

## Symbols, Stratagems, and Legitimacy in Political Analysis\*

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This article evaluates the new conception of symbols and rhetoric in organization theory (March and Olsen). It is a perspective that departs from the traditional instrumental view in political science (cf. Edelman). This reorientation postulates the close connection between legitimacy and symbols, viewing symbolic language as a way of producing social integration. However, this perspective neglects the crucial aspect of legitimacy, i.e., a moral justification of power. Legitimacy concerns the cognitive and rational aspect of political argumentation rather than the expressive and symbolic aspect. Symbols, then, raise distinct analytical problems that refer to the authenticity and sincerity aspect of behaviour. Politics has to do with the just allocation of welfare, and symbols signify meaning and loyalty. That governmental policy is merely symbolic, then, denotes that it does not produce any real effects.

### Introduction

The degeneration of rhetoric from its original status as a way of creating consensus through open speech, can be dated back as far as to Gorgias in ancient Greece. However, the dispute between Socrates and the sophists is still going on, at least as a controversy of theoretical approaches to the study of political behaviour. Nowadays, rhetoric only signifies a way of producing a definition of the situation that is to the speaker's advantage according to the sophist model. For most people rhetoric denotes the manipulative use of language symbols for creating a favourable opinion such that the speaker succeeds in realising his own interests. Rhetoric is no longer viewed as a medium for convincing and grounding arguments, but rather as a means of *persuasion*. Its main objective is to change or reinforce the attitudes of the audience through expressive and symbolic talk with no reference whatsoever to what is basically right or wrong (cf. Senneth 1977, MacIntyre 1985). Or, as Goffman puts it: 'when an individual appears in the presence to others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize

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his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is his interests to convey' (1959, 4).

Thus, rhetoric is, so to speak, no longer a way to amend one's understanding (enlightenment) and to reach agreement on normative evaluations, but is an *effective extract* of communication. This is a component of language employed by modern party and interest organizations, corporations, and governments as a means of structuring public opinion. This tendency is escalated by procurement of new information technology and modern communication systems. This may result in the situation where the actual disposal of information technology becomes the critical factor in achieving consumption demand and political loyalty. Indeed, it is already a fairly well documented fact that commercials and propaganda are crucial for the survival and growth of modern economic and political systems.

Although this tendency towards manipulation can be traced to ancient Greece, it seems to be more salient as a structural feature in modern democratic and industrialized countries. In these countries the split between state and society has led to the creation of a large number of institutions and organizations oriented towards special interests and selective problems. This diversification of society through functional specialization and hierarchical organization is due to the modern principle of organizing the economy. The struggle between capitalism and democracy is a struggle between selective and collective goals (cf. Macpherson 1977). The latter concerns the problem of establishing *common goals* and normative standards.

Most analyses of politics in postwar Western societies neglect, or pay only minor attention to, the 'old-fashioned' concept of common interests. There is, one contends, no way of achieving such highly fragile and idealistic qualities in societies which are so deeply rooted in materialism and conflicts over normative questions. However, a *reorientation* has been called for (cf. Lindblom 1982a, b; March & Olsen 1984, 1986; Wildavsky 1987).

In the last few years some political studies based on organization theory have been paying increasing attention to legitimizing procedures of modern policy formation by emphasizing the symbolic-expressive side of decision making (March & Olsen 1976, and others).<sup>1</sup> This again is due to the fact that in the late 1960s and 1970s new 'interest' groups appeared on the political arena. These groups or movements focus on qualitatively new matters like peace, ecology, and real participation in political and economic life. Such goals and interests do not fit very well into the traditional frame of reference of political analysis which recognizes political activity relative to material interest and socio-economic stratification of society. This schema has no place for the general interest of the society. The new theoretical insights of organization theory are closely connected with these particular circumstances. The point of departure in examining these problems is the

symbolic-expressive dimension of politics. The scope is extended in order to include different dimensions of political behaviour. By introducing concepts like normative orientations, definition of the situation, ambiguity, and by relying on propositions concerning contingency behaviour, they have departed from the clear-cut instrumental and effective approach to political behaviour.

Nevertheless, as far as this direction is concerned, I will question whether the authors really establish a workable alternative to the traditional instrumental bias in analysing the symbolic side of politics. What is the relationship between symbols and legitimacy? This examination is based on the concept of *communicative rationality* (Habermas 1971, 1981). This is a concept that may contribute to more adequate distinctions in conceptualizing such phenomena as the manipulation of symbols and the process of establishing legitimate interests. Language both helps and retards us in our exploration of experience. It is an instrument with which to conceal people's 'real interests' as well as a medium for rational enlightenment and mutual understanding.

## Symbols and Legitimacy

The fundamental concept of symbolism is *culture*. Organizational culture, being part of societal culture, is the fabric of meaning in terms of which a group of human beings interpret their experience and guide their action (cf. Geerts 1973, 145). Culture is usually comprehended as the symbols, myths, rituals, and language that give meaning to human behaviour. 'Meaning is associated with order – with a patterned, cognitive structure that permits anticipation of future developments' (Edelman 1977, 31). It also reduces complexity and ambiguity and facilitates social interaction (Luhmann 1979).

