

Political Psychology

JON ELSTER



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Victoria 3166, Australia

Cambridge University Press 1993

First published 1993

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Elster, Jon, 1940–

Political psychology / Jon Elster.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0–521–41110–6 (hardback). – ISBN 0–521–42286–8 (paper-
back)

1. Political psychology. I. Title.

JA74.5.E47 1993

320'.01'9 – dc20

92–17779
CIP

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0–521–41110–6 hardback

ISBN 0–521–42286–8 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2002

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----------------|
| <i>Abbreviations</i> | Page <i>vi</i> |
| <i>Preface</i> | <i>vii</i> |
| Introduction: Why Political Psychology? | 1 |
| 1 A Historian and the Irrational: A Reading of <i>Bread and Circuses</i> | 35 |
| 2 Internal and External Negation: An Essay in Ibanskian Sociology | 70 |
| 3 Tocqueville's Psychology I | 101 |
| 4 Tocqueville's Psychology II | 136 |
| <i>References</i> | 192 |
| <i>Index</i> | 199 |

INTRODUCTION: WHY POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY?

THE following four chapters present the case for seeing political psychology as important and relevant. It is in the details of these analyses that the answer to the question raised in the title has to be sought. The aim of this Introduction is to provide some preliminary clarification by describing the role and scope of the discipline, setting out the central question it raises, providing some examples, and explaining the method I have opted for.

THEORIES VERSUS MECHANISMS

I shall start with the last of these. Why would it seem useful, when explaining a theoretical approach, to concentrate on writers rather than on the theory itself? Although Veyne, Zinoviev, and Tocqueville are brilliant writers, may not their splendid style be a hindrance to any systematic exposition of a coherent theory? Does one have to be a genius to be a practitioner of political philosophy?

My reply is that the choice of these three writers itself ensures a degree of coherence, even if it is largely accidental and post factum. From Aristotle to the present political theorists have proposed innumerable typologies of political regimes. Each has its advantages and drawbacks, and none can claim any special status or any particular close relationship to the nature of things. Choosing Veyne, Zinoviev, and Tocqueville suggests a division of political systems into authoritarian, totalitarian, and democratic regimes. If we ask whether such a three-way split is exhaustive, or whether the categories are mutually exclusive, the answer

in both cases must be no. The Italian city-states, for instance, do not fall neatly into any of the categories. According to Tocqueville, democracy not only contains the germ of an ubiquitous and intrusive totalitarianism (however gentle and protective it may also be), but also entails the risk of creating an industrial aristocracy that could produce a new kind of authoritarianism – tendencies that could develop within the democratic framework rather than replacing it. Historical regimes form an infinitely more richly shaded mosaic than that offered by the threefold division suggested.

It would of course be possible to provide a pseudosolution to this pseudoproblem by introducing mixed regimes, rather as Marxism introduced the notion of a social formation to get around the rigid distinction between modes of production. This would allow us, for instance, to see set historical regimes within a triangle having the three “pure” regimes at the angles. It is not worth taking the idea any further. The reason why the distinction between authoritarian, totalitarian, and democratic regimes seems to me a fruitful one is that it both takes in a large proportion of historical regimes and makes it possible to identify and analyze the psychological mechanisms at work in *all* regimes. In other words, these three types of regime provide enough diversity and variety to cover also those that have different institutions. A typology of *regimes* is a fragile and artificial construction serving only limited purposes. A catalogue of *mechanisms* is a sounder and more helpful tool.

Mechanism: This is the key word. It will figure very largely in this book. In my view, progress in the social sciences does not lie in the construction of general theories such as historical materialism, Parsonian sociology, or the theory of economic equilibrium. The aim of such theories – to establish general and invariable propositions – is and will always remain an illusory dream.¹ Despite a widespread belief to the contrary, the alternative to nomological thinking is not a merely descriptive or narrative

1 Earlier arguments to this effect are Veyne (1984) and Boudon (1986). See also, ch. 1 of Elster (1989a).

Introduction: Why Political Psychology?

ideographic method. Between these two extremes there is place and need for the study of mechanisms. I do not propose a formal definition, but shall only provide an informal pointer: A mechanism is a specific causal pattern that can be recognized after the event but rarely foreseen. Some examples will clarify this proposal.

