

Øystein Gaasholt

## The Theoretical Underpinnings of the Study of Political Behavior: An Overview

Essayet er skrevet med henblikk på å gi en oversikt over de teoretiske forestillinger om menneskelig adferd som studiet av politisk adferd er basert på. Oversikten hvilke på det implisitte argument at disse teoretiske forestillinger kan plasseres langs et kontinuum der den ene ytterpol leder oppmerksomheten hen på psykologiske forskjeller mellom individer og der den andre ytterpol leder oppmerksomheten hen på variasjon hva angår omgivelsene individer er plassert i. Dog fremheves at samtlige teoretiske forestillinger er sosial-psykologiske i den forstand at de dreier seg om interaksjonen mellom individuelle aktører og deres socio-økonomiske omgivelser. Essayet behandler hvorledes henholdsvis psykologiske karakteristika og strukturelle forhold inndrages i de forskjellige teoretiske perspektiver på menneskelig adferd som politologi gjør bruk av.

Political scientists have, in the course of recent years, "rediscovered" the state and gone far toward restoring its status as the central actor in politics and hence a primary object of study. In accord with this development, analyses of governmental policies have replaced individual political behavior as a main preoccupation in an otherwise divergent and complex discipline. I would be the last to suggest that this turn of events is an unfortunate one. It seems obvious that the practical as well as moral problems surrounding the acts of governments at all levels should rightfully command the attention of political science. It would, however, be premature to conclude that this shift in focus away from individual political behavior that is associated with the "behavioral" approach has rendered it interesting only to historians of political science. It may be convenient to place the shifting "main approaches" to the study of politics along a historical dimension inasmuch as each approach has tended to enjoy its greatest popularity for limited and roughly identifiable periods of time. But it would be wrong to assume that the succession of approaches is one of mutually exclusive categories that in turn have been rejected in favor of new "models" similar to the way some rich people trade in their cars every year. Rather, elements from each is present in most of the others.<sup>1</sup> A striking example is found in the fact that much recent political science poses questions about the impact of legislation on the social and political order – problems that were a preoccupation in political science before the turn of the century when the discipline was dominated by a formal judicial approach. Another obvious example is the concept and related theories of *power*: At whatever stage in the evolution of modern political theory, considerations regarding the distribution and use of power in society are very much a presence. By the same token, concepts and theories that have grown out of the behavioral approach remain part

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and parcel of the intellectual tool kit routinely applied to the study of political phenomena. One important reason for this is that the basic actor units in all human social affairs inevitably are individual people. Whatever the unit of analysis – organization, community, nation-state, or international “system” – and whether the research question has to do with the making of policies, their implementation, or their results, the analysis must involve some ideas about what determines human behavior. This is to say that in order to understand the actions and reactions of collectives of people, it is necessary to have some theoretical notions about why individual members of the collectivity behave as they do.

Aside from the relevance to political science in general of some insights regarding the determinants of individual behavior, the continuing dependency of the discipline on these intellectual tools is most evident in connection with the investigation of voting behavior, political participation, and related areas of inquiry. Here it is problematic indeed to do without the systematic and deliberate application of concepts and theories (and methods) associated with the study of why individuals act as they do. It is the purpose of this short introduction to the study of individual political behavior to sketch out the kinds of assumptions and theories most commonly encountered in the literature on voting and other forms of political participation.

Classical political philosophers – among them no lesser persons than Plato, Aristotle, and Rousseau – were much preoccupied by the relationship between the total upbringing of the child and his performance as a citizen and statesman as adult. They took for granted that the quality of the community to a major extent is dependent on the character of its individual members and that for purposes of its maintenance and improvement the community therefore must take upon itself to shape and refine the human raw material represented by its youth. This thought is, of course, not an alien one to contemporary western man. Just consider the ideas on which child care and educational institutions in all western societies rest, as well as the not infrequent debates on the dangers of various corrupting influences to which our youth is exposed.

