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Essays on Political Actors and Attitudes: Do They Constitute Distributed Reflexivity? Part 2: A Dynamical Typology of Rationality

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Abstract

What is the relationship between the logic that guides political attitudes of constituencies and the logic of political actors, whose legitimacy is rooted in electoral choice of the constituencies? Classical approaches, such as the median voter theorem, view political actors as passively mirroring voters' preferences. An alternative approach, that we suggested in the first part of this series of essays, assumes that how constituencies see the competences of political actors, is crucial, in the sense that it does not only reflect voters' preferences, but it is also manipulable by the agency of political actors themselves. In this article we provide additional arguments in support of the thesis that the perception of competences is socially constructed and contextually dependent. We hypothesise that in times of well-being the logic of appropriateness prevails among both the constituencies and their political representatives, while in times of crisis constituencies resort to the logic of arguing, and leaders predominantly use the logic of consequences with some admixtures of the logic of arguing. Our arguments draw on Raymond Boudon's neo-Weberian "judicatory" or "cognitivist" model of rationality; on the theory of securitisation developed by Barry Buzan and his collaborators, under the influence of "speech act" theory of John Austin; and on the typology of basic logics of action, first proposed by James March and Johan Olsen, and later refined by Thomas Risse, under the influence of Jürgen Habermas.

Keywords: political philosophy, typology of rationality, axiological rationality, instrumental rationality, logic of appropriateness, logic of arguing, logic of consequences

[1]The ordering of the authors follows alphabetical order and does not indicate any priorities.

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1. Introduction

In the first part of this series of essays we have noted that political entrepreneurs often seem to be "more rational" than their audience – entrepreneurs often look like they "exploit" the audience for their own interests and aims, while the seemingly trustful audience appears as "less rational" than the entrepreneurs. In the first essay we have tackled this problem from the systemic perspective of viewing society as a problem solving feedback cycle. However, viewed from such a perspective, it appears that societal problem solving occasionally fails, as, for example, when political entrepreneurs merely "cheat" the audience. Yet, such considerations of differential rationality of political actors and constituencies also suggest a closer look at the micro perspective of the involved actors: Are constituencies indeed less rational than their political representatives? What strategies do political actors employ to influence the public perception of their competence?

The investigation of such questions calls for an actor-theoretical account. However, before we return to the question of rationality of the representatives and the constituencies, a brief recourse to the foundations of rationality and social actors theories is helpful. We argue that the question of social construction of the representatives' competences, or more generally, the question of social construction of the legitimacy of representative democracy, can be addressed by considering the role of instrumental vs. axiological rationality in the processes of social construction. How an actor is perceived depends, on the one hand, on the course of action the actor takes or proposes as political agenda (an "active element" of political actors). On the other hand, how the actor is perceived depends on evaluation criteria by which constituencies judge the proposed political agenda. As we shall se, both sides can be addressed by recourse to the theories of rationality. This will enable tackling the question of how it is possible that political entrepreneurs appear as more rational than their political audience.[2]

2. Instrumental vs. Axiological Rationality: Boudon's "Cognitivist Model"[3]

French sociologist Raymond Boudon[4] describes his theory of values as "judicatory" or "cognitivist", meaning that values are grounded in reasons. Following Max Weber, Boudon endorses the "Verstehen postulate", which he articulates in the following way: "when people believe that something is true, fair, legitimate, etc., the cause of their belief resides in the meaning of the belief to them, in other words, in the reasons they perceive the belief as strong" (Boudon, 2001, p. 49).

According to Boudon, and again, following Weber, rationality can be instrumental, as when people aim to choose the best means to satisfy a given goal, typically maximisation of one's interest, or axiological, when people behave "in a way congruent with principles they consider worth following" (Boudon, 2001, p. 42). Both types of rationality can be subsumed under what Boudon calls the "cognitivist model", according

[2] We follow Weberian conception to link macrosocial processes and microsocial theories of agency. For instance, Weber's theory of rationalisation describes a long-term historical process of changing agency. Protestant ethic is the most prominent example. For this reason we refer to a neo-Weberian typology of rationality and not to the more limited rational choice accounts which are restricted to instrumental deliberation. This purely instrumental logic would not suffice to capture dynamics of the principles of rationality. One of the most sophisticated recent neo-Weberian accounts can be found in the works of Raymond Boudon.