In Chapters 1 and 4 I examine the mechanism of the “sour grapes syndrome,” in which desires are adjusted in accordance with the means of achieving them. The opposite mechanism can also be seen, for sometimes we want what we cannot have, precisely because we cannot have it. If we consider the behavior of the citizens in totalitarian regimes, we can see that those who condemn Western freedom and stress the evils of Western society are very like the fox in La Fontaine’s fable. Among those taking the opposite view, there will be some who want the freedoms they lack because they are worth having in themselves, and no doubt others who want them simply because they cannot have them. There is no a priori reason why the three character types should not all exist at the same time, and no way of knowing in advance to what degree they will all be observable.

In Chapter 4 I discuss the formation of beliefs and tastes as a result of a desire to conform – not to the external situation, but to the beliefs and tastes of others. Here too the opposite mechanism – the formation of beliefs and tastes as a result of an (unconscious) desire to be different – can also be observed. This phenomenon, which should not be confused with mere indifference to others (see Chapter 2), can exist alongside with conformity in a constantly shifting relationship. Electoral behavior, for instance, has been analyzed in these terms, with some voters tending to favor the candidate tipped to win (the “bandwagon effect”) and others to identify with the one tipped to lose (the “underdog effect”).²

A third example involves the fine grain of altruistic motivation.³ Some people are unconditionally altruistic, in the sense that

2 Simon (1954).

3 This is discussed at greater length in ch. 5 of Elster (1989b).

their contribution to charities is in no way dependent on how much others give. In the case of conditional altruists, there are those who subscribe to a norm that prevents them giving less than their peers. Others adopt a utilitarian approach leading to the opposite result: Large contributions from others make the beneficiaries better off, and hence (assuming declining marginal utility of money) an extra contribution less effective, which makes them less inclined to give. Here too, elections provide an example. As a high turnout at the polls can be seen as a public good, in the absence of which democracy might crumble, an individual vote may be seen as a gift to the community. For some, the obligation to cast one's vote is deemed to be more compelling when the average propensity to do so is high, whereas for others it is stronger when the latter is falling.

A final example is taken from the psychology of envy, further discussed in Chapter 4 below. The definition of targets of envy can be governed by either of two mechanisms. On the one hand, there is a *spillover effect* by which the habit of envy tends to spread. According to Plutarch, once the habit of envying enemies is established "it sticks; then from habit we start hating and envying friends."⁴ On the other hand, there is a *compensation effect*: If envy is denied one outlet, it will seek another. (For more about these two mechanisms, see Chapter 4 below.) Plutarch, again, argues that to the extent that "envy is a fact of life, unload it on enemies, who will render you pleasanter to your friends in their prosperity by draining your potential for envy."⁵ Instead of concluding that Plutarch was contradicting himself, we may interpret him, more charitably, as implying that either mechanism can operate, on different occasions.

Anyone stating two opposite general propositions is in fact contradicting himself. We cannot at the same time maintain that men prefer what they have to what they cannot have and that they prefer what they cannot have; that they think like others and the opposite to others; that they give more when

4 Walcot (1978), p. 36.

5 Ibid.

Introduction: Why Political Psychology?

others give more and that they give more when others give less; and that envy of one's enemies both strengthens and weakens the tendency to envy one's friends. If one of the propositions is true, the other is necessarily false. But we *can* maintain, without fear of contradicting ourselves, the existence of two contrary mechanisms. The distinctive feature of a mechanism is not that it can be universally applied to predict and control social events, but that it embodies a causal chain that is sufficiently general and precise to enable us to locate it in widely different settings. It is less than a theory, but a great deal more than a description, since it can serve as a model for understanding other cases not yet encountered.

