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Toward a Proactive View of Political Action

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Abstract

Our explanations of political action reflect our evaluations. If we are favorable, we treat the action as proactive and instrumental--as an attempt to achieve some real outcome through the political process. If we are unfavorable, we treat the action as reactive and expressive -- as the venting of personal frustrations in the political arena. This view of politics blurs our vision.

It is more useful to view all political action as proactive regardless of the personal motives of participants. Differences between conventional and unconventional political action are not the result of their being more or less goal-directed but of their different strategic imperatives.

Toward a Proactive View of Political Action

Explanations of political action start -- I think quite
unconsciously -- with a fundamental question about the actors:
Are they good guys or bad guys? Depending on the answer, we
employ a quite separate apparatus of theory to deal with the
phenomenon.

Good guy politics are proactive and instrumental. The
participants have goals that we either share or empathize
with and political action is seen as a more or less effective
attempt to reach these goals. Sometimes, we may be uncomfor-
table with the means chosen but we are able to see these as
they might look to a member of the group employing them. We are
likely to be sensitive to the slowness or ineffectiveness of
other, less costly means and forgiving of a certain amount of
impatience.

Bad guy politics are reactive and expressive. The griev-
ances may be real enough but the politics are seen as directed
toward inappropriate targets. The targets are scapegoats, the
goals irrational and simplistic panaceas. The "real" causes
are ignored, because of "false consciousness." Those who
participate in such politics are seen as reacting to some
psychological need or vulnerability rather than attempting to
realize some realistic political goal.

Of course, we don't always agree among ourselves on who

the good guys and the bad guys are and this makes for some
vigorous debate on which explanatory apparatus should be in-
voked to explain some given political action. If we regard
urban black militants as unsavory agitators, we may prefer
explanations of urban riots which see the participants as in-
sufficiently socialized youth who are rioting mainly for fun
and profit while agitators egg them on with political rhet-
oric that justifies their anti-social activity. Or, with
different sympathies, we may see the riots as a quasi-politi-
cal expression of a community groping for political conscious-
ness as it attempts to confront long-festering grievances.

Similarly, the unsympathetic see student activists as ex-
pressing characteristic generational conflict packaged in an
ideological form which legitimizes its expression as "politi-
cal action." Or, viewed more fondly, they are the cream of
their generation, giving voice to the gap between values of
equality and justice and the crude reality they see around them.

Note the basic difference in each case. Sympathy suggests
a proactive view of people trying to change something through
their efforts at political action. Hostility implies a reac-
tive view of people giving vent to frustrations, using the po-
litical arena gratuitously as the handiest means of expression.

Such a way of looking at political action blurs our vision
and I wish to suggest an alternative. First, it is more use-

ful to think of all political action as having both instru-
mental and expressive aspects. This includes both conven-
tional politics and social movements. Second, it is more use-
ful to focus on the instrumental aspects to understand poli-
tical action. Why more useful? Because a wide variety of
motives characterize the participants in all kinds of polit-
ical action. Furthermore, when characteristic motives differ
in two kinds of political action, they are better understood
as consequences of the goals and resources of a movement or
political party rather than as causes of political action.
The remainder of this essay will elaborate and develop these
arguments.

Proactive and Reactive Politics

We all know that social scientists are too clever and
sophisticated to employ concepts such as "good guy" and "bad
guy." The concepts instrumental and expressive and institu-
tionalized and non-institutionalized do the job for us. We
tend to regard as instrumental those politics that are ex-
pressed through established channels -- the voting booth, the
committee, the golf course, the board room, the lobby. From
"institutionalized" to "instrumental" to"rational" are short
steps with another equally short one to "good". Similarly,
unconventional politics tend to be regarded as expressive --
the politics of the streets, of riots, demonstrations, and
violence. The jumps from "unconventional" to "expressive"

to "irrational" to "bad" are as short as their counterparts above.