In language, myth, art, religion, our emotions are not simply turned into mere acts; they are turned into 'works' . . . (which) are persistent and durable (Cassirer 1946, 57).

However, the expressive or symbolic aspect of politics is indicating how governmental policy does not produce any real effects; it is 'merely symbolic'. In this way, the expressive content of experience may be opposed to instrumental orientations which have reference to goals; i.e., to effects anticipated for the future; whereas the expressive-symbolic content 'serves to stabilize the present in the security of its states. . .' (Luhmann 1979, 13).

It may also be added that the problem of symbols in speech is not to be posed as a question of symbols, language and communication on the subjective-idealistic side versus the world as it 'really' is on the objective side. Since the works of G. H. Mead (1934/62) and L. Wittgenstein (1953),

we know that reality as such is a *symbolic construction*, a point I will return to later.

Modern organization theory focuses on organizational choice in highly complex and fluctuating situations. In such cases there are difficulties in defining the situation and the necessary precautions and actions. There is *ambiguity* and uncertainty in all relevant criteria for organizational choice. Goals are multiple or ambiguous, participants are part-time members, technology is unclear or unknown, the environment is complex and turbulent, it discloses different solutions concerning what would be a satisfactory organizational choice in order to survive or maximize a bargaining position. In sum, the external possibilities are highly variable and the internal structure is no longer fixed (cf. March & Simon 1958; Cyert & March 1963; Thompson 1967; March & Olsen 1976).

In such loosely coupled systems functioning in a complex environment, a *definition of the situation* is still required if the organization is going to survive. Somebody has to express a kind of common definition of the situation that integrates and motivates different participants to a common (or different) rational course(s) of action. This undertaking may be highly risky in open-structured and loosely-coupled systems where participants, motives and interests differ and where no authoritative structure keeps the ranks together.

To create a favourable definition of a situation to get things done may activate new participants and motives. The environment may also contribute to this ambiguity by responding to organizational actions in an uncalculated way. In analysing decision-making processes in such contexts, many sophisticated analytical tools have to be developed and incorporated into a general framework. The *generality* of modern organizational theory is still rather limited. However, organization theory concerned with decision making has developed several analytical distinctions that have increased our understanding of behaviour in organizations; especially in the case of the sets of propositions or clusters of ideas constituting the so-called Garbage Can model of organizational choice.<sup>2</sup> The main proposition underlying this perspective is that in many organizations and decision-making situations '... the flow of individual actions produces a flow of decisions that is intended by no one and is not related in a direct way to anyone's desired outcomes' (March & Olsen 1967, 19).

Here the *symbolic-expressive* dimension of politics becomes relevant, not as a way of intentionally producing certain effects, but more as an *unconscious* undertaking from the actor's point of view. The actors may not calculate this behaviour as a successful one, but this is the result (Olsen 1983, 40). What is suggested is that the symbolic side of politics has a special *legitimizing function* unintentionally. It is not, as commonly conceived, merely an instrument of political leadership and manipulation,

it also has a particular rationale of integration and motivation in directing individual actions for the benefit of 'common' purposes.

March & Olsen (1983) studied twelve big reorganization projects in the US federal government and found them 'a history of rhetoric'. They concluded:

. . . governance is an interpretation of life and an affirmation of legitimate values and institutions. In a society that emphasises rationality, self-interest, and efficacy, politics honors administrative and realpolitik rhetoric. It provides symbolic and ritual confirmation of the possibility of meaningful individual and collective action. The argument is not that symbols are important to politics, although they certainly are. Rather, the argument is the reverse – that politics is important to symbols, that a primary contribution of politics to life is in the development of meaning (March & Olsen 1983, 292).

In 1984 they confirmed the view that politics also encompasses the creation and affirmation of interpretations of life, stating: 'Politics and governance are important social rituals' (March & Olsen 1984, 742). The symbolic aspect of politics constitutes a way of creating solidarity and social integration among members as well as a way of justifying and authorizing decisions.

## The Problem of Rationality

J. P. Olsen (1983, 39–76) employed the concept of symbolic-expressive behaviour in analysing the ups and downs of postwar Norwegian Parliament. The new tasks facing modern parliamentary government have accelerated the process of system-differentiation. Societal governing takes place through many autonomous and semiautonomous institutions and organizations that are given a relatively free position vis-à-vis the political authority centre. The complexity of modern governance has led to specialization of politicians, disappearance of the clear-cut division between administration and politics codified in the constitution, increasing demand for expertise, time and energy shortage and so on. These are problems facing modern governmental organizations that make it difficult to reach rational agreement through open discussions. In addition, political discussions in modern societies are prestructured and within limits also *pre-determined* in the respect that the critical decisions are often fixed beforehand. Many have observed that the discussions in modern parliamentary assemblies, in principle free and open, are in fact settled a long time beforehand in committees, in ministries, in political parties and caucuses.