[3] Following Boudon (2001; see also Habermas, 1996), we use the term "model" in a very loose sense, not implying any high logical or mathematical formalism. As understood here, "model" is a series of arguments that allows drawing some working hypotheses.

[4] Sadly, Boudon passed away on April 10, 2013, right at the time the final draft of this article was taking shape.

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to which social actors should be considered rational as long as "they have strong reasons for believing what they believe, for doing what they do, etc." (Boudon, 2001, p. 67). These "strong reasons" can be derived from cost/benefit considerations of various courses of action, in which case the cognitivist model reduces to instrumental rationality as its special case, or they can be derived from the actor's conviction that some course of action is good, fair, legitimate or in some other way "valuable", in which case the model yields axiological rationality as its special case.

Boudon's "cognitivist model" presupposes trans-subjectivity of strong reasons: "I can have the feeling that 'X is good' only if I have the feeling simultaneously that the other man should feel and think in the same way" (Boudon, 2001, p. 10). However, the trans-subjectivity is contextually dependent, i.e. we always need to look for an explanation of this compelling feeling in the socio-historical context within which actors are situated.[5] Hence, "the 'cognitivist model' suggests that it is possible to reconcile the contextual character of the feelings of justice with their claim to 'objectivity.' We express a moral judgment as 'this is fair, unfair, etc.,' and by so doing expect that other people will agree as soon as we feel that the reasons on which our judgment is grounded – whether we can express these reasons clearly or are merely vaguely aware of their existence – take into account the characteristics of the context, far from being merely derived from abstract moral precepts or from our own subjective inclinations" (Boudon, 2001, p. 176). In other words, reasons draw their strength from the contextual embeddedness of our reasoning, as well as the expectation that most of us will reason similarly in similar contexts.

3. Roots of intersubjectivity of strong reasons

We can say that, according to Boudon's "cognitivist model", strong reasons are socially constructed, but their construction is neither fully deterministic, nor entirely arbitrary, as it depends on a multitude of socio-historical factors underlying the context within which it takes place. The role of contextual conditions which provide the objectivity of strong reasons has been explored in more detail in a different theoretical strand – the theory of securitisation (Buzan, 1995; Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998). The theory envisages two kinds of actors – the securitising actors and the audience. While this framework has been developed to study how a certain issue is transformed into a security question, it entails the elements that can be identified in political communication more generally.[6] Namely, it builds on the theory of speech acts (Austin, 1976) in order to describe the relation between an actor who undertakes a speech act and an audience that needs to be convinced by it. In order to convince the audience, the actor needs to demonstrate his or her competence to deal with the issue being raised. In the case of the so-called "security move" this is done by declaring a certain object as being under threat. Obviously, the notion of threat provides mobilising power. More generally, in political communication a speech act needs to refer to a certain reference object. This may be any issue of public interest, such as taxation policy, an environmental issue, or the security of a nation.

However, recent examinations of this theoretical framework have emphasised that contextual conditions affect the chances that a securitising claim will be successful. It is claimed that – while in principle it remains open which topic will become the subject of a securitising move – these moves are

[5] Boudon does not make the notion of "context" very precise. Following Ashmore, Deaux and McLaughlin-Volpe (2004, p. 103), we assume that "[c]ontext is the general and continuing multilayered and interwoven set of material realities, social structures, patterns of social relations, and shared belief systems that surround any given situation".

[6] Indeed, Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998, pp. 23-24) argue that securitisation is nothing more than "a more extreme version of politicisation".