The field of collective behavior in sociology is saturated with such thinking. "By the mere fact that he forms part of an organized crowd," wrote LeBon in 1896, "a man descends several rungs in the ladder of civilization. Isolated he may be a cultivated individual; in a crowd, he is a barbarian -- that is a creature acting by instinct. He possesses the spontaneity, the violence, the ferocity, and also the enthusiasm and heroism of primitive beings."

Today, we are more sophisticated. We talk of the authoritarian personality and the true believer; of the mass man who is bewildered by the breakdown of intermediate structures that provided him with a social identity; of the short circuiting phenomenon by which a movement leaps from the level of the social structure that is producing strain to focus on a more inclusive level without specifying how its proposed solution will deal with lower levels. Of course, we don't apply this apparatus to all political action reserving it for movements which liberals and radicals are hostile to -- fascism, anti-fluoridation, McCarthyism, the Wallace movement, the John Birch society.

Suppose, that instead of separating this kind of political behavior into a bag called "collective behavior" or

"mass movements", we put it in the same bag with the Republican and Democratic Parties, with the Farm Bureau Federation, the American Medical Association, and all the other familiar actors in the conventional political arena. We will discover all kinds of expressive motives in our mixed bag even among the most conventional members. We will find, for example, that a wide range of motives characterize members of the Democratic Party. Some seek camaraderie and fellowship and are pulled in by friend-ship networks; some are motivated by ideological concerns; some find in their allegiance to the party a meaningful way of dealing with a confusing world; some seek material rewards, status, and contacts; some seek an opportunity to exercise power over their fellow men.

Basically, this catalogue of motives is of limited useful-ness in helping us to understand the political action which the Democratic Party may engage in. And even if we discovered, as we well might, that motives are distributed differently over Democratic Party members and Peace and Freedom Party members, this is hardly more useful intelligence. Clearly, the Democrat-ic Party is going to be a more attractive vehicle than the Peace and Freedom Party for a person trying to make business contacts. So we should find more evidence of this motive -- not because these motives explain political action but because the resource position and the degree of deviance of goals and means will act as a selector. An analysis of motives puts the cart before the horse.

Start, then, with an instrumental view of political behavior even -- in fact, especially -- when the behavior appears most irrational or irritating. This is an unnecessary bit of advice when studying mainstream political action. No one is tempted to see the environmental movement as the outlet for frustrated individuals who are seeking in the removal of pollution a way of dealing with the meaninglessness of their personal lives. We readily assume that they are really trying to clean up the environment rather than acting out a rebellion against parental authority -- although some leftists have viewed the movement as an attempted diversion by the establishment to draw energy from the more serious problems of racism and imperialism.

If the participants in some political action look bizarre to us, if they are less civil than the norms of conventional politics allow, or even if they use violence and terror, we should resist the temptation to reach immediately for the apparatus that sociologists have offered us for so long under the rubric of collective behavior.

To be convincing, I'm sure I must be more specific. Let me take as my example, the most coherent and persuasive theory of extremist politics as reactive and expressive -- the theory of mass society. I will outline the argument briefly and try to show how utterly misleading it has been in helping us to

understand two recent phenomena -- support for Senator Joseph
McCarthy in the early fifties and support for Senator Barry
Goldwater in the early sixties.

The Theory of Mass Society

Mass society produces people who are self-estranged and,
hence, vulnerable. "By divorcing people from larger social
purposes," Kornhauser writes, "mass society also tends to sep-
arate people from themselves " (1959, p. 107). "Self-estrange-
ment, in turn, heightens the individual's readiness for activistic
'solutions' to the anxiety accompanying personal alienation.
For the individual who lacks a firm conception of himself
and confidence in himself does not possess the basis for
strong control over himself, and therefore is highly suggest-
ible to appeals emanating from remote places" (p.108). Or
as Eric Hoffer puts it, "Faith in a holy cause is to consider-
able extent a substitute for the lost faith in ourselves ....
One of the most potent attractions of a mass movement is its
offering of a substitute for individual hope" (1951, p.14).