The adoption and systematic use by modern political science of the general notion that the characteristics of individual citizens is a major explanatory factor in political life is rightfully associated with the rise of behavioralism. In this connection, reference is frequently made to the publication, in 1908, of *Human Nature in Politics* by Graham Wallas. Among other and later pioneers of the behavioral movement whose names stand out as particularly important are Charles Merriam<sup>2</sup> and Harold Lasswell<sup>3</sup>. As illustrated by the titles of especially the latter's works, these men and their associates and students were, however, less directly influenced by classical philosophy than by the “new” sciences of psychology, psychiatry, and social psychology. In fact, the rise of a behavioral approach in political science is to a major extent a function of the permeation in American intellectual life of concepts and theories developed in the psychological disciplines. And the psychological concepts and theories most readily available to the broader social science community during this period in history were none other than those dealing with the formation of individual psychological characteristics

and how these characteristics influence behavior. Thus it hardly is by coincidence that behaviorally oriented political scientists have occupied themselves with how individual psychological characteristics are acquired – in terms of concepts such as *personality formation, training, conditioning, learning, and socialization*; with measuring individual differences in terms of *personality, beliefs, values, attitudes, orientations*, and similar constructs assumed to represent more or less stable and enduring psychological traits; and with seeking to demonstrate that these traits structure political behaviors in predictable ways.

Here it must be noted, however, that the investigation of these and similar questions depends not only on psychological concepts and theories, but on individual-level data from large populations. The rise of behavioralism is, therefore, also associated with the invention of large-scale surveys, the introduction to the discipline of statistical procedures of analysis, and the development and availability of high-speed computers capable of processing large numbers of data. Thus, behavioralism is closely tied to developments in research technology and techniques, which in turn grew out of the dramatic technological progress that took place in connection with World War II – especially in the United States. It belongs to the story that the natural “hard” sciences are held up as the ideal model. With regard to its philosophical underpinnings, therefore, behavioralism involves a conception of (political) science as a hard science whose aim it is to construct universally valid empirical theory according to the principles of logical positivism – which was the ruling paradigm in the philosophy of science at this time in history. Incidentally, both this scientific ideal and the psychologization of American intellectual life and culture are to a major extent attributable to Jewish-Austrian refugees from Nazism. This group of people, many of whom were outstanding scholars, were, understandably, much preoccupied during the forties and fifties with the evils of Hitler’s Germany. In this connection, *The Authoritarian Personality* by Adorno, et al.<sup>4</sup> is a central work that illustrates both the scientific principles on which early behavioralism rests and its heavy reliance on psychological concepts and theories.

Especially in view of the fact that political scientists have tended to be highly unsystematic – not to say promiscuous – in their relationship to psychology, it is important in the following to keep in mind that we are once again talking about trends rather than clearly defined and absolute categories. None the less, it seems fair to say that the influence of psychoanalytic thought (originated by Sigmund Freud) – or, more generally, a psychodynamic orientation – has been strong in the behavioral movement from the beginning. Although it is neither possible nor necessary in the present context to describe in any detail the psychological schools of thought that have influenced political science, it is, with regard to psychoanalytic and psychoanalytically inspired theories, important to note that they focus attention on the pre-adult years – and especially as these are experienced within the private sphere of family and other primary social groups. The central mechanism in producing personality differences is a conflict, for the most part registered at the subconscious level, between biologically based drives and social realities which all people have to suffer through in the course of the years leading up to adulthood. The successful resolution of this conflict will, according to this general

orientation in psychology, produce individuals characterized by positive perceptions of themselves, an ability to evaluate the social environment realistically, high adaptive capacity, tolerance, and similar basic traits adding up to psychological good health and associated with relatively active, altruistic, and well adjusted lives. Unresolved conflict, on the other hand, will tend to pursue the afflicted individual through his/her adulthood and express itself in deep-seated anxieties, resentment, aggressions, egotism, feelings of insecurity, or the like. These psychological states will rule behavior by requiring constant gratification or management through the mechanisms of repression, denial and compensation. Anybody who has seen a Woody Allen film will recognize the general principles!