Moving from a plurality of mechanisms to a unified theory would mean that we should be able to identify in advance the conditions in which one or the other mechanism would be triggered. In what circumstances do people give more when others give more? Or, alternatively, what are the characteristics of those who give more when others are doing the same? My own view is that the social sciences are currently unable to identify such conditions and are likely to remain so forever. Using experimental procedures, one can often establish general propositions of the following type. In conditions $C_1, C_2 \dots C_n$, we observe mechanism M_1 . In conditions $C'_1, C'_2 \dots C'_n$, we observe mechanism M_2 . In the real world, however, the number of possible permutations of conditions is too great for us to be able to establish the characteristic mechanism operating in each of them. That is why experimentally based social psychology is both indispensable and insufficient. It is indispensable because it can foster in their pure state mechanisms that would otherwise have passed unnoticed, and insufficient because it has very little predictive power outside the laboratory.⁶

Identifying mechanisms can also be helpful in another respect. The correlations that social scientists can identify between different patterns of behavior tend, even when they are statistically sig-

⁶ Useful introductions to experimental social psychology are Nisbett and Ross (1980) and Aronson (1988).

nificant, to be quite weak. In such cases, we might ask whether the weak correlation does not really mask two strong correlations, one positive and the other negative.⁷ Imagine, for instance, that we found that there is a weak tendency for people to donate more to charity when others donate more. This tendency might well be the net effect of the two opposing mechanisms that I discussed above, with the norm of reciprocity being somewhat stronger (guiding the behavior of more people or guiding people's behavior more of the time) than the utilitarian reaction.

Or take another, nonhypothetical example: Walter Mischel's celebrated finding that the crosssituational consistency in behavior tends to be quite weak.⁸ People can be aggressive at the workplace and mild-mannered at home; selfish in one setting and altruistic in another. In terms of the present approach this finding could be understood in two ways. On the one hand, one might see the setting as the trigger of a mechanism. On the other hand, however, we might postulate the existence of two different kinds of individuals. To anticipate on the discussion in Chapter 4, some persons might be subject to a *spillover effect*, so that, for instance, the ability to delay gratification in one arena creates a general habit of doing so in all walks of life.⁹ Weightwatchers might find it easier to give up smoking. Other individuals might be subject to a *compensation effect*, so that drives denied an outlet in one arena will seek one in another. Weightwatchers might find it more difficult to quit smoking if they need to give themselves a break from time to time and to reward themselves for the strict dieting.¹⁰ In such cases, a weak aggregate correlation might mask the presence of strong opposite correlations on a less aggregate level.¹¹

A final comment on mechanisms. It might appear, from the examples given, that mechanisms are essentially psychological.

7 For a similar point, see Lewis (1982), p. 32.

8 Mischel (1968).

9 Ainslie (1992) offers impressive evidence to this effect.

10 For findings to this effect, see Nisan (1985).

11 See also the comments in note 13 below.

Introduction: Why Political Psychology?

However, we can use psychological mechanisms as building blocks in the construction of sociological ones. In the discussion below of revolutionary behavior I indicate, for instance, how heterogeneous motivations may interact to create a snowball effect that none of them would have produced taken by itself. In Chapter 4 I show how some of the psychological mechanisms identified by Tocqueville can interact so as to account for large-scale social phenomena. Like the individual-level mechanisms themselves, these interactive structures are largely contingent. We cannot tell in advance when the mix of individual motivations needed to generate aggregate phenomena will turn out to be present.

METHODOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM

The importance of political psychology is linked to the postulate of methodological individualism, a much criticized but, if properly understood, essentially trivial doctrine.¹² It implies neither an atomistic perspective (it grants that relations between individuals are not always reducible to their monadic predicates), nor egoism (it is compatible with any specific set of motivations), nor rational choice (here again it is perfectly neutral), nor the innate or “given” character of desires (it is consistent with the view that desires are shaped by society, that is, by other individuals), nor finally with political individualism (being a methodological doctrine, it is compatible with any political or normative orientation).

It does, however, answer guilty to the charge of reductionism, by its claim to explain the complex by the simple – the principle that has brought about scientific progress in the face of all kinds of holistic obscurantism.¹³ Like any kind of reductionism, it is

¹² I have written more about this in Elster (1989c).