The analytical point of departure regarding this problem may be put in the following way (Olsen 1983, 39): The Norwegian Parliament is, on the one hand, a forum for making rational choice on behalf of the population to maintain and develop the *citizens' welfare*. On the other hand the

Parliament has to achieve legitimation; it has to validate or justify its decisions in public vis-à-vis the electorate. In addition to effectiveness and efficiency in producing substantive results on the part of the population, Parliament has to obtain *legitimacy*. These two goals may be contradictory in that they cannot always be satisfactorily achieved through the same procedures. They require different representative principles and also different substantive arguments. In many respects, Parliament of today is old-fashioned and out of date compared with modern principles of effective administration. The MP's spend too much time in handling trivial issues, too much time in endless discussions of no real importance, too much energy on matters of which they have little knowledge.

However, Parliament is a political institution not a business firm. Consequently, it also has to be effective in the process of creating legitimacy. The *symbolic-expressive face* of politics needs a forum, and the time spent on long and 'non-important' discussions may have the function of integration and the function of legitimization of different views. It is a way of creating consensus, loyalty, and motivation. This suggestion calls for four connected comments.

First, in one respect, we have to analyse much political activity as a way of signalling loyalties and proclaiming value-commitments. However, this is in no way *exhaustive* since values on a general and abstract level actually implies non-commitment if they are not questioned and made operative on a more concrete level of goal-setting and implementation (cf. Parsons 1960). In order to really function, general values have to be specified with reference to operative goals, which calls for justification of norms relative to the situational and contextual aspect of *implementation*.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the reason for keeping 'outdated' organizing principles alive does not depend solely upon their more or less symbolic-expressive functions, but also upon how these principles function with regard to production of rational and *fair* decisions.

Second, organizing principles which from an efficiency point of view are of minor importance in promoting rational choices, may nevertheless have an effect of themselves on the actual political outcome. This is because these 'outdated' decision-making procedures in gross concern the *public aspect* of political governance (cf. Arendt 1965). Still, in cases where policies are mostly determined beforehand, the possibility of public criticism and examination may have consequences for this predetermination. In other words, the public parliamentary questioning may have a disciplinary and substantive impact on what is determined before-hand in committees and in closed-door meetings between different interest groups. The fact that the decision reached has to be defended in public may have real impact on the choice being made. Such procedures may still have a *democratic function* in political systems consisting of two dominant political blocs and

a corporate committee system of bargaining and compromising interest groups.

I contend that the bare existence of open and free discussions in unbounded institutions will affect the content of decisions. To label such phenomena symbolic-expressive is a bit far-fetched as this category implies a more or less non-rational notion of the overt communicative functions of representative political bodies. These features, however, are at the core of political behaviour altogether, having to do with definition of common goals, preference priorities and so on, whose rationale is dependent upon 'the *disinterested interest*' in making the best choice. In other words, the solution of moral questions fundamental to legitimacy, as they are, depends on the capacity of the political system to deal with all interests in a fair and just way. According to the modern democratic constitution, this is achieved by following *legal and just procedures*, but basically legitimacy depends upon public consent: It has to be openly and freely agreed that the decisions reached are reasonable and just.

Third, an element of rationality is also involved in the discussion on decision-making and legal procedures. This is because not every procedure, not every principle of representation, is equally just and legitimate. There is an internal relationship between questions concerning representativeness, formal procedures and legitimacy. Some procedures and some representative arrangements are more just and fair than others; '. . . there is a very close connection between results and the means used to obtain them' (Bobbio 1978, 18). These are basic analytical problems in social and political science that call for a reexamination of our general notion of such concepts as rationality and legitimacy.

## Symbols and Manipulation

The last comment on March & Olsen's approach concerns its neglect of the crucial side of the symbolic aspect of politics, i.e. their point of departure does not leave open the possibility of *symbol manipulation and deception*. Conceiving the symbolic-expressive dimension as a 'legitimate' and internal feature of every political process gives no analytical point of reference for diagnosing the use of symbols and dramaturgical actions (Goffman 1959) as manipulation and illegitimate behaviour.

This question has to be raised as it is a well-established fact that the modern political system, parties, political organs and so on are employing all kinds of methods to *produce loyalty* or acclamation of their particular policies. Today, the political systems' need for legitimacy is produced through 'ideological planning' (Luhmann 1975). The systems' requirement



of quiescence and loyalty is obtained with means like sophisticated public relations, commercials, and the use of press and media in a suggestive way, with the help of rhetorical ways of talking including strategical symbolic employment (Edelman 1974). The real problem is to establish some sort of criteria for legitimate or reasonable behaviour in order to decide what is individual strategies, manipulations, and illegitimate uses of symbols. Edelman's famous book was oriented toward the crucial problem of how the strategic symbolic uses of politics were employed to confuse and conceal the real allocation of resources in society. He tried to show how the common normative belief system concerning the functioning of modern democratic institutions could be exploited by the power elite as a strategic weapon in manipulating the masses. 'Decision-making at the highest levels is not so much literal policy-making as dramaturgy' (Edelman 1964, 78). Edelman's way of addressing this problem was to look at the discrepancy between words and action, between ideals and realities. Politics has two faces: One *instrumental* and one *symbolic*. Some members of the society get the real values, the material rewards, while the rest only get the empty phrases.