This psychological vulnerability makes mass man available
for mass movements. "In the absence of an acceptable self-
image, the individual seeks to overcome the anxiety accompany-
ing self-alienation by apathy or activism. Withdrawal from ac-
tivity and flight into activity are both responses character-
istic of the mass man. The activistic response underlies much
of the participation in mass movements as individuals seek to

substitute external identities for inner ones, to replace an
unwanted or unknown self with a collective image" (Kornhauser
1959, p.112).

Of course, vulnerability is only half the story. "Whether
or not mass tendencies in character and culture will become ex-
pressed in mass movements depends primarily on the social struc-
ture and the demands events make upon it... Crises break
down the already precarious structure of mass society and as a
consequence increase the chances for anti-democratic mass move=
ments" (Kornhauser, 1959, p.113).

The theory is developed in several directions with a
special emphasis on the absence of intermediate associations
and solidarities -- intermediate between the primary group and
the state -- which characterize pluralist social structures.
However, this part of the theory does not concern us here ex-
cept in so much as it implies what kind of people will partic-
ipate -- the isolated individual with weak or non-existent
solidary group attachments and identifications.

McCarthyism

I have full sympathy and admiration for those who lived
through the trauma and the viciousness of the McCarthy era
and were not too cowed to fight back. The threat was real
and I can understand how beleagured social scientists turned
quite naturally to the mass society apparatus that seemed to

make so much sense of the rise of fascism and to use it to dis-
credit McCarthy's followers under the guise of social science
explanation. However, work by Rogin (1967), Polsby (1960),
and others suggests that mass society theory does not explain
the McCarthy phenomenon very well at all.

McCarthy did not, in the mass society view, draw his
basic support from established, traditionally, conservative
groups but from the alienated. McCarthy was viewed as a pro-
totypical demagogue appealing to the mass of people for direct
support over the heads of their established leaders. He mobil-
ized those individuals who were psychologically vulnerable,
splitting apart existing coalitions and upsetting conventional
group alignments.

Plausible as it may sound, this view of the McCarty phen-
omenon is apparently false. Rogin's work strongly suggests
that there was less to McCarthyism than met the eye. Without
searching below the surface for hidden frustrations, the bulk
of McCarthy's support can be accounted for by taking the issues
at face value. On the basis of county voting records, poll
data, and other evidence, Rogin concludes that "McCarthy cap-
italized on popular concern over foreign policy, communism
and the Korean War, but the animus of McCarthyism had little to
do with any less political or more developed popular anxieties
.....McCarthy did not split apart an elite, the parts of

which had been equally conservative before him. He rather
capitalized on an existing liberal/conservative split within
the existing Republican elite" (1967, pp. 216,220). Polsby's
(1960) analysis of poll data points in the same general direc-
tion. Party affiliation is the single best predictor of support
for McCarthy -- Democrats opposed him and Republicans supported
him. Rogin concludes from his own review, "In these polls,
as in the data reported by Polsby, no other single division
of the population (by religion, class, education, and so forth)
even approached the party split" (1967, p.234). Rogin re-
jects the notion that McCarthy was sustained primarily by the
vague discontents of frustrated groups. "McCarthy had power-
ful group and elite support. He did not mobilize the masses
at the polls or break through existing group cleavages ... Com-
munism and the Korean War played crucial roles." (1967, p. 268).
Strange as it may seem, the issues on which McCarthy mobilized
support were apparently real ones for his followers, not mere-
ly symbolic of private anxieties.

Goldwater

The mass society apparatus also proved a convenient one
for liberals in explaining the support for Senator Goldwater
in 1964. It was frequently assumed that the early supporters
of Goldwater were anomic, institutionally detached "cranks,"

neofascists, or "infiltrators" into the Republican Party.
"Little old ladies in tennis shoes" became the popular phrase
to capture the lunatic fringe imagery.