¹³ This is the place to comment on a possibly confusing aspect of my terminology. In earlier work (Elster 1983a), reductionism was also characterized as a search for *mechanisms*, but not in the sense in which that term is used here. According to this earlier argument, the difference between theory and mechanism is one of fineness of grain. A theory is a lawlike “If, then” statement relating an antecedent state to a subsequent one. A mechanism provides

sometimes applied prematurely and overenthusiastically, given the scientific tools available. Thus Pascal's criticism of Descartes was not that he embraced atomism, but that he wanted to implement it: "We must say summarily: 'This is made by figure and motion,' for it is true. But to say what these are, and to compose the machine is ridiculous. For it is useless, uncertain, and painful." (*Pensées*, 79.)

This being said, we must beware of confusing the substance of a doctrine and the abuses to which it has been subjected. We may agree that many "economic" explanations of revolutions are ridiculous, and yet it has to be stressed that the actors on the revolutionary stage are men, not classes. (Later in this Introduction we shall see how the development of a revolution can be understood in the perspective offered by methodological individualism.) Nor can we talk of social institutions as if they were monolithic, since essentially they are collections of human beings. If they were not, how could we explain their corruption and the erosion of their authority? And if their instability needs explanation at the level of individuals, should not the same type of explanation be offered for their stability?

Methodological individualism tells us to study the individual human action as the basic building block of aggregate social phenomena. In a general way, any action can be explained by the motivations and beliefs of the actors.¹⁴ (This is not an im-

the causal chain that mediates between the two states. In the absence of a mechanism, the law is a mere black box (but see Suppes 1970, p. 91 for the point that "one man's mechanism is another man's black box"). In the present exposition, theories and mechanisms differ in level of generality rather than in fineness of grain. In my earlier terminology, going from theory to mechanism is to go from "If A, then always B" to "If A, then always C, D, E, F and B." On the view set out here, going from theory to mechanism is to go from "If A, then always B" to "If A, then sometimes B." However, I also urge the further move to "If A, then sometimes C, D, E, F and B."

14 In Chapter 4 I formulate this somewhat differently, saying that any action can be explained by the (subjective) desires of the actor and the (objective) opportunities at his disposal. Often, the two come to more or less the same thing, because in the first place what the actor does is explicable in terms of what he thinks he can do and in the second place what he thinks he can

Introduction: Why Political Psychology?

plication of methodological individualism, but a truism that follows from the definition of action, as distinct from mere behavior.) A central and very important case is when an actor chooses the action which for good reasons he sees as most likely to achieve his aims, that is, the case of rational choice.¹⁵ In a number of cases, however, psychologists and decision theorists have shown that action does not conform to that paradigm. Sometimes the beliefs underlying it are less than fully rational (see below). Sometimes there is a discrepancy, with the action actually taken being different from what would be dictated by the motivations and beliefs of the actor. Two major cases are weak and excessive will, discussed in Chs. 4 and 1, respectively.

There is a wide and varied range of motivations: substantive and formal, conscious and unconscious, self-regarding and non-self-regarding, forward-looking and backward-looking. I argue in Chapter 4 that the most important motives are advantage (or interest), passions and social norms. These are all, as it were, substantive motivations. They fit into a framework of formal motivations, which include attitudes to risk, uncertainty and the distant future. What often determines the behavior of an actor in the political field is not so much what he desires and how strongly he desires it as his aversion to risk or his preference for the present moment rather than the future. The “decision value” of an experience may, for these reasons (among others), differ from its inherent value.

Motivations can be conscious or unconscious. As further explained in Chapter 1, one should beware of ascribing to unconscious impulses properties that are only appropriate to conscious desires. However, it would be equally wrong to deny the

do is largely explicable in terms of what he can in fact do. There are, however, many exceptions to the second statement. Some of them are explored in later chapters. Although the desire–opportunity model could probably be restated so as to take account of these exceptions, I shall not try to do so. The model is offered as a mechanism (or a set of mechanisms), not as a theory.