Like Olsen & March, Edelman analyses political institutions and political procedures as *myths, rites and ceremonies*, but unlike them he sees these mostly as an ideology (false consciousness), the function of which is to legitimize a biased allocation system. They function as means to cover up the 'real' power relationships by giving a false or morally one-sided picture of reality. However, there are analytical and methodological problems involved in such unveiling and penetrating analyses. Who is going to decide objectively what is the manipulative component in utterances like: 'Further arms race is the best guarantee for peace and freedom' or 'It is good for the common welfare that taxes are reduced for business firms'; and what counts as real conviction?

Although Edelman used too gross analytical categories and drew too general conclusions, he nevertheless pointed to a very familiar feature of modern society. We have, in a certain respect, to conceive of discrepancy between the words and how the world really is – between ideals and realities. Then we know that reality as such is a symbolic construction. We have no other means of obtaining intersubjective truth and knowledge and of correcting misunderstandings than through language, which is to say communication through *significant symbols* (Mead 1962). There is no meaningful reality beyond the concepts that expresses this reality, since they also constitute human reality. Consequently, to establish common and intersubjective valid judgements is dependent on communication, which correspondingly calls for cooperation between participants. In taking such a *communicative view* as a point of departure, we may approach the problem of distinguishing between manipulative and truthful communicative interaction.

## Communicative Rationality

In opposition to the manipulative uses of symbols and belief systems, communicative interaction demonstrates the close correspondence between intention, meaning and the utterance itself as a precondition of communication. Language and meaning-content is one. The basic norm operative in all communication between rational actors is that of establishing *mutual understanding* between the participants (Habermas 1981, I, 387). This *telos* is operative in communicative interaction as an obligation of every participant to search for truth and then to accept others' arguments in so far as they are valid. This also implies a reciprocal relation of acknowledgement; i.e., participants in rational discussion recognize that each and everyone is principally free and rational and that others' opinions are principally at the same level of rationality as their own. That is, one has to admit as a precondition of rational interaction that it is possible to make mistakes and that others, thus, may have the capacity for correcting one's mistakes, as well as the other way around (cf. Mill 1972). Further, this possibility of reaching rational mutual understanding exists because, in communicative practice, there are certain intersubjective validity claims that are a precondition for the establishment of consent as well as of dissent. We have to at least implicitly know what counts as a valid argument and what is, for the sake of the nature of the case, invalid. Habermas presupposes four claims to validity that have to be recognized in rational discussion: These are *truth* (regarding representation of facts), moral *correctness* (regarding establishment of legitimate social relations), *sincerity* or authenticity (regarding disclosure of speaker's subjectivity) and *intelligibility* (i.e. the actor's performative competence of using language and making correct category distinctions).

These validity claims are ideal standards to which speakers have to appeal in order to obtain agreement with other actors. In other words, we can only understand an utterance and form an opinion as long as we know what makes it acceptable and valid, and correspondingly what makes it unacceptable and invalid. We understand and accept an utterance when we know what it is caused by or what the reasons and grounds are, and we hold these causes and reasons valid (cf. Eriksen 1986).

As a consequence, the scientist's possibility of giving an adequate description of the actors' behaviour is dependent upon comprehension of the actors' situations. The scientist has to *understand* what it is that makes the actual behaviour probable, but also rational, which means it is a reasonable response given the opportunity situation and the circumstances present within the specific social norms and cultural values of this community. In achieving a broader view and a more complete conception of the situation *from the actors' point of view*, of their specific orientations

and their definition of the situation, the scientist may be able to give a fairly adequate explanation of behaviour.

However, the scientist may be equally capable of deciding whether the reasons given by the actors, their definition of the situation and so on, is rational and correct. Maybe the actors would be better off, or more reasonable, by acting in quite another way. To be well founded, this judgement has to be relative to the norms and values of this specific society and to the goals of the actors themselves rationally conceived; i.e., they are not in a state of delusion. In other words we can only judge about rationality when we know the criterion of rationality. Then, when the scientist shares these standards, he may also judge the grounds and reasons given as valid or not valid. He or she may be able to judge the propositional content of an utterance, say yes or no to an assertion.