McEvoy (1971) has demonstrated that the evidence sharply
contradicts this image of the Goldwater phenomenon. Pre-con-
vention supporters of Goldwater were compared on a number of
variables with those who ultimately voted for him even though
they had preferred another nominee prior to the convention.
The early Goldwater supporters were very significantly higher
on such variables as church attendance, income level, and edu-
cation. They were more likely to be married. Furthermore,
they were much higher in past participation in Republican Par-
ty politics. Finally, they exhibited average to low levels of
objective status discrepancy. None of this evidence suggests
lack of attachment; on the contrary, early Goldwater support-
ers seem to be strong conservatives with social support and
respect from their friends and neighbors.

The Proactive View

What, then am I suggesting as a better way of explaining
political action? I start by assuming that people will
participate in political action for a wide variety of personal
motives and that while these motives may help us to understand
the style of politics and rhetoric adopted, they are not bas-
ically relevant to understanding the collective action. The

distribution of motives differs in different kinds of political action because people will tend to select vehicles that are appropriate to their particular personal motives.

I then propose to look at a variety of political action ranging from the most conventional to the most unconventional with the working assumption that they all can be usefully viewed as collectively pursuing certain end states through their political action. Their differences must be explained not by their being more or less goal-directed buy by their different strategic imperatives.

Groups which are relatively rich in resources will find it convenient to use conventional, institutional channels. They have the means and the know-how to use them. Going outside of such channels is usually more costly because it invariably brings upon the group the wrath of other power holders in the polity who are interested in seeing the rules of the game preserved.

Groups which are relatively poor in the resources needed to compete through institutional means will use less conventional politics. If their constituency is disorganized and lacking in solidarity and collective identification, the first strategic imperative is mobilization of support. If the members lack significant conventional resources even when they have developed political consciousness, they have available to them a major constraint resource -- the ability to make trouble.

An excellent example of the type of analysis that my argument
suggests is Michael Lipsky's article, "Protest as a Political
Resource", (1968) in which he examines the strategic problems
of relatively powerless groups.

Note that the rationality assumed here is collective and
conditional. It is the same rationality we apply to organ-
izations as instruments for achieving collective goals. In-
dividuals may use these vehicles for a variety of personal
goals which they don't share but they share an interest in the
organization or movement as a means. Furthermore, their col-
lective action may be effective or ineffective, clumsy or
skilled, intelligent or stupid. Nothing is assumed in advance
on these issues -- only that it makes sense to understand
political action as a coalition of participants attempting to
achieve outcomes which some significant portion of the elements
are seeking for whatever personal and varying reasons they may
have.

The Issue of Justification

In arguing for the abandonment of a division of political
action into expressive and instrumental categories, I am aban-
doning an implicit justification. If instrumental politics
are rational and good, and expressive politics are irrational
and bad, we need only classify a given phenomenon to know what
to think of it. I have been arguing, of course, that the pro-

cess really goes the other way -- after we know whether we like or dislike the political action we classify it as expressive or instrumental.

In contrast, the proactive view is completely neutral regarding justification. If Joe McCarthy's and Gene McCarthy's supporters are equally instrumental, then the justification must necessarily lie outside of the explanation. In short, it is not the causes of political action that provide justification but the consequences.

Social scientists can contribute something to the analysis of consequences and can thus be of some use in judging political action. For example, it is quite possible to explore the effects of the use of violence in a political conflict and of the operation of spirals of mutual threat and retaliation. It is possible to develop propositions about how conflicts can be managed or resolved in ways that minimize costs and maximize gains for the contending parties.

Such understanding is clearly far from sufficient to deal with issues of justification. One will still have to weigh possible outcomes against one another and, even if we were quite certain in our knowledge of the consequences of political action, we might easily disagree on whether a given outcome was worth a given cost.

The potential contribution of a social scientist to issues of justification does not lie then in what he may contribute

to our understanding of the reasons for political action.
Rather, it lies in his analysis of conflict processes and the
way in which particular political actions make such processes
more benign or malignant.

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