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nevertheless not completely arbitrary (Williams, 2003; Balzacq, 2005; McDonald, 2008). It has been carved out that the resonance of the audience (Balzacq, 2005) depends on how the subject is historically, institutionally or discursively "sedimented" (Williams, 2003). This holds for political communication in general. In political communication "the feeling that 'X is good' only if I have the feeling simultaneously that the other man should feel and think in the same way" (Boudon, 2001, p. 10) is - not deterministically conditioned - but adequately triggered by contextual conditions, facilitating a certain way of perceiving the social environment. Because "political elites use discourse to win a target audience" (Balzacq, 2005, p. 176), this may even be of a recursive nature: if it is conveyed in the course of political communication toward a target population that, for instance, deviant groups such as criminals or drug addicts are treated effectively if they are treated harshly, then a growing number of the targeted audience members may become convinced of the effectiveness of the "law and order" policy favored by certain political actors, i.e. an intersubjective validity of a certain way of argumentation can be generated. This may then enhance the perceived competence of the respective politicians, which may, in turn, provide an incentive for these politicians to reinforce this style of reasoning. However, since "communication is an intersubjective process" (Balzacq, 2005, p. 177), this depends on how the subject matter is historically, institutionally or discursively entrenched. Medieval obsessive belief in witchcraft or the Holocaust, based on a long tradition of anti-Semitism, provide examples of discursive intersubjectivity that are today considered rather bizarre.

How to apply these considerations to what is going on in political arenas? In our view, the constellation of political forces and their relative strengths reflect the distribution of perceptions of their competences among the audience, i.e. among the constituencies. In a democratic society the match between the constellation and the distribution undergoes periodical revisions at public elections. Our conceptualisation is "dynamic" since we assume that the distribution of perceptions of competences is the – always necessarily temporary – result of an ongoing struggle in which various political agents attempt to communicationally establish their competence in front of the electoral audience. Their attempts include not only proving competence in particular fields, but also struggles to draw public attention to certain fields of competence (e.g. economy, ethnicity, gender issues, abortion, etc.). Such attempts are always embedded in historical, institutional, discursive and other contextual "sediments", which limit the total number of available options, but do not determine by themselves which option will prevail. In other words, there is still enough manoeuvering space for human agency. Hence, "[a] speech act is interesting exactly because it holds the insurrecting potential to break the ordinary, to establish meaning that is not already within the context – it reworks or produces a context by the performative success of the act" (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998, n. 5, p. 46).

Since political communication is about doing things with saying things (Balzacq, 2005, p. 175), these considerations prompt us to take a closer look at the issues of "speech" and its rationality, i.e. the selection of wordings or, more generally, political communication through media and other forms of pragmatic interaction. What are the likely guiding principles for individual actors?

4. Toward a dynamic "cognitivist model" of competence of political actors

So far the building principles of a theoretical model have been outlined, which provide a framework for analysis. These consist of Boudon's conception of rationality as intersubjectively valid strong reasons and the contextual conditions within which intersubjectivity can be generated. The importance of contextual conditions has been underscored by the theory of securitisation. In the following we outline how all this can be put to work when considering dynamics of emergent (or depleting) democratic legitimacy. This refers back to the problem solving feedback cycle described in our previous essay. However, while we have

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previously described the systemic level, we shall now examine mechanisms that drive the system into possible pathways. We shall elucidate a crisis mechanism which indicates that the system is reaching critical zones, i.e. conditions where the feedback cycle is failing to solve problems. The objective of the following considerations is to integrate the systemic perspective (described in the previous essay) with the generating actor level.[7] This will imply a framework for a Weberian perspective of social evolution, namely how the interaction of different types of rationality on the micro level might generate macro-level conditions of a social system.

So, let us return for a moment to the question of competence of political representatives. The legitimacy of political representatives is derived from their competence. Those who are perceived as competent enough to lead, legitimately occupy positions of power and deserve various material and social benefits. But, why are certain people perceived as competent? What are the strong reasons for perceiving them as such? Are these strong reasons more of the instrumental or the axiological kind?