This sheds some light on the problem of the symbolic uses of politics, while it may be maintained that the political scientist *himself* employs this sort of criterion of rationality, when he or she is to decide what is merely symbolic performance and play to the gallery as a dramaturgical act. The scientist has to identify what it is in the way of talking and in the use of symbolic expressions that is not true, sincere or believable. The analytical potential of the concept of communicative rationality may consequently help us to identify what it is the communicative act tries to achieve that is not openly communicated. This analytical approach to the problem focuses on the political scientist's own capacity to inquire into the rationality of utterances in political rhetoric. In a certain respect it may be possible to maintain a criterion of rationality that makes it possible to distinguish between manipulation and sincere interaction. This calls for an elaboration as well as a reconstruction of the basic problem involved.

## The Criterion of Rationality

The problem in cases of manipulative speech is the lack of correspondence between the meaning of the words, the effects on the audience and the real intention of the speaker. A *systemic frame* of reference explains this in functional terms. The system, as such, needs this sort of utterance to prevail and maintain its borders. The symbolic-strategic behaviour has a function in maintaining the structure of the system.

The tradition of which Edelman is an excellent representative is a sort of functionalist ideology-criticism. This approach understands symbols and rituals as powerful instruments in concealing the injustice of the political system. The main problem with the systemic frame of reference consists of the impossibility of testing propositions about the functional needs for the survival of the system. It is merely a *metaphysical postulate* that some

functions have to be accomplished if the system is to reproduce itself, as we have no exact criterion for deciding the critical or imperative levels the functions have to meet (cf. Hempel 1965, Nagel 1956).

Another conventional objection to functional explanations is that the chain between cause and effect is not specified. The feedback loops are not properly identified (Elster 1978). To postulate that symbols are functional is not the same as to say that this is the reason why they exist. In other words, identifying a functional connection is not to say that this is its *raison d'être* – this is not necessarily the explanation of the existence of the phenomena in question. If symbols are functional and this is the reason why they exist, then we also have to show how somebody acts in accordance with such functional imperatives and thus *intentionally* reproduces the system. The actors themselves have to conceive of their acts cognitively while there is no such thing as intentions without actors, Elster proclaims (1979).

Another way of analysing this is to conceive of the speaker's intentions as concealed from the public. This is the perspective of *action-theories* in the utilitarian tradition. (Nowadays game theory is an excellent representative of this tradition.) In such action-theories we often see this conceived as the actor's capacity for concealing what he is really up to, so that he becomes able to achieve his own (egocentric) goals. However, this is not the whole case, since we all know that actors may be in a state of confusion about their own motives and their own interests. A way of dealing with this possibility, and a way of avoiding the *unconscious functionalistic* view of the systemic approach, as well as the *cognitive egocentric* view of certain action-theories, is to take a closer look at the scientist himself and his/her relation to the object of study.

It may be contended that when the political scientist sees through the rhetoric and judges the utterance as being not the whole truth at least, he is capable of this judgement while his own insight, knowledge or information makes him able to decide on the rationality of the utterances. The scientist, in order to make good analyses, has to decide on such questions by looking closer into the reasons and arguments maintained; and, in so doing, the scientist examines the consistency, the relation between premises and conclusions, and the logic and the truthfulness of the speech. He has no other means of clearing up the cases than to take a closer look himself at the speech, the contextual factors and the interests involved, the cognitive and social limits present, and then to evaluate the outcome according to his own rationally grounded knowledge. In this way, we may contend that the scientist possesses a kind of 'higher' or 'better' knowledge and rationality, and it is this higher degree of rationality (or just information) that enables him to make fruitful analyses.

Reflecting on the standards of rationality present, we may on the one

hand avoid inferring conclusions from symbolic-expressive behaviour and transferring these to the propositions about its hidden or latent function. On the other hand we may also avoid 'conspiracy' about the actor's intentions. It may very well be that the speaker himself is in a state of *confusion*, he may be ill-informed, and he may beyond doubt, himself, believe in his own 'false' message. His deception may be unconscious and may be rooted in lack of information, ideology, personality-idiosyncrasy, etc.

In 1964, Edelman contended that governmental economic policies frequently convey little in the way of instrumental resources, but rather function to reassure anxious groups of their continuing status as protected groups. In a book issued in 1971, Edelman reconsiders the impact of rational knowledge and 'objective' information in unveiling political language of myths and symbols. He also clearly confirms that not only the masses are manipulated.

Elites are just as likely as others to base their beliefs upon symbolic governmental cues. Though government officials and other elites make conscious efforts to manipulate mass opinion, these are not our chief concern. Far more influential are the mobilizations of both elite and mass political opinion that stem from their engagement with the same symbols. Sometimes governmental actions or language create distrust in official policy, and information from nongovernmental sources can reinforce and counteract official cues (Edelman 1971, 10).

At this point I should accentuate some general analytical distinctions that may throw some more light on the principal problems involved.