15 For a more detailed examination of the theory of rational choice, see Elster (1986a; Elster 1989d, ch. 1).

existence of unconscious motivations, although their precise mode of operation remains a mystery.

Moreover, motivations may be classified by the way in which they take into account the effects of an action on other people. For purely logical reasons, we have to give pride of place to selfish motivations.¹⁶ This does not rule out, of course, that in the real world altruism and envy (see Chapter 4) may be just as important.

Finally, we can distinguish between rational motivations, which are orientated toward the future, and those that carry the past with them. A rational actor is one who is willing to let bygones be bygones. He does not, for instance, seek revenge unless the reputation of being someone who gets even is likely to be useful to him in the future.¹⁷ Those who are unable to shed the past may be subject to a cognitive mechanism often called "the sunk-cost fallacy" or (by reference to some phenomena that embody it) the "Concorde effect" or the "Vietnam effect." Or they may be in the grip of a social norm that tells them to return good for good and bad for bad, regardless of the consequences.

Cognition similarly varies both in its substantive objects and in its modalities. Human opinion is directed toward individual facts (what does my opponent intend to do?), toward general causal connections (what will reduce inflation?) or toward the future (what will the dollar exchange be in a year's time?). Among modalities, we must first distinguish between certainty and what is believed to be more or less likely and then, more

16 See also Elster (1989b), pp. 35–6 for an argument that rational action is also methodologically prior to irrational action.

17 Of course, having that kind of reputation may be useful even if it is not the outcome of the rational pursuit of reputation. The following comment on Robert Moses illustrates the point: "If Moses was indulging his enjoyment at hurting people not in order to help him with his aims but simply because he liked hurting, the indulgence nonetheless helped him achieve his aims. As Judge Jacob Lutsky puts it, 'If you know that every time you get in a guy's way, he's going to kick you in the balls, you make pretty damn sure you don't get in his way – right?' " (Caro 1974, p. 507)

Introduction: Why Political Psychology?

subtly, between what is unreservedly accepted and what is only half believed (see Chapter 1). We may also differentiate between strong and deep convictions, where the former are characterized by their ability to shape action and the latter by their ability to remain stable in a turbulent environment.

The realm of error, sophism, and fallacy is a particularly rich source for political psychology, and one to which I shall return again and again. The most important instances in the present book are the microeconomic and micropolitical illusions (Chapter 1), the tendency to confuse the absence of desire for X and the desire for X to be absent (Chapter 2) and the tendency to confuse partial and general equilibrium (Chapter 3). Also worth mentioning is the “everyday Calvinism” underlying “everyday Kantianism.”¹⁸ The latter (a form of unconditional altruism) is a normative attitude, compactly summarized in the persuasive question, “What if everyone did that?” The former is a cognitive fallacy, viz. that of confusing the diagnostic and the causal values of an action. If a person believes that his choice between, say, giving and not giving to a charitable cause is not only diagnostic of whether others will give, but actually has an impact on whether they will give, he is more likely to be swayed by the Kantian question.

THE FORMATION OF BELIEFS AND DESIRES

Political psychology cannot limit itself to tracing the effects of beliefs and desires on individual actions and thereby on social processes. It also has to concentrate on the mechanisms by which desires and beliefs are formed. In these mechanisms, causes as well as effects can belong either to the order of motivations or to that of cognitions, giving four distinct cases. In the following, I am mainly concerned with mechanisms that

18 The following draws on Quattrone and Tversky (1986). See also Leff (1976), pp. 167ff and ch. 5 of Elster (1989b).

distort desires and beliefs, broadly defined as those whose operation would be unacceptable to the subject were he aware of it.¹⁹

In the first place, the formation of motivations can itself be explained with reference to mechanisms that are of the order of motivations. Here, I am not talking about conscious and motivated character planning as advocated in Stoic, Buddhist, or Spinozistic philosophy,²⁰ but of the operation of unconscious motivations or drives that have as their end result a conscious motivation.²¹ Among these, the most important one is the *reduction of cognitive dissonance* (Chapter 1). Despite the term, the phenomenon is motivational rather than cognitive. The organism seems to have a need for interior tranquillity, which makes it adjust its desires to its beliefs (or vice versa²²) until they are relatively consonant with each other. Although being in the grip of this mechanism makes for loss of autonomy, it does at least create some, even if perhaps merely temporary, contentment.²³ (See Chapters 3 and 4 for comments on Tocqueville's discussion

19 The following repeats some of the analysis in Elster (1983b), ch. 1, and Elster (1989d), ch. 1, but with a view to laying the groundwork for the discussions in later chapters.

