Saying Things with Deeds
Exploring the Grammar and Dynamics of the “Record“ Language of Politics – A Participant Observer’s Account

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Abstract: Uninhibited verbal escalation tends to erode the credibility of political statements. Hence, politicians will have to express themselves by means of their “record”, which may be considered a repertoire of symbols that cannot be cut loose from their referents. What are the grammatical rules of the “record“ language? Expressing oneself by means of budgets, laws and material things, rather than through ordinary language, tends to give an unplanned dynamic to political processes: The world is full of objects, rules and opinions, which may be considered as by-products of our struggle to present ourselves.

Introduction

This article is an attempt to examine the implications of a very simple idea: The symbol used by A for expressive purposes may be of considerable instrumental interest to B.

Political acts, like all other human actions “can serve to do things, that is, altering the physical state of the world, or they can serve to say things“ (Leach 1968: 523). What concerns me is that Dick may say things in ways that do things to Harry, in the concrete sense of “altering the physical state of the world“.

Many expressive acts involve “doing things“, and not only in the classical sense of “doing things with words“, like when political orators arouse the audience to action (Paine 1981). We may need material objects for communicative purposes, like telephones, Madonna figures or flags, and some people make a living from providing these material objects. In such cases, however, it is rather unlikely that “the medium determines the message“, in the sense that our symbols are chosen on the basis of their instrumental or material implications. National flagwaving is hardly initiated with consideration for its effect on employment in the flag factories.

Of considerably more interest are cases where our choice of symbols may be determined, or strongly influenced by the instrumental implications of their use. What I especially have in mind, inspired by Murray Edelman (1964), is the symbolic uses of budgets, legislation and other ostensibly instrumental aspects of government.

What triggered my interest in political symbolization was a feeling that Scandinavian parliaments, and especially the Norwegian one, of which I was a member 1973–77, seems to be going through a transition from “workshops“ to “theatres“. Actors “do things“, or rather make them, in a workshop, whereas the theatre is an arena for “saying things“, i.e. communicate or exchange messages.

Many Norwegian citizens express concern that politicians seem to have lost their former ability to provide full employment and decent housing for all, and that they nowadays do “nothing but talk“. Political studies indicate that most of the debating time is spent on marginal issues. But it is important to keep in mind that the theme of most debates are practical issues, not “ideology“ in the conventional sense, e.g. contrasting socialist ideas with other “isms“.

On the other hand, what some may label “the decline of social democracy“, others may call the “maturing“ of a political system “from populism to liberalism“. William Riker argues forcefully against loading too many practical tasks (that may be left to the market) onto representative democratic institutions, and speaks in favour of a form of “minimal democracy“, i.e. the opportunity to oust unpopular governments every fourth year or so. Thus the function of parliamentary debates will be reduced to one of creating legitimacy. From this point of view, the transition from workshop to theatre is not decline, but progress, towards a more robust form of democracy (Riker 1982).

An evolutionary perspective on political symbolization

Erwing Goffman’s The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959) demonstrated the great analyti-
cal potential of face-to-face sociology, and made many of us look more closely at expressive aspects of acts that in themselves could be explained by reference to instrumental purposes, intentions or "functions". When a man for the first time appears on the beach in the presence of other hotel guests, he performs a series of acts, using instrumental requisites like books, sandals, gown and sunglasses, that serve to tell the others what he "is", i.e. how he wants to be perceived. This perspective on social action forced itself upon me as soon as I started to reflect upon my participant observations of Norwegian politics. Proposing a change in tax laws may be regarded as an initiative aimed at the physical structure of the world, but independently of such instrumental aspects, it serves to tell the audience something about the party behind the proposal. In other cases, politicians may be faced with the problem of finding more or less subtle means to tell specific audiences about differences between them and their party, or rivals within the party.

A proposal, a bill, the launching of a new Development PLAN or institution may be a way of communicating the difference between oneself and others. Thus, I am concerned with political acts as symbols, means of expression, "things that may be charged with meaning" (Cassirer 1953). When you propose the prohibition of seal-hunting, you tell the audience how different you are from your neighbour.