## Social Interaction and Rationality

The concept of communicative rationality refers to the competence of individual actors to reach mutual understanding with the help of arguments and reciprocal recognition of criticizable claims to validity. Communicative actions are in a particular way social; it is only with the existence of *others* and their attitudes that an agreement can be reached. In addition, consensus cannot be imposed by one side if we are to judge the agreement as a valid one. Liberty and equality is, in a way, a transcendental condition on which communication is based, i.e., everybody's arguments are, in principle, counted as equal (cf. Mill 1972).

The participants' attitude is *performative* when recognizing reciprocally the validity claims: When they act according to the premise of achieving mutual agreement and not to manipulating each other. The only way to obtain this is through rational arguments. When this is the case communication itself coordinates action and makes consensus possible. While this basic human way of acting involves 'other' as goals in its own right, the other basic way of acting does not involve 'other' as *end in themselves* as

Kant (1967) said. This way of acting is called *purposive behaviour* (or by Weber: 'Zweckrational Handlung') and is the basic category of work and material reproduction of society. This is what may be maintained as the utilitarian way of acting and is the situation where the actor tries to maximize his own (or other's) factual interests and goals. The basic criterion of rationality is, contrary to the communicative criterion of achieving mutual understanding, *success*; i.e., if he really achieves the goals that he is striving for efficiently.

Purposive rational action, furthermore, signifies a class of actions that may be both social and non-social. That is to say that such actions may, on the one hand, be conditioned upon the expectations of the behaviour of objects – *instrumental* rational actions. On the other hand, they may be conditioned upon the expectations of other actors' behaviour – *strategic* rational actions. The main point, however, is that these expectations are used as objective conditions or means for the actor to maximize given or egocentric goals (Weber 1978, 24). Strategic actions or stratagems, then, is the intermediate category between communicative and instrumental actions. Stratagems involve other actors, but merely as means for reaching a given end; they are not ends in themselves. The term strategic action consequently denotes behaviour following the rules of rational choice that can be appraised for the standpoint of efficiency or influencing the decisions of the opponents (Habermas 1981, I, 445).

The category of strategic rationality is central to political science (as well as to economics), because behaviour within such institutions as formal organizations and representative government consisting of competing political parties and bargaining interest groups to a large extent may be labelled 'purposive'. However, the crucial problem of action-theories like modern game theory and decision-making models in organizational studies is the universalization of this action-model. This is obviously an exaggeration that has led to much controversy. The problem may be dealt with adequately only if we first explain *why* so much behaviour in modern industrialized and capitalistic organized countries is conceivable in terms of strategic action, and, second, establish a model that renders it possible to identify the standard of criticism operative; e.g., communicative rationality.

In making use of such analytical tools, we may go on distinguishing between communication oriented towards mutual consensus and other ways of acting that are at the core of political purposive activity; among them dramaturgical and expressive performance.

## Stratagems and Communication

One common misunderstanding is to view the difference between communicative and strategic actions as having to do with whether or not

the behaviour is goal-directed. Another related and frequently observed misunderstanding is to conceive of the distinction as a question of egoism versus altruism. Rather, the difference is that between whether one's plans and goals are formed in *harmony* with others or if they are just egocentric calculations.

This schema illustrates the following points (Habermas 1981, I, 446):



Reaching mutual understanding is a peculiar telos since it cannot be sought in communication in the same way as a goal can through teleological action. In strategic interaction the actors are oriented towards achieving *objective success* and not primarily towards *creating consensus*. The frequency of the latter type of interaction is due to the rising degree of *action-formalization* that renders realization of interests possible. In such formalized situations, language and speech acts function as means of influencing other participants in a way that is effective for the realization of the actors' goals. Speech acts function in such situations just as other means to achieve goals. As Edelman (1977) correctly observes, rhetoric, language symbols, metaphors, metonyms, etc., are used as causes or remedies, not to achieve mutual understanding, but to influence others' understanding and their definition of the situation that is advantageous for the speaker's own plans.

Obviously, in real situations there is quite a number of mixtures and hybrid forms of communication where the situation is ambivalent; it is not obvious whether people are acting in a manipulative way. Generally, *misunderstandings* and suspiciousness arise when there is reason to believe that the speaker himself is not devoted or is not fully committed to his own arguments. In such cases, one is led to believe that the actor has motives other than those he openly speaks about.

The next complex of problems that has to be dealt with is the distinction between what is openly strategic interaction and what is basically *covertly strategic interaction*. The latter may also contain the important possibility

of unconscious deception. Both the audience and the performer are disillusioned; the speaker is not aware of the manipulative consequences of his action. This may be the case of systematic distorted communication that may be conditioned by psychological misconceptions or ideology; i.e., one does not realize one's own rational interests. The most usual and analytically most problematic situations are perhaps those of *conscious deception* or manipulation, where somebody plays tricks on others in order to confuse or camouflage what is truly going on.

