assume these are amongst the categories likely to cluster around practices such as the electoral process and various types of collective action. During election campaigns and on election day, ‘the voter’ is likely to be a prominent idea, while in the preparation and enactment of a strike, boycott, or act of civil disobedience, ‘the general public’ will probably be a relevant consideration. These are categories of special significance in the practices and discourse of citizenship, and the expectations which attach to them are likely to be significant both for concrete political actions and for the more general self-understanding of the political community.

Expectations and assumptions can be treated as routinised discursive practices – the patterned ways of speaking recurrent in everyday talk. While sometimes they may express consciously formed views, perhaps more often they express the taken-for-granted ideas that precede deliberation and reflection (Schatzki et al. 2001). As such, they are best studied not by questionnaires aiming to elicit fully-formed ‘beliefs’, but through the close analysis of naturally-occurring or loosely structured texts. Lightly moderated group interviews provide a useful means to study everyday discursive practices of this kind. They allow considerable scope for participants to set the terms of discussion, and involve participants interacting with each other as well as the researcher (Morgan 1997). The audience for each intervention is not just a scholarly one but a peer-group one, implying that speakers cannot afford to attune themselves only to the expected reactions of the former.

What follows draws on material generated in ten group interviews with taxi-drivers conducted in Britain, Germany and the Czech Republic between October 2004 and August 2005. The study was designed to explore various aspects of common-sense understandings of politics and political problems, with participants invited to speak freely about the topics of importance to them with limited interference from the researcher (Author 2009a) (Author 2009b).³ Consequently, the kinds of discursive practice that will be highlighted, to do with other citizens as potential political actors, were made spontaneously rather than in response to a concerted effort to draw discussion towards them. This element of spontaneity can be seen as one of the approach's virtues, though admittedly it involves a trade-off: the data are therefore unstandardised and unevenly dispersed through the material, making formal cross-national comparisons difficult. The logic of analysis is thus an exploratory one: to probe a number of settings for patterns of theoretical relevance, as a prelude to thinking about their implications, rather than to isolate particular discursive features as distinctive of a certain national or social position.

This logic informed the selection of taxi-drivers as subjects for interview, the supposition being that their conversation forms a particularly fertile site for studying forms of discursive practice likely to extend more widely in society. Taxi-drivers are exposed to a wide range of social stimuli – newspapers, the radio, and the experiences of others as narrated to them on the job – placing them at the intersection of a large number of discursive formations. The cities for interview were chosen on grounds of geographical spread and diversity in the consolidation of democratic structures: three in Britain (Reading, Swansea and Norwich); three in the Czech Republic (Plzeň, Liberec and Ostrava), and four in Germany, including one from the former East (Erfurt) and three from the former West (Lübeck, Kassel and Würzburg). Groups of three to four drivers (thirty-seven participants in total) were recruited using financial incentives and assembled in cafés and pubs for discussions of up to two hours.⁴ An effort was made to recruit those already in conversation, facilitating richness and depth of discussion.

As indicated, the study does not seek to examine hypotheses concerning the relationship between discursive practice and exogenous identities to do with class, sex, or ethnic background.

Consistent with this is the simplicity of the sampling criteria used: a diversity of ages was sought for each group, with the youngest driver in his 20s or 30s and the oldest in his 50s or 60s, and where ethnic minorities were evident on the taxi-rank (as at Reading), it was made certain that the sample reflected this diversity. Female drivers were rare in the ten cities studied, and did not feature in the sample. Their absence clearly reduces the extent to which the sample is representative of 'society' as defined by socio-demographic make-up, but less so the extent to which it can be used to uncover discursive patterns of theoretical interest.

Some Observations from Discussions with Taxi-Drivers

Of the ten interviews conducted, not all featured the expression of views towards others *qua* citizens. In many cases discussion focused mainly on 'us', as victims of problems such as bad working conditions, low income, or inadequate provision of law and order, accompanied by the evocation of specific others using categories such as 'the rich', 'criminals', 'the unemployed', or particular ethnic groups (Author 2009a). The evocation of other citizens in the guise of potential political actors was rarer – in the Swansea and Plzeň groups, there was little material one could read in this way. It may be that non-reference itself should be seen as a kind of routinised practice, albeit one of omission, expressing scepticism towards other citizens by treating them as unworthy of mention. To evoke the political potential of others, or to criticise them for failing to realise that potential, already requires the assumption of their relevance. It is likely that a basic discursive repertoire of citizenship, affirmative of the political importance of other citizens, needs to be available to participants before conversation can take this turn, and that this repertoire is unevenly spread. Nonetheless, references across the groups as a whole were sufficiently numerous as to allow a series of key points to be made.