But why does one say "Outlaw sealhunting!" to present oneself as a humanitarian, rather than using the opportunity to articulate the specific, exact message offered in ordinary English or Norwegian: "I am of the opinion that we should love and take care of all God's creatures!" What makes us prefer the inarticulate exclamation to an explicit specification of the symbolized attitude? Why does our all-purpose, obedient ordinary language fail us when we are faced with the problem of presenting ourselves effectively in political contests?

In his analysis of the Tsembaga religion, Roy Rappaport (1971) draws on elementary semiology, ethology and linguistics to develop an analytical perspective that may help us understand the language of modern, Western-type politics:

When the peacock displays his fan in front of the hen, it "signifies" a strong interest in her. When our day's Romeo calls on Juliet carrying a bouquet of roses, it "signifies" a comparable interest. The cat arches its back "signifying" aggression or fear, and homo sapiens has body language or certain objects "signifying" the same states of mind.

But there are important differences between animal and human signifying, and these differences lie in the relationship of signs to their referents: Homo sapiens is able to cut the tie between the two, whereas we assume that animals lack this ability. While the fan of the peacock and the arch ed back of the cat are reliable, unambiguous indicators of emotional states, roses, menacing gestures and weapons are symbols. They may be tokens or expressions of emotional states or intentions, but they may also be paraded as substitutes. Romeo may have his reasons to present himself as in love with Juliet without being so, and some people may wish to frighten others without actually feeling the aggression symbolized by gestures or weapons. Note also that a symbol is more than a sign for its referent, it triggers processes a the receiving end, and produces effects dependent not only upon variables controlled by the sender. This also implies that symbols may do their job even if there, in a certain sense, is no referent: Romeo's flowers may trigger emotional processes in Juliet even if he doesn't love her any longer. A symbol may stand for something, but it may also stand instead of. In other words: symbols make lying, hypocrisy, simulation and fraud possible.

But Rappaport's line of reasoning can bring us somewhat closer to the understanding of political behaviour, or more specifically, the grammar of the language of modern, Western politics.

Obviously, homo sapiens does not desist from taking advantage of the opportunity he or she has been given to fill the air with symbols without any referent. We may emit the cry WOLF! without there being any real wolf around.

As long as our symbols work, we have no incentive to stop using them. A model of the process may be found in elementary textbooks of economics: Paper money may, under certain circumstances, trigger real growth processes in national economies. But the effects depend upon trust, i.e. credibility.

Crying "WOLF!" works best the first time. Symbols are effective only as long as they go on triggering the anticipated processes in the mind and body of the receiver, i.e. they cease being symbols, and are in this sense meaningless when the audience no longer believes in them. The credibility problem arises. The receivers of political messages cease to accept them. In most of the countries where parties compete for support for their opinions, "politics" is generally associated with "hot air", empty words or invalid cheques. Nothing stops the erosion of credibility from reaching the point where
verbal messages about intentions, priorities or loyalties in party programmes and platforms are simply regarded as worthless. What used to be effective verbal symbols within the ordinary language are no longer charged with meaning, i.e. they no longer produce the planned or hoped-for effects in the audience. Words fail to do their job any longer, because nobody believe in them.

The preceding paragraph must not be read as a general hypothesis about the fate of all symbols, i.e. that they lose their effect through inflation, like paper money. The world is full of symbols like madonnas, flags or kings which over time maintain their power to influence behaviour for complex reasons that do not concern us here. But I think it is an established fact that the verbal symbols used in political communication within Western democracies easily cease to have any effect on an audience who may have heard those wanting their votes cry "WOLF" too often.

The problem of credibility can be illustrated by what F.G. Bailey has called "The tactical uses of passion" (1983). People may say that they are "deeply depressed" on hearing or seeing something, and try to present a face matching their postulated sorrow. But if tears roll down people's faces, the audience knows that there is a referent behind the symbol. Tears are indicators, i.e. a visible aspect of an (invisible) emotional experience, like the hair raised on the cat's back. In this sense, a crying politician is "reduced" to an animal. Tears stand for integrity in an environment structured by the inflationary use of verbal symbols. But of course, there is something called "crocodile tears", and exceptionally astute politicians are supposed to control their nervous systems, turning "indicators" of passion on and off at will. On the other hand, the inability of politicians to control their emotions may be a severe handicap. The recourse to "animal" indicators demonstrates the limitations of ordinary verbal language as a means of political communication, limitations generated by the specific human abilities that distinguish us from the rest of the fauna.

