Scandinavian Political Studies, Vol. 16 – No. 2, 1993
ISSN 0080–6757

Paradigm, School, or Sect? Some Reflections on the Status of Rational Choice Theory in Contemporary Scandinavian Political Science

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In order to try to come up with an answer, the following discussion starts from an attempt to clear up some of the terminological mess that often surrounds discussions of public choice, rational choice, or whatever term is chosen for the occasion. After that the article provides a brief look at some of the research that actually has been done within this field in the Nordic countries. Differences found between the development in political science in various Scandinavian countries lead back to the central question of how to account for the present status of the theory in Scandinavian political science. The article suggests some tentative answers to this question, and then concludes by looking at what lies ahead.

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What Should We Be Looking For, and Where?

From the outset it has to be admitted that the following discussion will deal with a not too well-defined subject, ask some not too precise questions and use a number of quite slippery concepts. This simply reflects the fact that, despite their long and wide usage, some central terms in this article's title – most notably the terms "rational choice" and "theory" – on closer inspection still do not possess a universally agreed upon content. Moreover, the terminology varies. What is called "rational choice theory" in the present context is called "public choice (theory)" by others (e.g. Mueller 1989), while still others prefer the term "(new) political economy" (e.g. Frey 1977). From the relevant literature it is not hard to discover that the concept of one or "the" rational choice theory is just a chimaera: this theory comes in very many different shapes and shades, and differences of opinion as to what constitutes "genuine" rational choice theory are far from always trivial. Thus some initial clarification of my use of this central concept is called for in order to render intelligible what will be included in the following discussion and what will be left out, and why. With several slippery concepts to deal with at once, the task is not just to get hold of the proverbial soap in the bathtub; rather, the task is somewhat like getting hold of the soap after having foamed the bath water.

Rational Choice Theory

Nowadays it appears that most people would agree that rational choice theory deals with *non-market decisions and non-market decision-making, using economic theory*, and hence should be seen as ". . . simply the application of economics to political science" (Mueller 1989, 1). But despite its widespread acceptance, this type of definition is far from as operational as the adverb "simply" in the Mueller quotation would seem to suggest. One obvious difficulty stems from the use of the catch-all term "economic theory" or "economics". Since economics cannot (any longer) be considered a monolithic theoretical construction,[1] one question prompted by such a definition of rational choice theory naturally becomes "*which* economic theory?"

Most people would probably agree that rational choice theory cannot and should not *per definitionem* be tied to any particular economic theory, nor to any specific economic methodology in a narrow sense, like econometrics. What links rational choice theory to economics is the fundamental view of political man as a rational utility maximizer, analogous to economic man, or, put differently, the view that, basically, homo oeconomicus and homo politicus are one and the same and should therefore be approached from the same perspective. Thus the field of rational choice theory might

most appropriately be defined as the study of non-market decisions and decision-making, based on the twin premises of *methodological individualism* and *rational utility maximization*, well known from economic theory.

Actually, this does away with the imprecision inherent in the term "economic theory" or "economics" only at the cost of a new, unpleasant imprecision. The discussion of what exactly is implied by the term "rational utility maximization" has been going on for some time now, both within the rational choice community and between rational choice theorists and some of their critics. Two of the key issues of the debate have been the problem of *selfishness vs. altruism* in political behavior – i.e. whether the assumption of rational utility maximization is meant to imply that individuals follow only their self-interest (or the interests of their household, family, or some other narrowly defined social group to which they happen to belong), or if altruistic behavior might under some circumstances be called rational as well[2] – and the problem of *information* – i.e. whether individuals need actually to acquire and process all relevant information in order to qualify as rational utility maximizers.[3]

This is not the place to review and evaluate various arguments forwarded in favor of one or the other position on these and related questions. However, in the present context it has to be decided whether to opt for a narrow, hard-nosed conception of rational choice theory, encompassing only work based on the explicit or implicit premise of individuals acting strictly from their own self-interest (and possibly also under full information, perfect foresight, etc., as in the rational expectations school of modern macroeconomics), or for a wider definition where rational behavior ends up designating hardly more than instrumental, goal-directed behavior (as opposed to, for example, norm-directed or structurally determined behavior).[4] For reasons which will become obvious, I will in the present context opt for the "soft", inclusive approach. Thus, at the risk of incurring the wrath both of those who wish to preserve the purity of the doctrine and of those who may discover that they have been found guilty merely by association, the following assessment and discussion of the present status of rational choice theory in Scandinavian political science is based on a fairly inclusive view of what research work can be said to belong to rational choice theory.[5]

However defined, the scope of rational choice theory is broad, and the actual research conducted within a rational choice framework is diversified along several dimensions. It is quite common to distinguish two main subfields of rational choice theory. *Social choice* theory – the Arrowian tradition – is primarily concerned with problems related to the aggregation of individual preferences and values into collective (social) welfare functions. It unites two seemingly rather distinct problems: (1) how to

construct a suitable voting system, and (2) how to measure collective welfare (Elster & Hylland 1986, 2). By virtue of this dual problem, social choice theory maintains links to game theory on one side and theories of distributive justice on the other. The other subfield of rational choice theory – which will be called *public choice theory* – is less narrowly focused. It is in part concerned with very much the same substantive problems as is the rest of the political science discipline: voting behavior and party strategies (Downs 1957), interest group formation and behavior (Olson 1966), government coalition formation (Riker 1962), and administrative behavior (Tullock 1965; Downs 1967; Niskanen 1971), to mention only a few classic examples.