The instrumental logic used in convincing constituencies to vote for the representatives can be succinctly stated in the call: "Follow us and you will also be better off!" Such a call, however, may only be convincing in the context of relative economic prosperity, i.e. when the standard of living is on the rise, when large segments of the population become better off, and so on. Under the conditions of general prosperity, there are indeed strong reasons to regard leaders as competent enough to deserve their positions of leadership.[8]

However, in times of economic crisis such instrumental arguments obviously lose their force – most of the people are not better off anymore. As resources become severely constrained, and as people increasingly become aware of limits on resources, as well as dwindling opportunities to pursue their immediate interests, instrumental reasons lose credibility. It is to be expected that a greater weight will now be assigned to more axiologically oriented arguments, such as "the universalistic rule of merit": "Those and only those who contribute more need to be more rewarded."

It becomes, however, increasingly demanding for leaders to show that they indeed contribute more. As the whole economic system is crumbling, it looks like the leaders also contribute more to this crumbling. The context has changed, and those who could previously be regarded as contributing most to prosperity, now are seen as contributing most to the downturn. Those who could previously be perceived as legitimate leaders, now become increasingly perceived as mere "elites", i.e. as some ones who do not really deserve their positions, but are occupying them due to other, less legitimate competences. This is what can be observed in many European countries. The competences of leaders become increasingly questionable.[9]

A system of elites is in need of a financial basis, i.e. a certain budget. Elites, faced with a dwindling budget and a threat to lose their established positions, struggle to retain what is now increasingly regarded as their "privileges". The old call to constituencies to follow the current leaders in order to prosper becomes untenable. As axiological arguments become increasingly popular among the constituencies, elites now

[7] Here we closely follow the framework of MASON RebelLand (Cioffi-Revilla and Rouleau, 2010).

[8] One might object that excessive social inequalities might be the reason for questioning the role of leaders even during periods of well-being, but it can be argued that the human tendency to overestimate the own position within the total income distribution, as well as the tendency to compare with only those who are most similar to oneself (see e.g. Lane, 2001), mitigate significantly the effects of inequality. We should note, in accordance with our theoretical framework, that it is quite possible that such tendencies are not innate, but also contextually dependent, i.e. socially constructed.

[9] As Mastropaolo (2012, p. 217) put it: "Post-modern politics credits itself with being managerial and problem-solving, but this reputation is not particularly easy-to-wear". It is particularly difficult, for example, for the leaders of a country on the verge of bankruptcy to submit convincing proofs of their competence, i.e. to ground their claims of competence in strong reasons.

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also have a stronger incentive to demonstrate their competences in the axiological domain, which is not easily reconcilable with the need to preserve their acquired privileges. Elites might therefore become increasingly tempted to "cheat", i.e. to pretend they pursue universal values while, in fact, seeking to further their self-interest.[10] In other words, elites may become tempted to feign axiological rationality in order to preserve their elite status.

We speak of a "dynamic" model since we assume that, with time, the agency of elites can influence the attitudes of constituencies, and *vice versa*, the agency of constituencies can influence the attitudes of elites. In other words, preferences of constituencies (and elites) are not fixed, as assumed by the median voter theorem, but continually changing through a complex interplay of the agency of both the elites and the constituencies.[11] Elites are trying to convince constituencies of the competence of the former, but the impression of competence is more difficult to instill in the context of crisis. Constituencies rejoinder that elites are not competent any more than constituencies themselves. Note that such a reply carries in itself the potential for the former constituencies to become future elites. This is in contrast with classical models, such as the one assumed by the median voter theorem, where political actors passively mirror the preferences of the median voter and the median voter happily sees his or her preferences satisfied. Such models are inherently static and it is difficult to see how any sort of social change could occur under such conditions.

5. The import of various types of logic in times of well-being and times of crisis

Following distinction between the logic of consequences and the logic of appropriateness, proposed by March and Olsen (1989, 1998), Risse (2000) put forth a refined distinction between the logic of consequences, the logic of appropriateness, and the logic of arguing. Risse argues that neither rational choice theories based on the logic of consequences, nor sociological institutionalism based on the logic of appropriateness can adequately address important questions of "mutual constitutiveness of (social) structures and agents" (Risse, 2000, p. 5), whereas social constructivism based on the logic of arguing is better poised to answer such questions. Since we are concerned with social construction of elites' competences, it is legitimate to consider in more detail the role these various types of logic play in the processes of competence construction.