The ignorance of other citizens

As the first of a series of pessimistic assumptions regarding what can be expected from others, a prominent idea is that other citizens are ignorant or naïve in political matters, with opinions ill-considered or lightly held, and are therefore easily misled. In the Liberec discussion, Tomáš and Zdeněk agree that ‘people’ in the Czech Republic tend to vote without thinking: ‘Maybe the ODS [centre-right party] is doing well in the polls,’ says Tomáš, ‘but that’s not because people believe it’ll be better under them [Z: it’s not true ...] It’s not true, they just don’t think about it at all. [Z: They just refuse to give their vote to the government ... they vote for the stronger party.]’ The participants themselves invoke the Left-Right spectrum with considerable confidence when talking about parties, but express doubt concerning the capacity of others to think likewise: ‘here in the Czech Republic,’ says Tomáš, ‘the left-wing perspective still prevails, people would rather have security than say “I’ll do everything for myself ... don’t look after me.”’ But when the right-of-centre ODS party does well, it reflects not a considered shift in political views but the mindlessness with which people vote. ‘People go and vote for the Right without knowing what the Right intends to do, simply because they think that those in government are doing badly. And then they discover that the new ones do badly and after four years they jump back to the first ones. It’s ignorance. [Z: yeah] In schools they don’t teach a single word about politics. Children don’t know what a political party is or where they stand.’

The apathy of other citizens

The lack of political engagement ‘most people’ display is a theme in the discussion at Erfurt. When Matthias suggests there should have been a referendum on the introduction of the euro because ‘then it definitely would not have been brought in,’ the other participants are dubious. ‘Probably only 20% would have gone along to the referendum,’ says Axel. Harald suggests the problem is that ‘there’s simply no understanding of democracy there ... Most people have always been led and most people *want* to be led in some direction. They let themselves be led.

That's the point, Man is a herd animal. Put the right one in front of them and they'll traipse along behind. Whether it's to an election or to a demonstration or to a referendum. A few go along and the others just sit there, for whatever reason.' Matthias maintains the prospect of the euro was sufficiently disliked to cause a large turnout, but his voice is in the minority; Axel reminds that 'at the last election it was also assumed that lots of people would turn out to vote because everyone was saying that it can't be right that the SPD stays in power. And even so one ended up with a participation rate of a small percentage.' 'People are simply cynical,' adds Harald. 'They have too many problems ... They haven't got eyes and ears for anything else. And that's why they can be pushed around this way and that.'

A similar set of assumptions is expressed elsewhere in the same discussion:

Harald: You know, [democracy] it's a pseudo-issue. For a certain period of time the people are shepherded along with a stick, they're led along with promises, and unfortunately they're taken in by it because they don't have their own opinion.

Uli: And 40% of them don't realise it. The only resource in a democracy is to go and vote.

Harald: And they don't do that. In Germany democracy is just a pseudo-democracy, because you've got no chance of affecting things afterwards. [Axel: Wait, you do have the chance ...] But it's not given to you ...

Axel: It *is* given to you. It's given to you. But you have to start at the bottom. I can't simply go to the top and yank Schröder out and say 'Oi, Gerhard, listen up.' It doesn't work like that. No, but I can start with the municipality. I vote in the municipal elections ... [Uli: yeah] and at the municipal level you've got the opportunity, you can go there and you can raise a complaint with the administrative office [*Verwaltungsamt*] or whatever. It's just people aren't aware. And that's why no-one bothers about it now.

Notable here again is the contrast between the engagement and awareness participants claim for themselves and that which they ascribe to others. Both Uli and Axel underline the possibilities which voting holds, and generally avoid a tone of cynicism about democracy as an ideal. Yet there is scepticism about the willingness of other citizens to fulfil their role, and an emphasis on the ignorance of democracy which ‘people’ generally display.

It seems natural then that they should emphasise the need to *educate* people so that they become more aware and more sophisticated in their opinions. ‘Everyone has the chance – in simple human terms – everyone can develop for themselves their own opinion,’ says Axel. ‘And they should do it, and it should be promoted in school.’ Uli laments that ‘at the mass level it’s not being done.’ Axel reiterates the point elsewhere, and refers to the influence of the media in a way redolent of Davison’s ideas on the third-person effect: ‘this “great” [ironic] newspaper we have here in Germany, the *Bild Zeitung*, that gathers up the opinion of the mob [*Pöbel*]. And the mob, I must quite honestly say, as soon as they read the newspaper they don’t form any further opinion for themselves. Even if the name of the newspaper is “Bild” – “Bild Dir Deine Meinung” [“Form your own opinion”]⁵. They don’t form themselves an opinion.’ Harald, in a separate deployment of the herd motif, worries about the danger of people becoming convinced of the wrong ideas: ‘the danger, whether back then with Adolf [Hitler] when there were ten million unemployed, or today when there are five million unemployed, Man is a herd-animal. If you put the right one in front of them they’ll trot along behind.’ For Axel, a suitable goal then is to ‘strive to educate children to some degree so that they can form their own opinion – not a *Bild* opinion, but their own opinion. And I don’t mean necessarily the opinion that I have – it doesn’t always have to be the right opinion! But to have one’s own opinion ...’ Note how this emphasis on education implies both a dissatisfaction with the way things stand, and the sense that they could feasibly be improved.