But there is another area of distinctive rational choice work which – contrary to the above-mentioned fields – is not exactly crowded with political scientists of different persuasions, but where public choice theory takes on more traditional economic welfare theory instead. It is the study of the impact of government and government policies on the economy. To this field may be reckoned studies of the political business cycle (Nordhaus 1975; Hibbs 1977; Tufte 1978; Alesina & Rosenthal 1989), of policy or state failures (as opposed to market failures), as in the literature on the social cost of regulation (Tullock 1967; Krueger 1974), and on government as a monopolist or "Leviathan" (Breton 1974; Brennan & Buchanan 1980).[6] By virtue of not least the prominence of this area ("political economy" in a narrow sense), public choice theory is strongly, but not exclusively, *oriented towards the analysis of political outputs and outcomes*.

Another distinction within rational choice theory separates what has been labelled *first principles analysis* by Dunleavy (1991, 1–2) from what he calls *institutional public choice*,[7] the criterion being the work's level of abstraction. First principles analysis is concerned with the formulation and manipulation of highly abstract models of highly idealized situations with – at best – very precarious links to real world problems. Consequently, what comes out of the formalism is often of interest only to those who themselves play the game of first principles analysis. While perhaps intellectually gratifying, most often it does little or nothing to enhance our understanding of what is going on in the real world here and now. Thus, first principles analysis in rational choice theory plays a role analogous to the role played (according to some of its critics) by mathematical economics within the economics discipline.[8]

In contrast, institutional public choice strives to stay much closer to reality. Although using formal models and deductive reasoning to a degree which sometimes may be annoying to political scientists of more prosaic inclinations,[9] the aim is always to arrive at propositions about empirical phenomena. The litmus test for distinguishing between first principles analysis and institutional public choice is whether the truth criterion of a

proposition is taken to be (empirical) data consistency (institutional public choice) or just internal consistency (first principles analysis). According to this criterion, large parts of today's social choice literature must clearly be labelled first principles. Such a trend is explicitly recognized and criticized by Elster and Hylland (1986, 2):

> Today, social choice theory may be approaching the baroque stage. Breakthroughs are dwindling, while minor embellishments are accelerating. Formalism is gaining the upper hand, as in what Ragnar Frisch used to refer to as "playometrics". From a means, formal modelling is becoming an end in itself.

On the other hand, a large part of work within the public choice subfield is clearly empirical in aim and content.

Finally the distinction between *normative* and *positive* theory seems to take up an unusually central position in many discussions and assessments of rational choice theory. The reason is that rather frequently rational choice theory as such is accused of and summarily dismissed as being inherently biased in a conservative or libertarian direction, i.e., as being little more than right-wing ideology in disguise (Bosanquet 1983). Proof of this type of accusation is most often gathered from the writings of the "Virginia-school" in public choice, represented primarily by J. Buchanan and G. Tullock.

There is no denying that the *normative* work of the Virginia-school is indeed based on strongly libertarian values. But, important as Buchanan and Tullock have been as "founding fathers" of rational choice theory, this is not sufficient to dismiss *all* of public choice theory as being biased in a libertarian direction, nor to claim that it is inherently biased in such a direction. For that to be a valid inference, it must be the case that the normative implications drawn by the Virginia-school are the *only* normative implications which can be derived from a given piece of positive public choice theory. Plainly, such is not the case: unearthing particular policy or state failures through positive analysis, for example, does not logically lead to the normative conclusion that things are better left to the market, any more than the necessary normative implication of Arrow's impossibility theorem is that dictatorship must be great.[10] In order to arrive at this type of conclusion, additional premises have to be added. But they should not be mistaken for being part and parcel of positive analysis, nor of rational choice theory as such.[11]

With respect to positive rational choice theory, it is hardly more value stricken than other theories in political science – but probably also not less so.[12] There is, of course, no such thing as a purely positive theory; at certain points, value judgments are unavoidable in all scientific work. The distinguishing feature of rational choice theory with respect to values, then, appears to be that, compared to other theories in current political science,

a sizeable part of rational choice theory is openly concerned with normative issues. This is true for both the social choice and the public choice subfields. As mentioned, social choice theory, through the problem of how to measure collective welfare, links to and contributes to theories of distributive justice. Empirical results from public choice theory, especially in the field of government impact on the economy, likewise have served as the base of extensive normative theorizing, concerning, e.g., the proper mix of state and market allocation in modern society.

The Scientific Status of Rational Choice Theory: Explanations or Rules of the Game?