In political science the influence of this tradition in psychology can be seen in the concern with measurement of individual self-esteem, sense of efficacy, trust in others, authoritarianism, alienation, aggressiveness, etc. Positive scores on self-esteem, to illustrate, are believed to be indicative of a personality trait that predisposes the individual to be politically active and, indeed, have leadership potential. The theoretical reasoning is that people who believe in their own abilities will trust their own political opinions and also assume that their involvement in politics has an effect. Low self-esteem, on the other hand, will most likely result in resignation in relationship to the environment, the established political order included, on the basis of a feeling of uncertainty about one's own opinions and doubt about one's ability to influence events. Alternatively, individuals with low self-esteem may be compulsively driven on a never ending search for public approval and accept just about any sacrifice in pursuit of success. Former president Nixon is, according to journalistic folklore, a case in point.

The empirical evidence in support of these and related theories is, at best, inconclusive. However, we can hardly permit ourselves to simply dismiss as wrong or irrelevant the idea that people in their relationship to politics to some extent may be ruled by quirks of personality and more or less subconscious motives. We do, in any event, tend to rely on such notions when trying to explain our own private lives.

A specifically social-psychological variant within this general tradition in psychology which has commanded much attention in political science is Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory. According to this theory, humans everywhere seek gratification of their need for physical survival and comfort, their need for social intercourse, their need for acceptance and respect, their need for security, and their need for self-actualization – in that order. But not only must the first be gratified before the next can be attended to, and so on; to the extent lower-level needs are not gratified during the individual's formative years, he/she will tend to be preoccupied with these needs all through adult life.

As adapted to the explanation of political phenomena by Ronald Inglehart<sup>5</sup>, this theory is used to argue that because they have been raised under conditions of unprecedented material security, middle and upper class youth in the industrially advanced countries of Western Europe and North America are psychologically suited to pay attention to ethical and altruistic matters associated with upper-level needs. Thus "post-material" interests and values are common in the age-cohort raised after World War II, whereas the parental generation, as well as

youth from less privileged strata, remain preoccupied by physical and material values – presumably because they experienced deprivation of these basic needs during childhood.

The influence of psychoanalytic thought on political and other social sciences has, however, been tempered, and in many instances clearly replaced, by theories in the stimulus-response tradition of psychology. Although also this tradition – more generally referred to as "behaviorism" – assumes that human behavior to some extent is structured by past experience, radically different mechanisms are involved in the theoretical linkage between such experience and behavior. Taking its point of departure in empirical relationships between behavior and environmental events, behaviorism explicitly calls attention to environmental variation in the explanation of differences in behavior. Very generally speaking, the power of the environment to determine behavior is seen as lying in the consequences it produces once the individual has acted: Behaviors are "rewarded" or "punished" by the environment in the sense that it produces effects experienced by the actor as desirable or undesirable, pleasant or unpleasant. Positive effects will encourage repetition of the behavior that have elicited them in subsequent similar situations, whereas negative effects will discourage repetition of such behavior. Thus, thanks to the capacity of the organism for memory, it is the individual's prior experiences with the environment that to a major extent determines behavior. However, this memory constantly registers new information, which is to say that behavioral predispositions are not permanent traits buried deep in the individual's psychological structure, but changeable with environmental circumstances.

Another theoretical principle which should be noted in this connection is that learning, according to this general perspective on things, can also occur vicariously through observation of other people and their environments. Learning through observation – referred to as modelling, imitation, identification, and copying – suggests that a great deal of human learning takes place in higher-order mental processes. This is to say that the behavioristic school of psychology generally rejects the vulgar notion that the human organism is nothing more than a passive and mechanical repository of environmental information. Instead, behaviorism makes room for conceptual systems – registered as beliefs, values, attitudes, and the like – in which accumulated learning is stored and put to use in the evaluation of the complex environment.

Whereas the psychoanalytic tradition may be said to center on the concept of personality development, then, the behavioristic tradition may be said to center on the concept of learning. Then the latter tradition expands the range of social environments that become theoretically relevant in accounting for and predicting differences between individuals in outlooks and behaviors. In political science, this expansion can be seen in the almost standard references to background and current circumstances of individual actors in terms of their parents' and their own social class, civil and economic status, education, occupation, domicile, party membership, religion, etc. – all of which are assumed to represent special learning environments that equip the individual with predictable sets of beliefs and behavioral styles.