The passivity and pessimism of other citizens

Alongside the assumption of other people's political unawareness or superficiality, one finds the expectation they may be too cautious or inert when it comes to taking action in response to common problems, and too pessimistic about the likelihood of success. At Reading, for example, there is some discussion of people's passivity before rising petrol prices, with a comparison with France used to underline the point. 'We' are concluded in the criticism: 'it's weird,' says Malik, 'how most things, we just take it lying down over here. [Derek: Every time, yeah...] Like, the French, they won't. They'll have a revolution, get the guillotines out ... [D: Stop the boats, stop everything, yeah ...] But no matter what happens over here, you know, goes up another 5p, 10p, pound, 'oh yeah, ok ...' Bit like sheep here in that sense aren't we, plod along ... [D: Yeah, you moan, but you don't do anything about it ...]' In a similar vein, Ulrich in Würzburg suggests that 'people here in Germany, they have the wrong way of looking at things. ... They always see things immediately as "Oh God, nothing will come of it." ... [Ralf: yeah] Here the glass is always half empty. With Americans for example it's half full. Not that I find America great or anything, but we drive around enough Americans here and they just have a bit of a different feel for life ... [Oskar: ... the mentality ...].' At Norwich, there is talk of the harmful effects of supermarkets on consumers and small shops, with Malcolm noting: 'And we are the mugs who take it. We should go in there, we should go into Asda or Morrisons or whatever and we should turn round and say "Get that foreign crap out of our house.'" Les, however, expresses doubts: not everyone can be relied upon to take action, and 'until everybody decides to do it, it'll never happen. They [the supermarkets] have got the upper hand all the time and they'll do what they want to do.'

The selfishness of other citizens

A related assumption holds that other citizens lack public-spiritedness. They are taken to be motivated mainly by immediate self-interest, with little willingness to 'get involved' or contribute to the collective good. Such a perspective takes a number of forms, from the assumption that other citizens vote according to narrow self-interest rather than wider

considerations, to the assumption they prevent the successful implementation of government policies (taxation regimes, recycling programmes, etc.). In the discussion at Kassel, the willingness of fellow citizens to litter the local environment is treated as emblematic: Dieter complains: ‘when you confront people [for social misdemeanours] they don’t want to talk about it. Like I said, colleagues in the taxi trade, if you go up to them because they’ve thrown their cigarette butt on the pavement they curse you!’ ‘They push the matter away,’ agrees Peter, ‘and they say “that doesn’t affect me!” [D: yeah].’ There is a need, suggests Hans, ‘to make people aware that it does affect them.’ Elsewhere in the same discussion, Sebastian suggests today the focus is always on ‘me’. ‘Forty, fifty years ago, after the war, you always said ‘we’ and you helped each other. Now it’s “I”.’ At Norwich, as elsewhere, there is considerable discussion of people’s unwillingness to put pressure on their fellow citizens to follow ‘the rules’, whether these be the rules of good social behaviour or those established in law. Les recalls how he once intervened when seeing ‘two lads with their eyes on a young lady there, and if I hadn’t said something to one of the lads I don’t know where she would have been,’ but he is sceptical about the willingness of others to display similar public-spiritedness: ‘Trouble is that there’s so many people now that go around with their heads in the bloody clouds and they don’t look really around them. ... They don’t look. ... They’re more happy to go along with what’s happening rather than put themselves out to change it.’

The possibility of galvanising other citizens?

The patterns noted so far largely echo those recorded by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse for the contemporary US population. In their focus-group research, the presumption of apathy and selfishness is widespread, as is the presumption that other citizens do not hold real views. As one of their participants says, ‘you’ve got so many people that are just blind sheep that follow everything that the media throws at them,’ (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002, p.116). Perhaps there is a difference in tone though: amongst the groups studied for this article, there tends to be a sense of *dissatisfaction* expressed in accompaniment to these observations, as one sees in the

calls for education. The characteristics ascribed to other citizens are regarded critically, as a departure from the standards which democracy requires. In the passages analysed by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, this critical tone is less prominent, whether this be due to an empirical difference or to the authors' criteria of selection and evaluation.