Still another ambiguity with respect to rational choice theory is hidden in the terminus *theory*. In what sense can rational choice theory be considered a theory?

In much of the discussion so far, rational choice theory has implicitly been treated as an approach rather than as one single, overarching substantive theory – which most certainly it is not – or as a body of theories within a common frame of reference. While primarily analytical, the distinction between theory (proper) and approach is not entirely trivial: one expects different things from a theory than from an approach. Basically, the criterion on which an approach should be judged is its fruitfulness in generating interesting and rewarding research questions and in directing research to where new insight may be gained. In this context the internal structure of the approach, e.g. the empirical truth of its underlying assumptions, becomes a matter of secondary concern only. When it comes to the basic assumptions of an approach, empirical accuracy may hence be traded for analytical sharpness.[13]

It seems that such a relaxed attitude towards the basic premises of an approach comes more easily to economists than to political scientists, however.[14] In any case, the propensity to reject rational choice theory out of hand because of the alleged empirical implausibility of (especially) the rationality premise is clearly greater in the political science profession than among most economists.[15]

With respect to the possible status of rational choice theory as an approach in political science, it is obvious to even the most casual onlooker that at any time there has been a multitude of competing approaches in the field. None of these alternatives, however, has ever been able to claim status as a *paradigm* in the sense this term is used by Kuhn (1962), i.e. as *the* generally accepted framework for "normal science" within political science research. This may simply reflect the fact that it is not (yet) possible to establish a paradigm in political science, mainly due to the weakness of the internal theoretical structure of the discipline and to the lack of agree-

ment as to when a theoretical proposition has to be considered falsified and must be abandoned. Nevertheless, some approaches always seem to aspire to paradigm status. This was probably true for Marxism in the 1970s (in Europe), and it may be true of rational choice theory in the 1980s as well (at least in the US). The presentation of the "new institutionalism" (March & Olsen 1984, 1989) is also sometimes phrased in a way which seems highly indicative of an aspiration to the status of paradigm.[16]

Instead of one paradigm, political science can boast of various competing *schools*. A school may be defined as a group of scholars pursuing research questions which are considered central by most of the profession, but using a particular approach – and sometimes also a particular methodology – only the members of this group regard as fruitful. Besides schools, various *sects* may be in existence as well, each pursuing research questions only the members of the particular sect deem central or interesting and using their own idiosyncratic approach in this endeavor. Of course sects may develop into schools and schools may degenerate into sects as time passes by and scientific tastes and fashions change.

Thus the status one can ascribe to rational choice theory in Scandinavian political science must depend on how it is actually used in scientific work. Does it in any sense define "normal science" in any field? If not, is there perhaps, nevertheless, an identifiable rational choice school in Scandinavian political science, dealing with much the same problems as many others, but based on rational choice theory – or is the status quo characterized merely by one or more sects with idiosyncratic tastes, taboos, and an esoteric language?

What Do We Find?

At first sight we find very little, almost nothing. Or so it seems. If we take as our point of departure the most recent survey of Scandinavian political science by Anckar (1991), rational choice theory appears to be close to non-existing in these countries. In any case, there is very little mention of it.[17]

It must be admitted that this picture may have some grains of truth to it. As in most of the rest of Europe,[18] rational choice theory is far from being as well-established an approach in Scandinavian political science as it appears to be in the United States.[19] Recently, one observer – himself certainly not unsympathetic to rational choice theory – spoke about "the only type of real public choice research going on in the Nordic countries, viz. the research at the Institute of Political Science and the Institute of Economics at the University of Aarhus" (Lane 1992, 73; my translation), implying the absence of rational choice research everywhere else. But on

closer inspection something more can actually be found. Some political research based on rational choice theory is also going on in Scandinavia, especially if one is not unduly choosy with respect to what may be subsumed under this heading. Without the pretention of presenting the results of a detailed and complete stock taking, some examples will be given below.

Sweden is probably the country with the strongest tradition in Scandinavian political science for analyzing political phenomena from a perspective of rationality (if not a full-fledged rational choice approach). Already in the late 1960s models of rational party behavior were suggested by among others Molin (1965) and Sjöblom (1968). In hindsight, the Molin model to some degree anticipated one central idea in the later much acclaimed Frey-Schneider models of the 1970s[20] - i.e. the idea that party behavior has to be explained from the combination of an ideological factor and the concern for vote maximization. But contrary to Frey, Schneider and their associates in Zürich, Molin never developed his model to a degree of formalization where empirically testable propositions could be derived.[21] Neither did Sjöblom in his voluminous work on party strategies.[22] Both aimed at the more modest goal of developing systems of analytical categories for empirical work, rather than formalized models.

The 1970s saw the start of the ambitious PARA-project[23] under the direction of Leif Lewin from the University of Uppsala.[24] Over the years a substantial number of publications emanated from it. As can clearly be seen in many of them, rational choice theory played an important role in the analyses, providing, inter alia, hypotheses and models of analysis. At the same time the basic logic of Molin's two-component model of rational (party) behavior was retained: ideological goal-setting and strategic goal attainment were both treated as integral parts of the behavior of rational political actors.