20 See notably Kolm (1982).

21 For a critical discussion of the distinction between character planning and "sour grapes" (an important special case of the distinction made in the text) see Bovens (1992).

22 Often we can observe that a given situation of dissonance induces different individuals to go different ways. Thus in his analysis of Chinese reactions to the West at the beginning of this century, Levenson (1968) distinguishes between two types of response. Some saw Western technical development as an option that China had contemplated and rejected long ago (sour grapes). Others thought it might be possible to keep the essence of things Chinese and reject only the Western function (wishful thinking). In other words, the latter wanted to take the techniques they thought would be useful to them without the cultural and political concomitants. However, as Tocqueville observed with regard to a similar problem, "these things hold together, and one cannot enjoy the one without putting up with the others" (DA, p. 589).

23 The contentment can be permanent if the adjustment operates on the desires. If it operates on the beliefs, by making them correspond to the desires rather than to reality, there will usually be a penalty to pay down the road. See also Chapter 1 below.

Introduction: Why Political Psychology?

of such cases.) Sometimes, however, it is possible to observe mechanisms that *create* dissonance, such as one sees with case-hardened pessimism or the tendency to tire very quickly of the very thing that had been desired and chosen. These are doubly counter-productive, because they subvert both the autonomy and the happiness of those subject to them.

Secondly, desires can be formed under the influence of cognitive-type mechanisms. The relative attractiveness of two options can change when they are described differently, even if logically the two descriptions are equivalent. I may be ready to pay two dollars for a glass that is half full, but no more than \$1.50 for one that is half empty. There is by now a long list of phenomena of this kind.²⁴ In a way, they are akin to cognitive illusions, with the difference that in some cases there is no way of telling which of the alternative evaluations is the correct one. We know that in reality the stick in the water is not broken, but no test will tell us whether \$2 or \$1.50 is the right price for the glass of water. Some of the phenomena discussed in Chapter 2 also fall under this heading, as does the link between everyday Calvinism and everyday Kantianism.

Third, beliefs and opinions can be formed by “hot,” that is, motivated, mechanisms. Self-deception and wishful thinking are as uncontroversibly real as they are paradoxical. On the one hand, anyone who refuses to admit his own occasional or frequent tendency to believe that the world is as he would like it to be is thereby providing an example of what he is denying. On the other hand, analysis suggests that in the case of self-deception, the same proposition is both affirmed and denied. In itself, there is nothing paradoxical about that (Chapter 2). It is paradoxical only insofar as self-deception seems to offer an example of a seemingly impossible phenomenon, namely intentional and motivated denial.²⁵ If someone told us that on his way to work he always takes great care not to see any cats, we would wonder

24 Some recent surveys are in Thaler (1991, 1992).

25 See Pears (1984) and Davidson (1986) for attempts to make sense of this phenomenon.

whether he doesn't have to catch at least a glance of them in order to avert his eyes.