Furthermore, analysis of these European interviews would be incomplete if one omitted reference to the appearance of a more positive perspective unmentioned in the US study. To his previous comment about people with their heads in the clouds, Les in Norwich adds that if someone were to start a neighbourhood-watch scheme, 'to build on this issue, *you'd probably find they would follow.*' This marks a potentially important counter-theme: while other citizens may be deficient in levels of political awareness, easily misled, too passive, and unwilling to act for the common interest, if someone were to take the *initiative*, whether it be 'people like us' or an individual of unusual insight, then others might be willing to follow. Next to the pessimistic assumptions noted, this stands out as more optimistic, though its implications are potentially problematic. An indication is provided in an extended passage from the Norwich discussion:

Les: I tell you what would be nice: if the working-class stood up, everybody, and said 'look, enough is enough ...' [Author: How would you go about doing that?] All you'd need is somebody who's a real leader. To spell it out. Like you've now done with us four. If you could do that with four million ...

Bill: Proper working-class, good public speaker, someone probably ... example would probably be Sir Bob Geldof. I mean, he's a nob, a Sir, but he is a working-class lad, and he'd probably believe in the same values. [Malcolm: If you ever called him *Sir* Bob he'd knock your teeth out ...] You need someone to stand up for us. Somebody we could actually all vote for, instead of saying 'he's the best of a bad bunch.' [...] The trouble you've got at the moment, the working class, that is a big vote but you've got a lot now who feel they've got no choice, they're moving towards the BNP [British National Party]. You've got the ones, the more left-wing, voting for the Socialist Workers' Party. And they're a waste of votes, moves neither way. You've got to get them back in the mainstream, but if they don't like what they're voting for, you know ...

Les: What's that coloured bloke's name, he who stood up for all the black people who lived in America ...

[Bill: Martin Luther King?] Martin Luther King. If you had somebody like him, talking sense, you could probably bring ... I mean, it wouldn't take a lot for the working ... cos I think working people have had enough, to be honest, really. Why should we ... [Bill: Yeah.] Because all our money goes in the pot, and it's all shared out with people that are taking it.

Malcolm: [...] Too many leaders with not enough bottle, too many leaders with not enough charisma, not enough belief, because belief breeds belief. If we voted at this table today and said 'right, that's it, the Council don't take the piss out of us anymore, the police don't take the piss out of us anymore, the punters [customers] don't take the piss out of us anymore,' and we really believed it and we went back and said to Joe Bloggs on the rank 'this is how it's going to be from now on,' what do you think? Eventually it would spread. It's the same with our country. This is a great country, I love my country, my heart bleeds red, white and blue, and that's as simple as that. And if everybody stood up and said 'right' ... But it's only the working-class people. The rich people, the financial institutions, they turn round and say 'how much money can I make from these poor people?'

Les: That's what I'm saying. The rich can't be arsed with it, the middle lot - which is ourselves - have got no chance, and you've got the people down the bottom who are taking all the money anyway, like his next-door neighbour, them people are taking it all. And you're left with nothing. We're left bloody bleeding in the gutter. That's basically what it is. It's terrible really, but where do you go?

Malcolm: You have to have enough people with enough belief in what they believe in to be able to spread that word with enough conviction. Like ... Now *he* [points to Bill] would make a good leader. I would follow him, cos I know he would follow it through. If he said to me 'do you want to get your own back on the police for not clearing out taxi-ranks on a Saturday night? We're going to drive around and around and around the city, really slowly ... Nobody can get to the cinemas, they're going to complain because they're not getting the revenue, well fuck 'em. Fuck the lot of them. We deserve to have what we've paid for. Not because they can't be bothered to give what we've paid for.' If he said he would do that, I'd follow him. And I'd risk getting arrested for it.

Gary: You'd only get half ... you'd only get half the drivers wanting to do it. The rest of them ... one of the people would probably get nicked [arrested] and the rest would carry on working, you've got to get everyone ...

Bill: That is the trouble. That is basically ... same as the country – unity. You've always got someone who'll profit. Like you said, they'll always be someone looking 'ah, I can make a profit ...'