The value basis of the project, on the other hand, was clearly not the libertarian orthodoxy of the Virginia-school, but rather a concern that elitist tendencies stripped the theory and practice of modern democracy of any rational content. In that respect the project was certainly much closer to V. O. Key than to J. Buchanan and G. Tullock.

Also some of the topics in political science which have been most systematically and thoroughly investigated within the rational choice framework during the last 20 years or so and almost have become a trade mark of the approach – vote and popularity functions and public sector growth – have been covered by Swedish scholars. Jonung & Wadensjö (1979, 1987) and Lybeck (1985) have estimated Swedish popularity functions for the 1970s and 1980s, while, among others, Henrekson (1990) has analyzed public sector growth in Sweden. Finally, the work of Lane (with associates) deserves mentioning. It covers a wide range of topics within public choice

and political economy, often concentrating on the interplay between politics and economic outcomes.

Also in Denmark, the first traces of a rational choice approach to the study of politics are found in the field of party behavior studies. In 1967 J. Dich, a welfare economist, suggested a model of rational party behavior (Dich 1967). In a number of respects, it was quite close to Downs' model, although it appears that Dich did not know of this work.[25] But the emerging Danish political science profession, at that time firmly entrenched in the systems approach to political life, did not pay much attention to this line of research,[26] carried out, in the bargain, by an economist.

The first Danish political scientist ever to apply a rational choice framework in his research appears to have been Erik Damgaard. In his thesis (cf. Damgaard 1970) he performed a test of Riker's size principle on Danish government coalition-building data. Actually the size principle fared quite well, if an ideological constraint was added to restrict the set of possible coalitions. But after this initial venture into rational choice territory, Damgaard quickly turned elsewhere in his research, and for the many years after nobody was there to take up the lead.[27] With the systems approach in retreat, various branches of Marxism and neocorporatism came to reign the discipline in Denmark.

Meanwhile, the field of rational choice theory was claimed for the Danish economics profession, mainly due to the work of Martin Paldam (University of Aarhus) in the late 1970s and early 1980s. He primarily covered the area of political business cycles and vote- and popularity functions.[28] The only contribution from the political science corner at that time was a study of the Danish vote function for the period 1920–72 by Madsen (1980) who had come under the influence of Hibbs at Harvard.

But since the mid-1980s there has been some (moderate) increase in the interest for applying a rational choice framework in Danish political science, as witnessed by, inter alia, a couple of monographs published during the last five years. Kristensen (1987) rediscovered the asymmetry thesis and raised it to prominence as a possible explanation of public sector growth in Denmark. Nannestad (1989) presented a "Downsian" analysis of the five Danish general elections in the period 1971–79, while Mouritzen (1991) analyzed budgetary behavior at the municipal level from the perspective of the political business cycle. From a rationality perspective Nannestad (1991) also compared Danish economic policy-making and economic performance in the period 1974–79 to what happened in Austria, Germany, Sweden and the UK in order to explain the marked differences found.

Outside the institutional confines of the political science community, Paldam has continued to contribute studies covering a wide range of topics which clearly are relevant from the perspective of political science. In 1990, for example, with support from the Danish Social Science Research

Council, a joint project on "The Economic Foundations of Mass Politics: Information, Expectations, and Political Reactions" was instigated by Paldam and the present author. This project is still under way.

In Norway, the use of rational choice theory in political science has for a long time been associated with the work of Knut Midgaard. Part of this work is devoted to game theory and related fields (e.g. Midgaard 1965, 1968, 1976). Another important part is devoted to the relationship between concepts and models of rationality and institutions (e.g. Midgaard 1983; 1985). Also the multifaceted work of Jon Elster in rational choice theory can – at least in part – be claimed for political science, despite the breadth of its scope. Besides this contribution, work on more specific, politically relevant social choice problems by Hovi (1986; 1987), using game theory, and by Hylland (1986) can be mentioned.

The more empirically oriented species of rational choice theory is represented in Norwegian political science by the studies of, for example, Rune Sørensen on vote and popularity functions (Sørensen 1987) and on municipal finances, and by Ola Listhaug (and co-workers) on the relationship between economic developments and voting behavior (Miller & Listhaug 1985) and on the spatial analysis of voting (Listhaug et al. 1990; Rabinowitz et al. 1991). Furthermore, work done by Rasch, inter alia, on voting models and their empirical application (Rasch 1983, 1984, 1987a, 1987b, 1988, 1990, 1991), deserves mentioning in this context.

In Finland, the study of voting procedures and their characteristics – one of the main areas in social choice theory – appears to have been the central field for the application of the rational choice framework in political science. Here the work of Hannu Nurmi has played a leading role.

Thus, contrary to first impressions, rational choice theory is actually used, by some Scandinavian scholars at least, as their theoretical point of departure for attacking a wide range of empirical and theoretical problems in political science. But it is also obvious that, taken by sheer numbers, this group is a relatively insignificant one. By no means does rational choice theory command a Scandinavian followership comparable in size to the crowd that in the 1970s was attracted to, e.g., the framework of neo-corporatism in various fields of political science or to the Michigan model in electoral research.