Another main approach in psychology that has influenced political scientists

which must be mentioned in this connection is cognitive psychology. It might be argued, however, that cognitive psychology is not a special school of thought in the sense that it necessarily presents itself as an alternative to the psychoanalytic and behavioristic traditions. It may be seen, rather, as a focus that is aimed at the development, description, and behavioral outcomes of the intellectual processes and intellectual maps of reality people carry in their minds. Cognitive psychologists tend to view the human mind as a calculating device, or as a system of processing information that reaches the mind through the organism's senses. Thus, cognitive psychology may properly be termed a science of intellectual development and intellectual processes.

One example of cognitive psychology to which we might refer in order to suggest, however crudely, some of its central principles is the developmental psychology of Jean Piaget. A basic idea in this theory is that organically based psychological stages of development under normal conditions unfold in a certain and cumulative sequence. Each of these stages is characterized by identifiable capabilities for receiving and processing information: For instance, at early stages of development, children are egocentric and incapable of causal reasoning, but as maturation proceeds, they become equipped with the ability to think in altruistic terms and to reason in terms of causal systems. The catch is that depending on the degree to which, and how, the person is nourished emotionally and intellectually, development may be arrested at a premature stage and render the individual intellectually and socially handicapped. Such an individual is likely to have an incomplete and incoherent ideational system and have great difficulty incorporating information that is dissonant in relationship to his/her preconceived notions of reality. The mature person, on the other hand, will most likely have a picture of reality that is sufficiently abstract and coherent to be potentially inclusive as well as adaptable. The mature person will, furthermore, be more actively in control of his/her environment precisely because he/she understands how things are related.

In political science these and similar theoretical notions have first and foremost been employed in connection with the study of ideology and related orientational concepts. Taking from cognitive psychology the idea that attitudes, beliefs, values, and perceptions are systems of information, political scientists have, for example, made much of the theory that one attitude can be predicted on the basis of another one – that they, in other words, cluster in a somewhat coherent fashion. This general idea also forms a theoretical foundation for observed positive relationships between attitudes and political behavior: People tend to perceive and act upon political situations in a manner that is consistent with their ideational system. And with regard to predispositional differences, concepts such as "open" and "closed" minds, liberalism-conservatism, political interest, political knowledge and other intellectual resources assumed to affect political behavior may be traced to the influence of cognitive psychology. For example, ideational systems resting on shaky intellectual ground will require selective attention and/or selective admission of facts if some semblance of internal coherence is to be preserved; such precariously constructed ideational systems will tend to support themselves on absolutist and authoritarian ideologies; intellectually underdeveloped persons will have little interest in politics both because they will tend to be preoccupied

with private pursuits and because they are incapable of fully seeing a relationship between private and public life; and they will tend to have an understanding of politics insufficient for appropriate and effective political action.

Although the defining characteristic of psychology is the study of individual organisms, the reader will, I hope, have taken note of the fact that in the final analysis all of the psychological perspectives discussed above concern themselves with how the individual organism interacts with its environment – and particularly the social environment. The environment is seen as entering into the picture in two main ways: First, it has a formative effect by shaping individual mental states assumed to structure subsequent behaviors; and, second, it defines the objective situation in relationship to which the acquired traits come into play and, possibly, become modified. Depending on what psychological school of thought they call into service, political scientists differ with regard to what part of the environment they pay attention to. But the fundamental theoretical notion, as adapted to political science, remains in general terms the same: The effect of environmental circumstances on behavior can best be understood when going by way of psychological and intellectual predispositional traits.