Nevertheless, in both cases, rational discourse has the (potential) function of revealing hidden motives and unknown forces and transforming the manipulative and systematically distorted communication into a more enlightened situation where manipulation is reduced and people's wrong or false conceptions of the world are being corrected: which is to say, people become capable of realizing their own interests and of recognizing the barriers of material character and normative beliefs that have to be overcome. Rational communication may lead to the situation where the actors are capable of viewing their own interests in accordance with others and, in such a way, act on behalf of themselves as well as others through universal role-taking (Mead 1962). However, this is not to say that power and inequality, as such, have to be disposed of. It is rather a question of *legitimate interests* and valid power.

Concluding this article, I will point to the analytical advantage of this approach to the study of power and domination. Is it possible to establish a criterion for deciding whether or not power is wielded legitimately?

## Rationality and Legitimacy

Communicative action is the general modus of interaction that coordinates different actions according to the principle of mutual understanding. Human reality is a symbolic structure that people only conceive of as members of society; and, this sharing of common conceptualizations is not restricted to objective reality but is immanent to the social and meaningful reproduction of society. Durkheim's major sociological contribution is the notion that society exists 'sui generis'. It is a collective and *moral order* existing in its own right. Society is an order that encompasses and structures man's life, transcends man's finiteness, directs man's actions and engenders his motives (Durkheim 1972). G. H. Mead and J. Habermas have convincingly demonstrated how this normative interaction, conditional as it is for social life at the stage of humanity, is due to the *symbolic representation* of reality.

In a certain respect, the perspective of March & Olsen confirms this notion of society by pointing to the symbolic-expressive aspect of political and organizational behaviour containing development and confirmation of



meaning, identity and purpose.

The stories, myths and rituals of management are not merely a way some people fool other people or a waste of time. They are fundamental to our lives. We embrace the mythologies and symbols of life and could not otherwise easily endure (March 1980, 25).

However, while Edelman exaggerates the instrumental aspect of political rhetoric and symbols, March & Olsen overstate the expressive and emotional aspect of decision making. Or as March so elegantly put it once, 'Decision processes are sacred rituals' (1981a, 228). This notion overlooks the cognitive and rational aspect of such phenomena as the problem of *fair decisions*, legitimate interests and correct procedures. The social reproduction of society is dependent upon the actors' *meaningful* attachment to norms and values. The identity and durability of society are conditioned upon the common norms and values having a motivational and integrative force on the actors: The members must acknowledge and approve of the actual norms and values in order to be committed to rule-following behaviour.

On the one hand, this approach stresses the fact that since reality is a symbolic order it is only through *new symbolic categories*, new concepts and new understanding, that it may be changed. On the other hand, this approach stresses the internal relationship between legitimacy and rational grounds. Some goals, some norms, some procedures are more rational; i.e., more valid than others.

At a political and organizational level we may say that, in order to prevail, a political system, an organizational structure, has to be accepted and *approved of* by the members of the society. Legitimacy is basic to the duration of a political system. We should not exclude the possibility of keeping a structure together with bare physical force or bare material incentives; but, as Weber has pointed out, such an order is fundamentally *instable* and labile (Weber 1978). The structure has to be held *legitimate*; i.e., recognized morally by its members, one way or the other.<sup>4</sup>

This legitimacy-thesis, however insufficient as a single condition for analysing transformation it may be, is relevant in the conceptualization of power relationships, as it directs our attention to the problem of valid versus invalid use of power.

## Domination and Power

This approach in no way excludes the use of force, disturbance of communication and the like; it has to be conceived of as a result of the

*breakdown of communication*: Arguments are not succeeding in establishing mutual understanding. The reason for this may be of very various kinds, having to do either with basically different and hostile belief systems (the case of Iran today?) as one main class, or be of more objective character, having to do with the exigencies that do not allow for peaceful settlements of conflicts, e.g., resource shortage.

According to this theoretical point of view we ideally understand the use of force, manipulation, and political power as the effort of doing away with dysfunctions of society that impede the realization of mutual understanding. Conversely, every society to a certain degree needs power relations that are hierarchically organized and oppressive. Rather than doing away with all power relations, as Edelman and other committed democrats seem to plead, the crucial question is to distinguish between legitimate and *illegitimate power*.

There always has to be some frustration of actors' preferences and individual actions in order to achieve some common goals. Every complex society based on division of labour to a certain degree contains hierarchical power structures that are instrumental to the objective of reproducing society materially. Habermas (1971, 254 ff.) defines power as the possibility of obstructing others in following their interests. This obstruction may, however, be legitimate to the degree that it is functional for the society and is recognized by its members. This is termed *manifest display* of power, consisting in force or threat. In addition to this kind of power, we may also observe *normative display* of power. This is the case where the forceful oppression of interests and preferences is based upon belief systems that obscure the power relations and prevent people from knowledge of the actual allocation of power. Such belief systems are functional for some groups or classes in society and disadvantageous for others. *Domination* ('Herrschaft') is, consequently, a special and asymmetrical form of normative display of power.