Unsurprisingly, then, rational choice theory cannot claim status as a paradigm in Scandinavian political science. It is not even a serious contestant for that position. Rather, it seems to linger at the borderline between a school and a sect. The size of the group applying rational choice theory in its work could easily make one think of a sect, but in general the group's attitude seems not sectarian: most scholars using rational choice theory appear to have a pragmatic, instrumental attitude towards it and show little signs of missionary zeal. Rational choice theory is used because (and when)

it is deemed useful. There are few, if any, "true believers", no dogmas are universally adhered to, etc. And, most importantly, the bulk of problems analyzed by Scandinavian political scientists within the rational choice framework are mainstream political science problems rather than the obscure (to all others) specialism of interest to just this one small group.

Using some of the categories set out above, three additional observations on rational choice theory in Scandinavian political science may briefly be stated as follows:

(i) Both subfields in rational choice theory – social choice theory and public choice theory – are covered by work of Scandinavian scholars. It would seem, however, that public choice theory dominates in Sweden and Denmark, while social choice theory is more strongly represented in Norway and Finland.[29]

(ii) A considerable part of the work is empirical rather than "first principles analysis". Furthermore, positive analysis dominates over normative work.

(iii) In general, there is no discernible conservative or libertarian value bias akin to the one of the Virginia-school. The group of rational choice theorists is probably as heterogeneous with respect to values as is the rest of the profession. Admittedly, naïve, state-worshipping socialists may be hard to find in this group, but all that really means is that a rational choice socialist cannot be naïve.[30]

One Big and One Small Why

For quite a long time, theoretical developments in Scandinavian political science used to mirror what happened in American political science, with a lag. But obviously things have changed, at least as far as rational choice theory is concerned. There is little to suggest that rational choice theory is in the process of acquiring a position in Scandinavian political science just faintly comparable to its theoretical position "over there", where, according to Lowi (1992, 4) "... public choice has become probably the hottest thing going on in political science today". The big why, then, is why the theoretical development in American and Scandinavian political science has begun to diverge over rational choice theory.

But even within Scandinavian political science itself, differences exist. It appears at least that Swedish political science has been more susceptible, and at an earlier stage, to a "rationality view" of politics than has political science in the other Nordic countries. If this is indeed the case, the small why becomes why such a difference exists between the development in political science in different Scandinavian countries.

In both cases, the answers must remain mainly speculative. Of course

this does not mean that they have to be entirely arbitrary. But they will certainly reflect personal points of view.

There are three obvious groups of factors from which one may be able to draw (some of the) answers to our big why. The first relates to characteristics of political science scholars themselves. Do American political scientists possess certain characteristic traits that are lacking in their Scandinavian counterparts, and that make rational choice theory more attractive, more easily accessible, etc., to the former than to the latter? The second group of factors has to do with the general status of the political science discipline vis-à-vis other disciplines and vis-à-vis its surroundings. Could it be that the status of Scandinavian political science is such that in one way or another rational choice theory could be conceived of as a threat to its identity or integrity? Finally, the third group of factors is constituted by what may broadly be termed the intellectual traditions of the discipline. Is there something in the intellectual tradition of Scandinavian political science which in itself could be adverse to the two main tenets of rational choice theory, and which is missing in the American tradition?

With respect to the characteristics of American vs. Scandinavian political scientists, in the present context at least two traits come easily to mind. In the first place, much of rational choice theory relies heavily on the mathematical formulation and manipulation of models for exposition and sometimes on reasonably advanced statistical and econometric techniques for empirical testing. Thus, a certain level of sophistication in mathematics, quantitative methodology and statistics is generally required if one wants to move freely within the confines of rational choice theory. It is not easy to tell if American political scientists in general are better trained and versed in this respect than are their European, and especially Scandinavian, colleagues. But if things are judged from the technical standards demanded by leading journals, then certainly the aspirations, and most probably also the actual levels, with respect to methodological sophistication in American political science exceed those found in the European and Scandinavian profession.[31] Thus the "entry costs" for moving into the field of rational choice theory may have been lower for many American political scientists than they have been for many Scandinavian scholars – who therefore wisely stayed out.