A question, much debated by critics of the behavioral approach to the study of politics, is whether it is useful to concern oneself with individual differences in the explanation of political behavior. In this connection, it is frequently argued that behavioral political science is not much more than a subfield of psychology, sterile as an approach to politics, concerned with explaining why people have different mental contents and styles by referring to the environmental vicissitudes that are specific to the history and life situation of the individual. In continuation of this criticism, it is pointed out that political science within the framework of behavioralism often loses sight of the structural realities at the level of society, or, at any rate, robs these structures of independent power while instead seeing them as aggregates of individual attitudes and behaviors. And there is much to this criticism: Heavily psychologized political science has indeed been guilty of focusing on individuals to such a degree that it has given credence to the charge that behavioralism rests on a conception of politics as the playing out in public life of individual idiosyncracies. To make matters worse, the more extreme behaviorists have tended to explain these idiosyncracies by reference to forces lying outside the realm of politics in all but the most indirect way – family dynamics, pedagogical practice, and accidental circumstances – and to investing considerable energy in the investigation of empirical relationships among various kinds and levels of predispositional traits while altogether losing contact with both social realities and behavior.

Fortunately, however, the picture is, on balance, less grim. It is, of course, legitimate also for political scientists to be interested in the mechanisms that operate at the level of the individual organism or in the personality of special political figures. For the most part studying aggregates of people rather than single individuals, however, political scientists have tended to find it both uneconomical and unnecessary to unravel the details of individual lives and instead found it more useful to refer to broader social categories to which the



individual belongs and which are assumed to be indicative of individual circumstances. This is to say that attitudes and behaviors are seen as co-varying in a probabilistic sense with where the individual is situated in the social system. And for this kind of thinking to make sense, it must involve some systematic ideas about social arrangements and how these define differential environmental parameters for individual members of society.

Systematic conceptualization and theorizing about how societies are put together and how they work are, of course, the constituting domain of the social sciences. Among these political science is but one and in many respects also a dependent member of the larger family where sociology and anthropology stand out as particularly influential. In order to get a more complete – although, admittedly, still very sketchy – picture of how political scientists tend to understand the relationship between individual attitudes and behavior and the position of the individual in the social structure, it is, therefore, necessary to allude to some general principles of sociology and anthropology which in this connection must be considered central.

With or without the explicit structural-functional framework first and foremost associated with Talcott Parsons, a central notion in all sociology is that societies are complex systems of more or less institutionalized functional units: Classes, status-groups, occupational categories, genders, races, etc. Whether emphasizing conflict among these units, as well as change growing out of the conflict – as did Durkheim, Weber, and in particular Marx, or positive interdependency and continuity – as is typical of sociology influenced by Parsons, each functional unit is seen as involving roles and norms appropriate to the specific function of the unit. In explaining differences among these units, then, reference is made to their particular function or task. And in explaining differences in the attitudes and behaviors of individuals, reference is made to the unit or social category to which they belong and within which they acquire certain outlooks and learn certain roles.

Another and related principle that shall be mentioned in this connection and which was emphasized by Marx is that the functional units – among which Marx considered classes to be most important – are differentially equipped with power, material values, and other resources that define the life situation of the individual member. These objective circumstances will, it is assumed, determine the individual's understanding of, and orientation to, the general society – including the political system. In this connection we encounter concepts such as political consciousness, alienation, and the like that may be seen as referring to predispositional psychological states.

As for anthropology, whether it seeks to account for the unique features of societies or for differences between societies and subsets of societies, it relies heavily on the concept of culture. This concept has proven especially useful to political science in moving back and forth between the individual and macro levels. Often explained in terms of adaptation to environmental demands for purposes of survival of the group, culture may be loosely defined as the totality of institutions, skills, and norms that characterize any given society. Although not

necessarily conceptualized as the aggregation of individual beliefs and behaviors, cultural norms and patterns of behavior none the less tend to be seen as registered in the individual intellect or psychology as internalized rules and learned behaviors transmitted from generation to generation through the mechanism of socialization.

Thus, by closer inspection, the social sciences in general tend to depend, however inferentially, on going by way of individual internal states in accounting for co-variation between social realities and individual behavior. In this regard both sociology and anthropology share with political science a reliance on concepts and theories borrowed from the psychological perspectives discussed above.