A largely ignored but very significant phenomenon for the study of political life is that of beliefs arising from a need for *meaning*. I believe we can identify several needs of this kind. First, there is the need to find a purpose – an end, a function – even in the tiniest things. This may give rise to a theoretical functionalism or to psychoanalytical conjectures (Chapter 1), but also to eminently practical consequences, as in the Stalinist notion of “objective complicity.” Second, there is the need to find justice in the universe, as elaborated in “just world” theories.²⁶ Misfortune is translated into blame and guilt, even when it is manifestly random in origin (as in the draft lottery). Even in authoritarian societies, the citizens need to justify the order under which they live (Chapter 1). Thirdly, human beings seem to have a deep need to have sufficient reasons for what they do, and an equally deep aversion to situations in which reason gives no clear answer.²⁷ They often need a belief – some belief or other – more than they need a correct belief. Even in situations in which they do not have the necessary information to form a sensible opinion, they are reluctant to admit their ignorance or agnosticism (Chapter 2). It ought to be an important task for the social sciences to examine this need for meaning and its consequences. Instead, they have to a large extent served as tools for realizing this need. Functionalism and psychoanalysis have, as I said, invented meanings where none exist. Decision theory, notably of the Bayesian variety, has told us how to give reasons for decisions that are essentially incapable of rational justification.

Fourth, beliefs can also be formed – or distorted – by means of “cold” mechanisms, that is, cognitive processes so rigid or naive that they systematically lead people into error. I have

26 See for instance Lerner (1980).

27 Elster (1989d), ch. 2. See also Chapter 2 below.

Introduction: Why Political Psychology?

already mentioned a number of false reasonings of this type.²⁸ Although the usual approach to political psychology is more concerned with mechanisms that have motivations either as their input or their output,²⁹ I argue in Chapter 1 below that important aspects of ideology fall in the doubly cognitive character.

THE POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY OF REVOLUTIONS

I shall conclude by giving two instances of applied political psychology: the dynamics of revolution and of constitution making.³⁰ It is sometimes said that to make a revolution a streak (or more) of irrationality is needed.³¹ I shall try to separate out what is rational from what is irrational in revolutionary movements. In writings on constitution making, it is sometimes asserted that *ideas* and *interests* – rational argument and strategic thinking – are the two dominant factors.³² While not denying this view, I shall offer what I believe to be some important modifications.

In this subsection I indicate how, in an unstable political situation, interaction between subjects and subjects, and between subjects and the ruler, can snowball and destroy the existing regime. The tale I tell will be half factual and half invented,

28 For case studies see Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky (1982) and Bell, Raiffa, and Tversky (1988).

29 Thaler (1983) is a rare exception.

30 Both examples are transparently inspired by the great events in France and the United States at the end of the eighteenth century (Elster 1991b) and by the recent waves of revolution (Elster 1990b) and constitution making (Elster 1991c) in Eastern Europe. The exposition will, however, be kept in a stylized form.

31 Tocqueville (1970, p. 22) has this to say: "I have always thought that in revolutions, especially democratic revolutions, madmen (not those metaphorically called such, but real madmen) have played a very considerable political part. At least it is certain that at such times a state of semi-madness is not out of place and often leads to success."

32 With regard to the Federal Convention in 1787, see references in note 52 below. For a contemporary example, see the discussion in Rapaczynski (1991) of the constitutional debates in Poland.

borrowing features from the great revolutions of the past and the present without however coinciding with any of them. First I shall consider the situation potential revolutionaries find themselves in, and their motives.

Briefly stated, we can say that they are faced with an n-person Prisoner's Dilemma.³³ Slightly less briefly, their situation is defined as follows. A successful revolution would establish a public good, that is, a good that could not be restricted solely to the militants themselves. Although it is possible to refuse social justice or political freedoms to those who have actively fought against the revolution, it would be impracticable to deny them to those who had taken no action or joined the movement only shortly before its final victory. The consequences of a failed revolution would be severe punishment for those supporting it, and even if it succeeded it would do so only after a prolonged struggle in which the lives, the health and the fortunes of those taking part would be at risk. The rational conclusion seems obvious: There would be everything to gain and nothing to lose by abstaining from any revolutionary strategy. Abstention, in fact, is a *dominant strategy*, since whatever others may do it is in the interest of the individual to stay on the sidelines. If they commit themselves, he can plough his own furrow and benefit from their efforts. If they do not, the risks he himself would run if he joined are enough to dissuade him.