In the second place, the alleged right-wing orientation of rational choice theory – however untenable the accusation – may have played a different role for the general attitude towards rational choice theory found among American political scientists as compared to their Scandinavian counterparts. If judged from their susceptibility to the attractiveness of Marxist theories and doctrines in the 1970s and early 1980s, the Scandinavian political science profession as a whole would appear to be more left-wing or progressive in outlook than the American. Consequently, the alleged

conservative value bias of rational choice theory may be more offensive to the average Scandinavian political scientist than to his or her average American colleague.[32]

With respect to the status of the discipline in America and in Scandinavia, it has to be remembered that – with the exception of Sweden – political science is a relatively new discipline in Scandinavia. In most countries its formative years, when the discipline struggled to develop its own identity vis-à-vis neighboring disciplines and to carve out its own fields of study, have not been over for long – if they can in fact be considered to be over. Rational choice theory, as is obvious from the very definition already offered, opens the flank of political science to economics. Adopting a rational choice framework is tantamount to, at least potentially, inviting economists to play on what political science would like to see and keep as its own turf. Moreover, it means inviting economists in on terms giving many of them some distinctive comparative advantages, especially in the methodological field. Thus the general reluctance towards rational choice theory in Scandinavian political science may simply reflect a wish – entirely understandable in a rather recently established discipline – to leave the economists alone and, not the least, to be left alone by them. In comparison, the American discipline, much older and much more well entrenched in its fields, could afford to face the competition from the economic profession coming with rational choice theory with much greater equanimity.

Finally, there are the intellectual roots and traditions of the discipline in the US and in Scandinavia, respectively. In complex ways, these intellectual traditions are linked to and influenced by the national political and social contexts of the discipline.

According to McKay (1991, 463–464),

> (b)roadly speaking American scholarship has been dominated by the liberal intellectual tradition. In the original legal and constitutional approach, during the behavioural revolution, and now with rational choice analysis, the individual has been and remains the basic unit of analysis. . . . Indeed, the American discipline has been constructed on foundations laid by liberal jurisprudence, economics, philosophy and psychology. Such remains the case today with many of the higher status research breakthroughs informed by a paradigm borrowed from liberal economics.

In comparison, the intellectual tradition in Scandinavian political science is to a large extent shaped by "puppet programs" (Poulsen 1979, 121–149), as opposed to the "liberal constructor programs" so typical of the American tradition. Even when the individual was made the basic unit of analysis, as in the American discipline, it has typically been viewed from a somewhat different angle: the main emphasis in Scandinavian political science has traditionally been on outside factors conditioning, constraining and structuring the individuals' behavior, be they socio-structural cleavages of various kinds, psychological factors, norms, institutions, or whatever.

Thus the intellectual climate in the American discipline would appear to be considerably more "congenial" to rational choice theory than is the intellectual climate in Scandinavian political science. Rational choice theory fits well into the American tradition, but not so well into the Scandinavian (or the European tradition in general).

The differences between the American and the Scandinavian intellectual traditions in political science are not just historical accidents. As aptly noted by McKay (1991, 464), they also reflect differences with respect to the foundations on which politics are conducted in the American and European systems:

> (i)n no European country is the business of politics infused with the liberal individualism so intimately associated with the USA. Instead, European democracies are a complex melange of liberalism, corporatism, consociationalism, elitism, populism, statism and socialism. European political science reflects this in just the same way as American political science – which is primarily concerned with the study of the USA – reflects the individualism of American politics.

This means that not only may rational choice theory be more "congenial" to the spirit of the American than the Scandinavian profession, it may also be more appropriate with respect to the political reality American political science is grappling with, than with respect to the political reality facing Scandinavian political science (which is hardly less inward-looking or ethnocentric than the American discipline). This may be a further reason – and a very good one – why rational choice theory has not achieved the same status in Scandinavian as in American political science.

But to concede this much is not the same as writing off rational choice theory as irrelevant to the furthering of our understanding of politics, even in the Scandinavian countries. It is, however, tantamount to writing off rational choice theory as a likely candidate to the position of *the* paradigm, or even a "hegemonic subdiscipline" (Lowi 1992, 1) in Scandinavian political science.[33] Rational choice theory focuses on one ingredient of the "melange" making up contemporary politics in Scandinavia – possibly even a growing one, and one which has been grossly neglected so far, but still only one ingredient.

It is because rational choice theory focuses on aspects of politics in our countries which traditionally have not been given the same attention in Scandinavian political science as, for example, structural determinants that we may expect this approach to be able to provide us with new questions and to turn up interesting and new insights. The question is only for how long: when will the well of (yet) unasked questions be emptied? In part, at least, this may well depend on the future direction of the political development, cf. below.

In summary, the difference between American and Scandinavian political

science with respect to the status of rational choice theory may tentatively be related to:

(i) Differences with respect to some characteristics of the profession as a whole, i.e. differences with respect to the level of methodological skills and differences with respect to the dominating value orientation.
(ii) Differences with respect to openness, reflecting differences with respect to the perceived need for self-protection.
(iii) Differences with respect to intellectual traditions, partly reflecting differences with respect to the main foundations of national politics.

As to the "small why" of this section, namely the question why there appears to be an older and stronger tradition for a rationalist view of politics in Sweden than in the other Scandinavian countries, it is unlikely that either (i) or (iii) should be able to provide an explanation. But it might be a reasonable hypothesis at least that Swedish political science, being by far the oldest in Scandinavia, simply reached a state of scientific maturity where it could afford to "open up" to some degree before the rest of the discipline in Scandinavia did.

What Lies Ahead?