As opposed to psychology, the social sciences are, however, at least in principle concerned with accounting for differences between social categories rather than differences in individual makeup. In spite of the fact that also the social sciences tend to link individual behavior to social realities by way of internal states – personality, attitudes, beliefs, values, orientations, and other traits located within the individual organism, the observation that behavior to a significant extent varies with the actor's position in the social structure sets the stage for drawing a direct causal link between environment and behavior. For purposes of explanation, the theoretical focus is, in other words, manifestly on objective conditions located in the social, economic, and political environment – without including predispositional differences in the theoretical equation. The human material is, in a manner of speaking, held constant.

This extreme environmental/structural perspective on things involves two alternative research strategies. The first of these is to "black-box" the individual actor – which is to say that any explicit speculation about the human organism is deliberately avoided. The other strategy is to attribute to all human beings identical intellectual characteristics and motivating forces.

Although it must be emphasized once again that we are not talking in terms of absolute and mutually exclusive categories, the first of these strategies is – in spite of the qualifications mentioned above – first and foremost associated with classical sociology, of which in this particular connection Durkheim and Marx stand out as the most obvious representatives. Durkheim, for instance, attributed deviant behavior to "membership" in a society characterized by anomie – a state of affairs in which small communities are dismantled (by the demands brought on by the industrial revolution) in favor of impersonal urban centers where the individual is anonymous and detached from authority structures and intimate social networks. Marx, often thought of as the chief proponent of a pure structural perspective in sociology, predicted revolutionary behavior alone on the basis of membership in the working class – given, of course, certain objective historical circumstances. In contemporary social science, variations on these classical themes can be found in many guises. Modern sociology and anthropology have made much of the idea that population density causes deviant behavior. A case in point is recent radical Norwegian sociology, which recommends a deliberate reconstruction of society aiming at making small village communities the standard environment for people to live and work in. Another example, from anthropology, is the thesis that

behaviors and social forms observed in the black ghettos of American cities are in a very direct sense adaptations to objective circumstances. As for political behavior, social scientists of both conventional and Marxist persuasions point to economic conditions in general and the crisis that has afflicted capitalistic societies in particular in accounting for a wide variety of political phenomena – including the rise and fall of political parties, political unrest expressed in spontaneous as well as organized opposition to the established order, and violent conflict between ethnic groups. The most clear-cut and uncomplicated example of the environmental/structural point of view in explaining political behavior is, however, represented by the concept of objective political resources: Geographical distance from centers of power, means of transportation and communications, availability of local political structures, etc. More generally, this perspective is expressed in the idea that the path to the good society is not through people's hearts and minds, but through the restructuring of society.

Paradoxical as it may seem at first glance, also psychology has contributed to this perspective. Behavioristic psychology in its more purely cultivated versions is quite extremely environmental, dismissing as irrelevant any reference to internal states while instead seeing behavior as a function of forces located in the physical and social surroundings of the actor. However, of even greater interest in the present connection are some aspects of small group psychology.

Although small group psychology is equally concerned with the question of how different personality types affect the group, the opposite question is at least as important. A major and general pattern that has emerged in studies of how individuals are affected by membership in a group is that they succumb to group demands and perform in ways that may be at variance with the way they would perform outside the context of the group. As this suggests, a key concept is conformity: Group goals influence the behavior of individual members as powerfully as do their personal goals in areas of life that are independent of the group; people conform to group judgements even to the point of disbelieving their own perceptions; and individual members let their behaviors be defined by the role they are assigned in the group. These and similar findings form the nucleus of an entire field of study in sociology, social psychology, and political science – namely the study of organizational processes and structures and how these influence human behavior.

As should be obvious, however, even the practice of black-boxing individual actors involves some assumptions about what makes people "tick". An assumption that often is attributed to the black box is that man is a social creature whose behavior is guided by the need to live in close and meaningful association with others. A case in point are some interpretation of the Marxist concept of "objective interests". Thus, the strategy of black-boxing individual actors in order to focus attention on the environmental determinants of behavior overlaps with the second strategy: Assigning all people identical motives and other psychological attributes.

Most notions – however unsystematic and implicit – about the nature of man encountered in the social sciences rest on the assumption that man is a biological creature. It seems logical, therefore, to begin by alluding to explicitly biological

explanations of social behavior.