According to Risse (2000), the logic of consequences corresponds to instrumental rationality and characterises forms of communication typified by bargaining on the basis of fixed preferences. The logic of appropriateness and the logic of arguing are both related to norm-regulated behavior. However, the logic of appropriateness is primarily at work when complying to norms and taking norms for granted, whereas the logic of arguing gains dominance when norms become contested and subject to innovation. The logic of appropriateness characterises rule-following, whereas the logic of arguing gives rise to processes of argumentation, deliberation and persuasion.

In terms of the earlier discussion of Boudon's "cognitivist model" and "strong reasons", it can be said that the logic of consequences searches for strong reasons of an act or a belief primarily at its consequences for an actor or a believer, while the logic of arguing seeks "a reasoned consensus" (Risse,

[10] We have already emphasised that the notions of "good", "fair", "legitimate", etc. are contextually dependent. In accordance with such a view, whenever we use terms such as "universal values", "general interest", "true reasoning" and the like, we assume the meaning of these terms which is acceptable to the most of the members of a society in a given moment, i.e. the meaning which can be justified by strong reasons, under the given contextual conditions. In the like manner we also use the term "elites" in the remainder of the article.

[11] Instead of "preferences", we prefer to speak about "perceptions of competence" in order to underscore their malleability.

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2000, p. 9) among actors, based more on mutual understanding rather than on self-centered calculations of success (Habermas, 1981). This corresponds to Boudon's axiological rationality. The logic of appropriateness, on the other hand, does not care much about reasons. Therefore, according to the "cognitivist model", actions taken under dominant influence of the logic of appropriateness could not be regarded as rational actions.[12]

As Risse (2000) observes, each of these types of logic can be thought of primarily as an ideal type that in reality rarely occurs in its pure form.[13] This, however, does not need to prevent us to expect certain types of logic to be more prominent in certain contexts than others. Thus the selection of a certain kind of frame is triggered by dynamically changing contextual conditions. In what follows we hypothesise prevalence of certain types of logic in the contexts of economic prosperity and crisis, respectively (Table 1). We justify these hypotheses by referring to some of the most salient characteristics of contexts under consideration.

Table 1: Hypotheses about prevalent types of logic among elites/constituencies[14] in times of well-being/crisis

	Elites	**Constituencies**
Times of well-being	Logic of appropriateness	Logic of appropriateness
Times of crisis	Logic of consequences with admixtures of logic of arguing (rhetorical action, strategic uses of argument)	Logic of arguing

In times of well-being we expect the logic of appropriateness to carry greatest significance among both the elites and the constituencies. As the interests of everyone are satisfied at least to some extent, it is easily taken for granted that following leaders makes everyone better off. When the tide is rising and the wind is good, there is no need, for most people, to rock the boat.[15] This is not to say that arguments based on instrumental or axiological premises will be entirely missing from public discussions in times of well-being, only that many, and perhaps, most people would not feel a compelling need to enter such discussions, being satisfied with things as they are. In fact, as both sides adhere to the logic of appropriateness, even the cleavage between the elites and the constituencies may not be readily apparent as other cleavages may be more salient.

[12] In terms of Weber's (1922 [1978]) typology of action types, it can be denoted as traditional action.
[13] Habermas (1996, p. 26), for example, notes that "'dialogical' and 'instrumental' politics … do in fact interpenetrate in the medium of deliberations of various kinds".
[14] Throughout the paper we speak of elites and constituencies as relatively homogeneous collectivities. This is an obvious simplification. As we have already noted, the constellation of political forces in a society reflects the distribution of perceptions of their competences, which is in reality more complex than a simple elites/constituencies dichotomy. Mastropaolo (2012, pp. 157–160), for example, distinguishes between "remote", "detached", and "involved" citizens. In reality, involved citizens would be much more likely to resort to the logic of arguing than remote, or detached citizens. It is also unlikely that the elites in possession of political power would represent a coherent social group. Having all this in mind, however, we still feel that the elites/constituencies dichotomy is useful as a point of departure. Later refinements of the proposed hypotheses should take heterogeneity of both the elites and the constituencies into closer consideration.
[15] Strikingly, in the 1960s Luhmann developed the theorem of legitimacy by method (Luhmann, 1969). In times of economic prosperity and stability, rule following appeared as appropriate and sufficient as a source of legitimacy. This can be characterised as an example of the logic of appropriateness.