It is not hard to imagine that the recent political changes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union will exert a profound influence on the theoretical development in Western political science for quite some time to come. Obviously, area specialists for Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union will have to reorient themselves (or find new areas to specialize in), and those working in the field of international politics are likewise faced with new realities to adapt to. But most probably the impacts of what is going on in the East will turn out to be even more far-reaching for our discipline than that, reshaping, at least to some measure, our whole agenda of research questions as well as the priorities assigned to them. "Il faut une science politique nouvelle à un monde tout nouveau" (Tocqueville 1951, 5).

One problem area which – once again – is brought to the focus of attention by the political development in Eastern Europe, is the relationship between the economic and the political subsystems of society. The role of economic failure in the downfall of the various communist regimes in the East can hardly be disputed, and most observers (as well as actors) seem to agree in linking the future prospects of democratic changes in these countries to the prospect of successful economic reforms and economic progress. Thus at the macro-level we have, e.g., the basic, time-honored

question of the relationship between (stable) democracy and economic prosperity. Faced with the seemingly widespread belief in the redeeming powers of "the free market economy" as a panacea for all social ailments in the new states in the East, we also have the (partly normative) question of the proper role of the state in the economy. At the micro-level these questions translate, inter alia, into questions concerning peoples' expectations and political reactions to (economic) policies and policy outcomes. Needless to say, all these topics belong among the core topics of various subfields in rational choice theory.

There are certain trends in Western political systems as well which may push political science in the same direction as do the recent developments in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Under the impact of a persistent economic crisis, Keynesianism has gradually lost its hegemonical position in many countries, both in terms of theoretical economics and in economic policy-making. Also in these countries, questions regarding the interplay between economics and politics, the proper role of politics in the economy, and the effects of political controls of the economy have been re-opened. At the micro-level we find a gradual weakening of the effect of certain traditional structural factors on political behavior, as witnessed by, among other things, the gradual loosening of ties between parties and their traditional social constituencies. Increasingly, traditional class-based party loyalty can be seen to be giving way to a quid pro quo (vote for policy) attitude.

If this diagnosis is right, and if Scandinavian political science is to pick up such trends in real-world politics, it seems that the discipline will have to focus more than hitherto on policy outputs, outcomes, and feedback processes, not only for their own sake, but also because they are becoming increasingly central determinants of the inputs (demands and support) to the political system. In the longer run it will probably not prove fruitful to keep treating the determinants of political inputs as mainly exogenously given, as one could do as long as socio-structural variables could safely be considered the most important determinants of political behavior. Increasingly, determinants of political inputs will have to be endogenized in our theories and models. In various subfields of rational choice theory, especially in the related areas of vote- and popularity functions and political business cycles, this type of model is already available and is widely applied.

This is not to say that rational choice theory is the only possibility, nor necessarily the superior choice, when it comes to facing new theoretical and empirical challenges to our discipline arising from rapidly shifting political surroundings. Rational choice theory does not contain "the" answer. All it does is to allow us to ask what looks like one set of pertinent questions. But one should keep an open mind – other approaches may turn out to do as well, or better, than rational choice theory. Even so, it is

hoped that rational choice theory will remain a school alongside others in Scandinavian political science – not more, but also not less. What has sometimes been considered a particular weakness of political science – its theoretical pluralism, not to say eclecticism – may in the end turn out to be a strength when it comes to dealing with phenomena as kaleidoscopic as modern politics.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Honkapohja (1990).
2. See, for example, Opp (1984, 2).
3. Another debated question (see, e.g., Rasch 1987c) is the exact status of these premises. Are they to be considered theories of behavior, to be judged by their ability to resist empirical falsification, or are they just axiomatic assumptions, chosen for convenience, to be judged primarily by their ability to beget relevant, interesting and stimulating research questions? Can, consequently, the whole of rational choice theory be dislodged by demonstrating the undeniable fact that instances of not strictly self-interested behavior may be observed in politics (as Lewin (1991) seems to presume), or is it the predictive or explanatory power of models and theories based on these premises that counts in the end?
4. This distinction illustrates that even when the assumption of pure selfishness is given up, non-trivial differences between the model of man employed in rational choice theory and in a number of competing theories still exist.
5. Actually, some of the most widely cited work in rational choice theory does nicely without the assumption of selfishness as the actors' sole incentive. For example, the centerpiece in the Frey-Schneider models (Frey 1978) of macroeconomic policy-making is the joint operation of *both* electoral incentives (vote maximization in the interest of staying in power) *and* ideological incentives in the actors. Likewise, the Partisan Theory of the political business cycle, attributable primarily to Hibbs, relies on the assumption that parties pursue ideological goals, "broadly consistent with the objective interests and the revealed preferences of their core constituencies" (Hibbs 1991, 4). From this perspective the endeavors of Lewin (1991) to dislodge rational choice theory by demonstrating, among other things, that politicians are not vote maximizers but may rely on other incentives as well appear to some degree misdirected. Moreover, even when rational choice models are explicitly based on the assumption of self-interest as the only incentive, this is not always as crucial an assumption as it may seem to be. For example, the generalization of Niskanen's model of the budget-maximizing bureaucrat by Sandmo (1990), allowing for both preferences for the bureaucrat's own income and for the social result of the bureau's activity in the utility function of the bureaucrat, shows that Niskanen's main result is not affected: the bureaucrat still strives for an activity level of the bureau above the point where marginal (social) utility equals marginal cost.
6. This shows that rational choice theory need not necessarily be seen as a device of imperialist economists scheming to colonize political science. It may as well be seen as a device of expansionist political science bound on conquering parts of what used to be economics.
7. The term "institutional" is not the most fortunate choice, since this type of rational choice work is not necessarily concerned with institutions.
8. Some counter-examples do, of course, exist. For example Hylland (1986), on the basis of a first principles analysis of what is known as the "Lady Chatterley problem", arrives at a proposition highly relevant to real world politics when he demonstrates that ". . . even the tiniest amount of decentralization, namely giving each of two persons control over the choice from one pair of possible decisions, makes it impossible to guarantee Pareto optimality. Those who construct decision procedures have to