Because of their historical association with racism, we may be accustomed to think of biological explanations as outdated theories concerned with establishing "natural" differences between social groups and justifying social inequality. In its current versions as employed by the social sciences, however, biological theory emphasizes genetically constituted parameters on human behavior. Thus, with regard to social behavior, this theoretical perspective is best suited to account for universal patterns of human organization and interaction – such as the tendency to order societies hierarchically; to prefer association with family, kin, tribe, nation, and phenotypically related others; for such primordially constituted populations to occupy a territory; and to be on guard against out-groups that might be seen as a threat to one's own people and territory. But according to the growing number of social scientists interested in biological explanations, the more we learn about how the human organism is equipped genetically, the closer will we come to be able to explain and predict behavioral responses to specific situations.

A closely related, although psychological, example of placing the burden of explanation in the environment by assigning all people identical somatically based response-mechanisms is the frustration-aggression theory that stands behind the relative deprivation hypothesis. According to this theory, frustration – caused by situations in which external obstacles prevent the individual from reaching a goal – is an unpleasant psychological state that can most naturally be relieved by aggression. Thus, when collective expectations are frustrated by socio-economic realities, people are prone to anger and subsequent acts of rebellion and violence.

Of greater and more obvious interest in the present connection is, however, the notion that human behavior is propelled by selfishness and structured by rational calculations. Although this idea is not a theory of human behavior, but a greatly simplified *model* that has been found useful in testing certain propositions about human behavior, it none the less represents an understanding of man that has been adopted as a basic premise by increasing numbers of political scientists in recent years. I shall devote the last few paragraphs of this short essay to suggest how this understanding has impacted on the study of political behavior.

In 1957, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* by Anthony Downs appeared on the market. Although far from the first to introduce the idea that man also in political affairs is selfish and rational, the work is by many considered to represent the beginning of a theoretical revolution in the study of political behavior as well as politics in general.

The central thesis of the book is that people act for the purpose of maximizing values for themselves and on the basis of rational evaluation of the alternatives for courses of action made available by the environment. This thought, directly traceable to utilitarianism, represents a fundamental assumption in liberal economics. It is no coincidence, then, that Downs' book refers to economic theory. And accordingly, it has become fashionable in political science circles to talk of the Economic Model of Man.

To illustrate that there is little new under the sun, this model is very close to the one that dominated political science in its first years as an academic discipline! In

the more recent applications of this model of man to the study of political behavior – whether the act of voting, joining and/or participating in political organizations, supporting or opposing policies, or, in the case of elected and appointed public officials, the making of policies – existing political realities are brought sharply into focus: According to the theory, the explanation of behaviors is to be found in the alternatives for courses of action society presents to rational man in pursuit of personal gain. Thus a key concept is *rational choice*, which in this perspective on things is a value-maximizing calculating operation defined by rules that are independent of the actor carrying out the operation. Somewhat ironic in view of the emphasis on rationality, many adherents to the theory have found it necessary to incorporate psychological and sociological variables to account for differences in capacity for rational action as well as in value priorities and levels of information. But in its purest form, the theory assumes perfect rationality on the part of political actors, setting the stage for analysis of political behavior that at least in principle is reducible to mathematical logic when personal goals are specified and information held constant. Within this formal framework, political behavior becomes – again in principle – predictable with mathematical precision alone on the basis of data taken from the environment.

A peripheral point in this particular connection, but none the less an interesting one, is that the theory focuses attention on values placed in the public domain. These are the object of political activity and the stuff around which politics revolves. This introduces an understanding of politics according to which the management and distribution of public values – most of them in the final analysis dependent on money – become the primary concern of political science. In the eyes of many, this understanding of politics is sufficiently different from the traditional understanding to represent a paradigmatic shift taking us from the age of behavioralism to the age of political economy. But that's another story.

## Noter

1. Cf., Erik Rasmussen, *Komparativ Politik 1*, 2. udgave (1971), pp. 53-62.
2. See especially Charles Merriam, *New Aspects of Politics* (1925).
3. Two central titles are *Psychopathology and Politics* (1930), and *Power and Personality* (1948).
4. 1950.
5. Ronald Inglehart. *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics* (1977).