This is a very rich passage, particularly in its evocation of class-based forms of subjecthood, and not all such elements will be examined here. Notable for our purposes are the kinds of assumption expressed about other citizens. It will have been noted that many of the sceptical motifs traced above are to be found here too: an attempt at 'direct action', for example, would be compromised by the unwillingness of others to take risks for a collective cause, indeed their desire to take advantage of the situation. At the same time, however, one sees the idea that if a 'real leader' with sufficient charisma (perhaps one of 'us') were to take the initiative then others would probably follow, as they have on historical occasions. Luther King and the pop-singer turned activist Bob Geldof are mentioned favourably, and a few sentences before this extract Bill highlights Lech Wałęsa as a 'brilliant man' for leading the ship-builders of Poland against the Communist regime. If the leader is a 'good' one, both in terms of personal effectiveness and the cause represented, one can expect others to get behind him. It is an affirmation of the possibility of galvanising people for the pursuit of shared ends.

Notice though the emphasis which is placed on key individuals. Perhaps the danger implicit is that the call for a strong and effective leader is driven at least in part exactly by the scepticism concerning the inclinations of other citizens. Their political failings or hesitations need to be overcome by the force of a charismatic individual, someone who can 'spell it out'. Such a perspective may be seen to carry an authoritarian tendency. It also seems conducive to what one might call a 'populism against "the people"' – an act of positioning not just against those opponents deemed generative of hardship, but in the name of 'people with belief' against

those peers considered to be undermining the collective effort. We shall return to some of the implications below.

Contradiction?

One sees elements of inconsistency in the passage above regarding what can be expected of others. Within the interventions of Bill alone, other citizens are treated both as potential followers of a collective cause, and as self-interested individuals who resist organisation and who can be expected to break off from such a project so as to pursue their own profit. The two positions are not incompatible – naturally ‘other citizens’ may be of both such types – but the emphasis is clearly different in the two cases. Likewise there is a certain incongruence in the Erfurt discussion (though not quite a paradox) in the assumptions noted above whereby other citizens are considered essentially inert yet liable to gather like sheep behind a disreputable cause. This suggests one should think not in terms of a settled body of beliefs about other citizens but a complex array of discursive patterns which do not necessarily amount to a coherent whole.⁶ Negative or sceptical assumptions outweigh the positive in these discussions, but there is more than one logic in play.

Drawing on existing empirical research (Gamson 1992), it may be possible to propose an underlying pattern here – albeit not one which necessarily restores logical unity. Variations in the kinds of assumption which prevail may depend on the degree of specificity with which the situation at hand is articulated. Where the discussion is at a quite general level, without a clearly defined issue at stake and with other citizens appearing in the rather abstract and colourless guise of ‘people’ or ‘voters’, one might expect the scepticism to be stronger: there is no clear course of action to be taken, and the demands of engagement may appear higher. Where there is a specific issue at stake (a new tax, for example), and where ‘we’ and ‘they’ are given sharper definition, one might expect the more positive assumptions to come through. The goals may appear more modest and more achievable, and a stronger sense of an adversarial relationship may engender a greater sense of their being ‘people like us’ with whom solidarity is possible (Gamson 1992,

p.7). In the extended passage above, it does seem possible to identify a stronger faith in other citizens insofar as they are cast as the ‘working class’, with clearly demarcated opponents, than where they are cast in vaguer terms as ‘someone’ or ‘the rest of them’.

An interpretation of this kind locates the sources of ‘inconsistency’ not so much in the individual mind but in the contrasting associations of different discursive formations. When speakers draw on the language of citizenship, they express a level of scepticism not necessarily replicated when drawing on alternative repertoires. While individuals may have some freedom to select between these – the metaphor of a ‘toolkit’ is attractive (Swidler 2001b) – they are nevertheless limited by the conventional usages of those they choose, and those which other speakers press upon them.

The locations for these interviews spanned three different countries, as well as Europe’s former political division between East and West. Noticeable in the material collected is how rather similar discursive practices can be found dispersed across these various sites – across old democracies and new, and prosperous cities and poor. At least on the evidence available, there are few grounds for localising the patterns. That said, some of the particular associations these motifs carry must surely vary across these differing contexts. The relative novelty of democratic structures in the post-communist cities (Erfurt and those in the Czech Republic) means that when speakers decry the political ignorance and apathy of other citizens they may be read as simultaneously suggesting those citizens have failed to adapt to changed circumstances, and perhaps are ‘not ready’ for democracy. There may be the implication they retain Communist sympathies, or are in some way morally tarnished by the previous regime. Criticisms may also carry the sense of recent disillusionment in the wake of higher expectations, in a manner one could less easily associate with participants in Britain and western Germany. Likewise, in the German locations one must assume that references to people gathering behind a strong leader have distinctive connotations of the Third Reich experience (a point supported by certain references to Hitler). Enthusiasm for leadership of the kind expressed in the Norwich discussion is surely less easily produced by German speakers without conjuring such echoes of the

country's past. These nuances and others caution against neglecting the variety of meanings that may accompany these motifs, notwithstanding the similarity of form.