choose between decentralization and optimality". But then, as witnessed by the header of his contribution, Hylland is to an unusual degree concerned about the "significance", i.e., the real world relevance, of social choice theory.

9. According to Barry (1978) this is one of the strong points in much work done within the confines of public choice theory: thanks to the clarity achieved through formalization it really sticks out its neck with respect to testing and falsification.
10. As (rightly) pointed out by Paldam in his manuscript "More of a Branch or More of a Sect?" (Paldam 1993).
11. Cf. Lane (1990) where essentially the same point is made.
12. Subjecting government intervention in the economy to critical scrutiny may not be the first priority of a true believer in socialism and the planned economy. Thus one will hardly find naïve socialists among rational choice theorists. But it requires one additional, strong assumption to infer that there can therefore be no Marxist rational choice theorist. Actually, there is a small group (cf. Dunleavy 1991, 5).
13. An extreme formulation of that point of view can be found in Friedman (1953).
14. Cf. the discussion of Downs in Rasmussen (1968, 242–243).
15. This does not mean that all economists accept rational choice theory or like it, but only that they tend to dislike it for different reasons.
16. Cf. Anckar (1991, 257–258).
17. The reference to "enquiries about the rationality of collective decision-making" and "reflections and research about the role of the state" (Anckar 1991, 257) is the closest one comes to finding something which may be interpreted as a reference to rational choice theory as an approach, and it is not entirely clear if this is how it should be interpreted. At the very least, it only covers a small part of rational choice theory. Moreover, there is a reference to a specialty named "political economy" alongside other examples of such specialties as "peace research, comparative politics, specific political issue areas, local politics, political methodology" (Anckar 1991, 246).
18. Cf. Dunleavy (1991, 3): "As a result it is still very common outside the United States for political scientists who do not themselves use public choice methodology to dismiss it as of marginal interest for the discipline as a whole. ... Public choice theory is widely seen by political scientists as simply another abstruse specialism produced by overdeveloping particular techniques without putting equal effort into showing how they can add to our substantive knowledge about central topics in political life. Public choice may be a legitimate field to work in 'if you like that kind of thing', but it is still not regarded as a basic intellectual position which has to be regularly or seriously considered in describing the behaviour of political systems and structures."
19. McKay (1991, 463) puts rational choice theory on a par with the original legal and constitutional approach and the behavioral revolution in American political science.
20. See Frey (1978) for an overview.
21. This is one of the reasons why Moberg (1966) doubted its character as a model.
22. It might even be argued that instead of striving for a degree of formalization which would have made deductions from their models possible, both Molin and Sjöblom went in the opposite direction. What was needed was (still more) simplification or "idealization" of their models. What both went for was amplification and ramifications.
23. PARA = Politics As Rational Action.
24. Surveyed in Midgaard (1987).
25. Neither is there any reference to the work of Schumpeter which might have been the common root of both Downs and Dich.
26. It was, however, mentioned and criticized in the then standard Danish textbook in political science (cf. Rasmussen 1968, 252–54).
27. There was a single voice in the wilderness, though – an article by Mogens Pedersen, (1975) proposing a spatial model of political recruitment. It was built on the assumption of politicians as rational actors with their behavior determined by cost-benefit calculus. This paper, however, did not evoke much response and was never followed up.
28. This work did not gain him full credit from either side of the borderline between economics and political science in Denmark.
29. With only a small group of scholars active in the field, these differences may easily be

attributable to the special interest of one or just a few leading figures in a particular country, however.

30. This expression is borrowed from the manuscript by Martin Paldam "More of a Branch or More of a Sect?" (1993).
31. Cf. McKay (1991, 461–462).
32. This probably generalizes to European political scientists as a whole. If it is further assumed that as a whole political scientists tend to be more left-wing or progressive in outlook than economists, then the political orientation might also help to explain why European rational choice theory is so heavily (over)populated with economists (at the expense of political scientists), while the number of economists and political scientists in American rational choice theory is about the same.
33. The same logic could be applied to other contestees, and with the same result.

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