Yet revolutionary movements have been known to come into being and sometimes even to succeed. If all else failed, we could account for them on the basis of the irrationality and madness of those engaging in them. Before doing so, however, we need to find out whether there are any other explanations still falling within the bounds of rational behavior that could show how they develop. One suggestion would be that the revolutionaries, having nothing to lose but their chains, are acting quite rationally in taking up arms against the existing regime. Historical examples show that things are seldom so simple. Over the centuries Chinese

33 Taylor (1987, 1988).

Introduction: Why Political Psychology?

rebels knew very well that if they were captured by the Imperial Army, they would die the death of a thousand cuts, to which any existence or even any other death would be preferable.³⁴ Moreover, abject poverty tends to reduce both motivation and the range of means available, the former as a result of resignation or adaptation (Chapters 1 and 4), and the latter simply because the poorest seldom have the necessary resources to take one step backward in order to take two steps forward (Chapter 4).³⁵ In Vietnam, it was the middling rather than the poorest peasants that headed the revolutionary movement.³⁶ Tocqueville's famous analyses in *The Old Regime and the Revolution* are slightly ambiguous from this point of view, since he cites both living standards and their rate of change as independent variables. A high standard of living provides resources and the means of revolutionary action, whereas a rapid rate of change frees men from their "adaptive preferences."

There is a further rationalistic interpretation which holds that revolutionaries are prompted by selective incentives in the form of either rewards or punishments.³⁷ Revolutionary leaders, in fact, are able to offer several types of encouragement. They can tempt peasants that associate with the movement not only with immediate benefits such as education or help with the harvest, but also with the promise of a privileged place in the post-revolutionary society or, in Islamic revolutions, in a future life. Conversely, they can announce that those who do not support the revolution will be punished, either immediately or after it.

34 Tong (1988).

35 Elsewhere (Elster 1985a, pp. 352–3) I have argued that in a revolutionary situation, motivations and opportunities are inversely correlated (see also Oliver and Marwell, forthcoming). The very poor do not have the resources needed to engage in revolutionary activities (they are too busy just surviving), and the very rich do not have the motivation to do so. Drawing on Veyne and Tocqueville, I am now claiming that the poor may be low on both motivation and opportunities.

36 Popkin (1979).

37 Olson (1965). In his study of the Vietnamese revolution Popkin (1979) stresses positive incentives, whereas negative incentives are emphasized in Chen (1986).

This analysis, like the preceding one, turns out not to be very satisfactory, chiefly because it does not explain the behavior of the leaders. Why should it be in their rational interest to offer selective incentives? In particular, will it really be to their advantage, once the revolution has succeeded, to keep their promise to punish opponents and reward militants? For a rational actor, the only reason to keep his word is the need to build up a reputation for honesty that is likely to be useful in the future, but revolutions rarely occur twice. This problem of *credibility* is a thorny one for any revolutionary movement.³⁸

The incentives that can be offered while the revolution itself is going on raise problems of a different kind. Because the potential members of the revolutionary movement are at the same time under intense pressure from the existing regime, the level of rewards and punishments easily tends to escalate. Because revolutionaries usually have fewer resources than the government, they may be tempted to use the stick rather than the carrot. Against this, it must be borne in mind that the strategy of punishment can have negative psychological effects. It is far from clear, under these conditions, which incentives rational revolutionaries should offer.

For some, participation is its own selective incentive. Some people see the revolution as a holiday, a happening or a feast, and its instrumental efficiency as purely secondary or even irrelevant. The problem of the free rider no longer arises once involvement brings benefits rather than costs.³⁹ Individuals thus motivated could not, however, account for the bulk of a revolutionary movement. At the very most, all they are useful for is to swell the ranks of a movement that as a whole is inspired by different and more serious motives. With their impatience and lack of the requisite revolutionary ability to wait,⁴⁰ they may even delay the revolution's coming.

38 For recent discussions see Elster (1989b), pp. 272–87, and Dixit and Nalebuff (1991). Both are heavily indebted to Schelling (1960).

39 See Hirschman (1982) for this line of argument.

40 This phrase (“*revolutionäre Attentismus*”) is used by Groh (1973) in his study of German Social Democracy at the time of the 2nd International. He