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As times become harder, however, people can be expected to become more attentive to a more "activist" logic. It is our contention that for constituencies it would be the logic of arguing, while for elites it would be the logic of consequences with some admixtures of logic of arguing. This discrepancy in the frame of reference for evaluating deliberative rationality entails a crisis mechanism which can be observed in the current loss of trust in the competence of political leadership.

Constituencies, on one hand, become increasingly aware that following leaders does not bring much good any more. On the other hand, however, they are not powerful enough to adopt the logic of consequences and engage in direct strategic bargaining with elites. In other words, average citizens are not powerful enough to articulate their own interests as "strong reasons". Moreover, at least some among them may become genuinely aware that available resources are limited to such an extent that the insistence on one's self-interest is simply pointless. Taking all these circumstances into account, the logic of arguing appears to be contextually most acceptable to constituencies.

Elites, confronted with a threat to their privileged positions, have incentives to use their positions of power and try to openly impose their interests in direct bargaining with constituencies. This is a strategy to restrict access to power and privilege to save the surplus for the elite. However, this entails significant risks of provoking the constituencies to resort to more drastic means of opposition, including revolutionary violence. In fact, though great uncertainty in the data has to be admitted, it has been found in empirical studies of civil war that the exclusion of major parts of the society from access to power increases the likelihood of violence (Wimmer, Cederman and Min, 2009).[16] Therefore, pure logic of consequences seems to be an overly crude instrument to be used on the part of elites.

Faced with growing axiologically rooted demands of constituencies, elites are more likely to engage in what Risse (2000, p. 8, following Schimmelfennig, 1997) calls "rhetorical action", or what Elster (1995) calls "strategic uses of argument". Both terms imply that the actual logic employed lies somewhere in between the logic of consequences and the logic of arguing. The point is that arguing is not used by elites as a means of arriving at a reasoned consensus, but primarily as a means of furthering self-interest. Self-interest is rhetorically presented as general interest, i.e. instrumental rationality is feigned as axiological.

6. Conclusion

It is now time to return to the question that we started with: How is it possible that political entrepreneurs appear as more rational than their political audience? Obviously, in our model particular types of logic are not prompted by a higher or lower degree of rationality of the actors involved. Rather, it is the interaction of variation in structural positions (elites/constituencies) and other contextual conditions (well-being/crisis) that gives rise to particular types of logic.[17] More generally, we can say that the type of discourse (e.g. "instrumental rationality", "axiological rationality", tacit "logic of appropriateness") that prevails in a certain point in time exhibits a very complex path-dependence on historical, institutional, discursive and other contextual "sediments" that precede it and facilitate its emergence.

[16] Wolin (1996, p. 37) also reminds us straightforwardly that "historically modern democracy and ancient Athenian democracy all emerged in combination with revolution... Democracy was born in transgressive acts, for the demos could not participate in power without shattering the class, status, and value systems by which it was excluded". However, as we shall see in the next part of this series of essays, the longer-term dynamics of our proposed model may also lead the system into non-revolutionary pathways of gradual change.

[17] Likewise, the performance of individual politicians has not been addressed. Instead, the perception of competence of political actors has been traced back to this covariance of types of logic and contextual conditions.

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In the next part of this series of essays we shall consider longer-term dynamics of our proposed model, as well as the micro level mechanisms by which transitions between different socially dominant types of logics are possible. We shall also discuss how this model fits into a wider theoretical framework of deliberative democracy, and whether we can expect that the unfolding of the model toward the conditions of "distributed reflexivity", characterized by the prevalence of the logic of arguing, will lead to significant improvements in societal problem-solving capacities, or it will only give rise to a circular, self-referential mode of communication that we refer to as "communicative bubbles".

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