Interpreting Interpretations: a Discussion

While these exploratory observations leave much scope for further study, when matched against the existing work in this area one has the basis for some discussion of implications. In what follows, these are framed in terms of two questions: the social-science question, which asks how to *explain* the ostensible prevalence of negative assumptions about other citizens, and the political-theory question, which asks what the political *significance* may be.

The social-science question: four candidate explanations

In thinking about how to explain these discursive patterns, perhaps the default position would be to treat them as truth-claims and regard them as accounted for by empirical reality. On this reading, the notion that other citizens are largely politically unaware, unengaged, and all too willing to focus on their narrow self-interests, is prevalent because ultimately it is broadly correct: this is how people generally are, and the interviewees are accurate in their assessments. Let us call this the *realist interpretation*. Such a view may seem especially inviting given that arguably it accords with the common sense amongst political scientists. Those who understand democracy following a Schumpeterian model are likely to be sceptical of the political competence of most citizens, echoing the assumptions traceable in the discourse of taxi-drivers. Even observers who accept the possibility that things could be different under different conditions may consider these assumptions appropriate to democracy as it currently exists. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse do not claim citizens lack fundamental ability, but do treat apathy regarding most policy-issues and a general distaste for politics as brute facts of the contemporary US population (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002, pp.8-9).

The grounds for adopting this perspective are by no means clear though. Even if one accepts the reality of a contemporary trend towards decreasing participation (Mair 2006), it is unclear whether it indicates widespread apathy amongst citizens: high levels of *concern* on substantive issues may be matched by fatalism regarding what can be achieved through participation.⁷ The very evidence of these interviews, in which taxi-drivers in multiple locations talk expansively on a range of political topics, suggests some level of basic engagement. Furthermore, the contradictory element noted above suggests one cannot simply account for these discursive practices by treating them as correct descriptions of reality: even if *some* had a basis in truth, they could not all. There is a danger, in other words, that the scholar falls victim to something analogous to Davison's third-person effect, positioning him/herself as 'I' the keen observer, speaking to 'you' the sensible reader, about the limitations of 'they' the other citizens, in a way the empirical evidence fails to justify.

Needless to say, one need not conclude such assumptions are *false*. A statement so definitive would also be problematic. If one rejects the idea that negative assumptions appear simply because they are accurate descriptions of reality, there are various alternative perspectives one might adopt while remaining open on the question of truth status. Three can be mentioned, in ascending order of appeal. The first would be an a-historical one which locates their origins in human nature. The denigration of the political competence of other citizens might be treated as a strategy for self-enhancement or group bonding, whereby individual speakers derive satisfaction and a basis for in-group identification by positioning themselves and those like them as more sophisticated and engaged than others. 'We' are made to seem more public-spirited than the rest, and are positioned as realistic, since not too much is expected from others. Insofar as 'we' are sometimes included within the scope of criticism, one might suspect a strategy of self-justification: 'our' inaction is normalised by projecting passivity onto 'them', suggesting others are no better and that there is little 'we' could achieve alone. Interpretations such as these can be called (*social-*) *psychological*. They do not focus on whether everyday assumptions about other citizens are true or false, but do take them to have an underlying basis, namely in the speakers'

psychological make-up. While there may be an important insight here, the danger – as with all psychological approaches – is that one overlooks the significance of the social context in its historical specificity as an influence on individual behaviour. One may give a universality to something grounded in a certain constellation of conditions.

An alternative perspective would be to link these patterns of discourse to the life experiences of the speakers who articulate them, in this case taxi-drivers. One might speculate that taxi-driving, which involves serving ‘other citizens’ in return for money, and which can place its proponents in a position of vulnerability, invites cynicism and scepticism towards others, and encourages in-group identification at the expense of strangers. Such a reading is local in focus, in that it sees these discursive practices as specific to the kinds of people who articulate them, and as performing a certain function in the circumstances of their encounter. One might term it a *situational interpretation*. Its appeal lies in the refusal to treat these discursive practices as objectively or psychologically pre-determined, and in its sensitivity to the experiences of the individual. Perhaps the concern however will be that it results in putting too much emphasis on certain socio-demographic characteristics, and on the separation of those bearing them from the rest of society. Moreover, such a move neglects the noted resonance with the findings of other studies which did not draw specifically on taxi-drivers or those of the same economic and national background.