In posing the question this way, we have first made explicit the normative component that is always present in social and political relations.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, we have stated that the problem of the symbolic side of politics is more deeply rooted than what is conceived of through concepts like strategic action and manipulation, which denote a 'Warre of every one against every one' (Hobbes 1962), and which implicitly do not give any understanding of the possibility that interests may be legitimate and that the normative justification of power relations may be valid. The crucial point is whether people systematically are exposed to deception, manipulation and false consciousness or if people themselves have the opportunity to make up their own minds *autonomously*. Accordingly, this constitutes the criterion for deciding whether or not the legitimacy of power and social interests is founded on *valid recognition* (cf. Eriksen 1987).

## Concluding Remarks

The problem of the symbolic-expressive face of politics has to be dealt with within a more comprehensive framework than that of Edelman or that of March & Olsen. That is, the symbolic-expressive aspect of politics should not be assimilated to the instrumental or effective aspect of politics, which in gross understands symbols in line with money as a means of *effective influence*. Conversely, the symbolic-expressive aspect should not be assimilated with the moral and normative-integrative aspect of political legitimization (March & Olsen). In other words we may say that Edelman and March & Olsen are substituting each others' one-sidedness. While Edelman sees manipulation and deception as the overriding aspect of modern politics, March & Olsen are aware of the many-sided tasks of government having to do with expressing *confidence* and *trust* which is basic to the achievement of legitimacy. However, if every procedure, every action that is not instrumental a priori, has a (legitimate) function in expressing trust and worthiness, then we have no criterion whatsoever for deciding on the validity of political action.

By posing the question this way, we make explicit the normative component that is at the core of political analysis, and that has to be distinguished from the instrumental as well as the expressive aspect of political action. According to the concept of communicative rationality, we may make three analytical distinctions concerning the standards of criticism that are present in evaluating political action.

First, decisions may be evaluated according to what *substantial results* they are achieving and how efficiently this production is being accomplished. Secondly, we may ask if this accomplishment of values is *right*; i.e., in accordance with common goals. In our complex society we often transform this question to that of whether or not the decision making is correct and just according to positive law. This principle of 'legalism' also contains a cognitive aspect in the respect that the procedures are also organized in a just way or at least proclaim to be. However, we often observe this belief in legalism turn into the question of political legitimacy altogether.

Thirdly, from this moral-practical question we have to distinguish the problem of *sincerity or authenticity* of the actors. Do we believe what they are saying, are their expressions of common values and norms sincere, or are they merely making a big dramaturgical theatre as a way of confusing what is really going on? We now see how the symbolic-expressive side of politics gives rise to analytical problems of its own. This aspect of political behaviour, therefore, is not to be reduced to the instrumental nor to the normative feature of political action.

### NOTES

1. I am here referring to the latest branch of the so-called Carnegie-tech School of

organization theory, founded by H. Simon, 1945, continued by J. March and H. Simon, 1958, R. Cyert and March 1963. A major reorientation occurred in the 1970s represented by such scholars as March, Cohen, J. P. Olsen, cf. March (1978, 1980, 1981a, b), Feldman & March (1981), Olsen (1972a, b, 1983). Consider in particular the concept of a *new institutionalism* which 'can be presented and discussed as an epistemological perspective of profound importance to understanding social science, but for our purposes, it is more useful to define it in terms of a narrow collection of challenges to contemporary theoretical thinking in political science, a small set of relatively technical ideas of primary interest to professional students of political life' (March & Olsen 1984, 738).

2. Garbage cans consist of mostly contextual and temporal combinations of people, choices, problems and solutions completely devoid of any overriding meaning or rationality.
3. In other words, we have to distinguish between norms and values. Values on the cultural level of generality like nation, democracy, rationality of government, and peace, are broad categories of meaning that mostly concern the expressive aspect and the *sincerity* of utterances and which, in a way, are beyond rational questioning. The analyst cannot decide whether or not notions like flag and nation, peace and equality, have any actual meaning unless people themselves manage to convince others that they really feel committed to such values. In our societies, reference to such symbols does not directly govern political action, because many possible actions flow from such statements. On the societal level, values have to be specified with regard to concrete operative norms and actions, and this calls for *justification*. Consequently, the process of making general values operative as specific norms and action programmes, which concerns political goal setting, involves the *moral rational aspect* in a far more decisive way than value-expression on a more abstract and uncommitted level of generality.
4. In this respect, I disagree completely with the strong proclamation of Edelman: 'A regime can continue indefinitely to pursue policies that deny most of the population what they are promised and what they value . . .' (1977, 146).
5. Unveiling of domination is to the core of sociology as well as political science. The question is frequently understood as a clear-cut empirical undertaking of describing how welfare is distributed quantitatively and to what degree people actually recognize decisions (Gallup poll, elections) or the level of participation in the political process. The perspective presented here is whether or not the members of society possess knowledge of the normative component of the manifest display of power; i.e., if people are aware of the extent to which the actual display of power amounts to ideology in favour of a biased allocative system.

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