A final standpoint would regard the discursive practices traced as a contingent way of seeing the political world, dominant due to a particular set of wider features of contemporary life. One might argue for example that media amplification of short-term trends in voting behaviour and social interaction leads to notions such as ‘citizen apathy’ or the ‘me-society’ gaining a footing in everyday discourse, whether or not those same trends continue over time. Media actors of a certain political persuasion might want to encourage such ideas and cement their commonsense plausibility insofar as they point to a political configuration they find favourable, while political parties in turn, convinced of the influence of the media and wishing to conform to the reality thereby produced, may start to peddle the same ideas (Meyer and

Hinchman 2002). A *historical interpretation* along these lines would thus invite one to remain open not just on the question of whether such discursive practices have a basis in truth, but also on whether they are permanent or contingent features of mass politics. Rather than objectively or psychologically determined, they may be seen as a field contested by the strategic actions of powerful agents (Rothstein 2005), and bearing the traces of political conflicts. This historical view seems a reasonable one to adopt, since it avoids a determinist perspective and makes space for a critical stance. If one rejects the idea that the prevalence of these practices is inevitable under current conditions, one can then ask critically what their implications may be, and whether there are reasons why one might want to see them challenged.

The political-theory question: three evaluations of significance

This second question then focuses not so much on how to explain these views, but how to evaluate the significance of their being voiced. To a large extent, this is a question of how discursive practice relates to other forms of practice whose value one appraises against the backdrop of a preferred model of politics. What, for example, may the willingness to express such assumptions imply for voting behaviour or the (non-)formation of collective movements? Will such forms of political participation be adversely affected? While strong causal connections between talk and action are rarely possible, it seems plausible to suppose an enabling significance: that is, that routinised ways of making sense of the world make certain kinds of behaviour more likely than others. Examining how various political-theoretical traditions might assess the empirical phenomena noted above, it should be possible to highlight these implications.

One way to divide contemporary theories of democracy is into three broad families, aggregative, deliberative, and agonistic approaches, with their principal differences as follows (Mouffe 2000):

	Preference Aggregation	Deliberative Dem.	Agonism
Interpretation of popular sovereignty / collective self-rule	Ability to hold rulers accountable in periodic elections	Achievement of a rational consensus on the common good	Pursuit of collective ends in a process of agonistic struggle
Key political activity of lay citizens	Voting in competitive elections	Contributing to the deliberative process, so as to reach decisions all can reasonably accept	Movement formation and / or participation
What holds the political community together	Interests, and maybe some form of overarching 'identity'	Values (universal or particular), some form of 'love of justice'	Common action in pursuit of political goals

These three perspectives imply somewhat different evaluations of the assumptions sketched above. Perhaps the perspective likely to be least disturbed by them is the first, the preference-aggregative approach. This perspective overlaps significantly with the realist one mentioned above, relegating the political role of the average citizen mainly to participation in elections. So long as citizens have a basic degree of confidence in their representatives' ability to promote their interests, and the willingness occasionally to cast judgement, their regard for other citizens is not greatly important. Discursive practices of the kind noted are likely to be treated as further reminder of the implausibility of alternative models which envisage a greater degree of individual participation or forms of collective action. A normative evaluation of this kind seems implicit in the way Hibbing and Theiss-Morse interpret their findings: while they see a need to foster the appreciation that citizens may reasonably disagree on matters of political relevance, they see little need to convince citizens of the engagement of others, nor raise overall levels of engagement and participation. On the contrary, people's aversion to giving 'power to the people' represents a wish that should be respected (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002, p.4).

Some interpreters might go further and argue that negative assumptions about the politics of other citizens are a *good* thing: conceivably they could encourage voting in greater numbers, since to rational, interest-maximising individuals (the existence of whom many such models assume), the appeal of voting should increase in line with their scepticism about other

people's level of engagement. Insofar as they assume other citizens to be reluctant voters, the weight of their own vote is all the higher, while insofar as they consider other citizens susceptible to bad ideas, the need for 'right-thinking' citizens to minimise the electoral consequences is higher too. Even from this perspective however, one would not be entirely sanguine: as suggested above, there is the troubling possibility this might invite longing for the strong leader who can overcome the deficiencies of other citizens and 'get the job done' despite them. Encouraged to an authoritarian tendency, there is the danger citizens might break out of the rather limited role this type of political theory reserves for them.

For those advocating a deliberative model of politics (Habermas 1996), the problematic aspect of such discursive practices is likely to be unequivocal. The exercise of public reason requires that political debate be entered into on a fair and equal basis, and while deliberative democrats have been accused of an elitist tendency (Sanders 1997), many nonetheless retain an emphasis on popular participation as a means to achieve optimal deliberation. However, if negative assumptions about the political capacities of other citizens are prevalent, the fear would be this leads to calls for their exclusion from the deliberative process. Its fair and equal basis would break down. Alternatively, the quality of debate might suffer not through the exclusion of voices but through the adaptation of interventions to suit what is expected of others. Opinions might come to be silenced not because individual citizens wish to suppress them, but because they consider them the kinds of opinion others will disapprove of or be unwilling to support. One might see spirals of silence (Noelle-Neumann 1984), or 'spirals of noise' whereby ideas gain ground because of their supposed attraction to others, phenomena of particular concern for those interested in the rationality of political debate.

Those taking an agonistic perspective on democracy are also likely to be troubled should such assumptions be widespread (Mouffe 2000). The very essence of political life in this perspective consists in collective action on matters of common concern; it is ultimately this, rather than some notion of interlocking interests, identity, or love of justice, which is seen to hold the political unit together, and only by mobilising citizens can progressive causes be advanced.

If the presence of negative assumptions about the political capacities of other citizens makes the initiation of collective action more difficult, this can only have a corrosive impact on the health of the political community. Scepticism towards other citizens is likely to be regarded as more damaging even than disaffection with elite representatives, since it may prevent criticism of the status quo being accompanied by the call for actors outside professional politics to remake the political scene.⁸ The challenge would then be to awaken a greater sense of the feasibility of collective agency in the face of scepticism about the willingness of others to take action.

Conclusion

These reflections underscore how a pattern of scepticism concerning the politics of other citizens is problematic, albeit to a varied degree, from the perspective of each of several models of citizenship. The remedies one might foresee clearly vary between these perspectives, but a common basis for concern appears evident. By describing other citizens as they do, speakers set the parameters of their own citizenship practices, and risk acquiring some of the very dispositions they project onto others. They risk becoming ‘other citizens’ themselves, as it were. Yet while the language of citizenship is spoken in pessimistic tones, equally it seems too quick to suppose a preference for ‘stealth democracy’, for any appearance of the notion that other members of the community could be galvanised by an initiative suggests a more active conception of citizenship remains possible also. Whether this possibility is taken up to serve ends consistent with liberal democracy, or is used to mobilise for authoritarian causes, remains open.

A question that might be considered further concerns how different patterns of assumption come to the fore in different discursive contexts, and what the significance may be of the specificity with which political problems, situations and actors are defined. For one possibility is that the negativity is strongest where fellow citizens appear in their most abstract

guise, ‘others’ linked to the subject through no more than common membership in the political community. If this is so, it may be that richer conceptions of citizenship will need to be sought in the instances where others are cast encumbered with shared concerns and substantive goals. Some grounds for the idea were noted in this study. More clearly delineated forms of subjecthood, coupled with the articulation of common challenges, perhaps provide some of the resources that can be deployed by those seeking to breathe life back into the politics of other citizens.

¹ [ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS]

² The focus may also be distinguished from the study of trust in political leaders and confidence in political institutions, matters extensively studied in the literature on political cynicism and distrust: e.g. (Dalton 2004).

³ The interviews were loosely structured, with approximately the first twenty minutes of each discussion devoted to an exercise based on thematic index cards. This was followed by an open discussion led principally by the participants themselves and focused on the political issues they considered to be most urgent. The material below is drawn from these open sections of the discussions. For further details, see (Author 2009a) and (Author 2009b), where some of the main findings of the project are discussed, notably to do with patterns of problem definition, comparison, and perceptions of political agency.

⁴ In Britain and Germany the rates were €60-70 per head; in the Czech Republic c. €40. These rates were above waiting-time, and intended to represent a good return on two hours’ work for most drivers; however, they were not so high that a driver might not, in principle, have made the same amount in the same time from fare-paying customers. Each discussion was facilitated by the author in the local language and recorded using audio microphone.

⁵ This is a slogan which the newspaper has used in advertising campaigns.

⁶ The arguments for emphasising discursive rather than mental phenomena laid out in (Potter and Wetherell 1987) are of particular relevance here.

⁷ Importantly, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse make a twofold distinction between ‘process preferences’ and ‘policy preferences’, and stress the importance of the former at the expense of the latter. It may be necessary, however, to distinguish *within* the second category between people’s depth of concern about what particular policies are adopted (on which indifference may be expressed) and their depth of concern about the substantive problem itself which needs to be addressed (on which stronger views may be voiced).

⁸ Arguably democracy requires that those disaffected with ‘the system’ still retain the hope that actors can emerge from civil society able to change it. The significance of such views seems to be underplayed by scholars of political cynicism and disaffection who focus purely on attitudes towards elite actors: cf. (Dalton 2004), who looks at ‘public confidence and trust in, and support for, politicians, political parties, and political institutions’ (p.191).

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