But what does one do when the old language does not work any longer, while the need to send messages persists? It is reasonable to expect that the problem is solved in the same way as secret services act if the old code is rendered useless: Invent a new one! In U.S. election campaigns, nobody seems to be interested in the programmes of platforms of competing parties or candidates, because their old verbal symbols are now considered empty, or devoid of any meaning. But the candidates themselves, their supporters, rivals and adversaries make the most out of their "records": how has the candidate spent his or her resources, in terms of votes, money or time? Anybody can say or write that they are in favour of education or against crime, but how did they vote on this or that occasion? "My record shows that I am in favour of strong defence and racial integration, and against socialized medicine and exporting jobs to South-East Asia!".

Presenting yourself through your "record" must be considered as "saying things with deeds". In the realm of politics, the ordinary verbal language has been rendered useless as a vehicle for some categories of messages, through uninhibited use of the opportunity to operate with symbols without referent, and the resulting pettering out of the response processes supposed to be triggered in the audience. If everybody is "against terrorism" in their printed programmes, the message is robbed of any meaning, and bombing Libya may be the only credible way of declaring your opinion on the issue, i.e. by showing who is really against terrorism (Brox 1986).

As the old code has been destroyed, a new one has to be established. The difference between words and deeds as political symbols is that there is some kind of cost involved in deeds. Voting in favour of 500 million for schools implies 500 million less for other purposes. Bombing other countries, even Libya, carries the risk of losing planes or pilots, and there may of course be repercussions in other theatres, if the target has friends or allies. Voting against a welfare programme, to symbolize adherence to an economic philosophy, may win you some voters, who like this philosophy. But contrary to the ideological statements on the party platform, it may hurt some real people who may punish you on election day.

In semiological terms, the difference between human and animal ways of signifying is reduced when the opportunity to operate with symbols without referent is closed or rendered more difficult. Lying becomes less easy as soon as the new code squeezes out the old one, and competitors in the political arena have to express themselves in "record" language rather than in ordinary English or Norwegian. Through the new code, limitations or "inertia" are introduced, very much like the gold standard may be introduced to limit the opportunities for governments to create inflation. The new code ties the word to the deed standard, so to speak.
My use of the labels "old" and "new" should not be misunderstood. They refer to a certain evolutionary logic, and not to historical time. The "record" language grows out of ordinary language, as a consequence of the unlimited opportunities humans have for cutting the tie between symbol and referent. But even if I refer to specific countries, and specific time periods, I am not prepared to specify the point of time when the "new" code squeezed out the "old" one, for any particular country. It is also obvious that people have always expressed themselves by means of deeds, probably in the field of politics as well, and that politicians can still use the old code in circumstances when they enjoy great credibility.

When we analyze political messages sent in the new, "record" code, it is important to keep one thing in mind: Homo sapiens continues to be homo sapiens even after the new code has squeezed out the old one and taken its place, i.e. when words in many contexts are transplanted by deeds as the elementary meaningful units of the language. Even under the new rules, the human drives, purposes or impulses to cut the tie between referent and symbol have not disappeared. If we take it for granted that homo sapiens sui generis is a liar, should we not expect that the obligation to present oneself through one's "record" only means that our mendacity takes on new forms? The new code may not save us the trouble to look out for cases of symbols being used without any referent. The "record" may be an aggregate of referent-less symbols, just like party platforms and oratory, but they are still effective symbols in the sense that they make the user credible to the audience. If certain types of deeds are conventionally accepted to symbolize certain political values, priorities or qualities, the human temptation to use symbols with no real referent will be constantly at work. If you have to propose a bill, or vote in favour of a tax, budget item or prohibition to communicate your ideals and commitment, you will probably look for issues without negative practical consequences for your voters. If we can demonstrate that the actual usage of the "record" language appears to be structured on these or other principles, we will obtain an outline of the "grammar" of this language.

Some elementary rules of political communication

According to a popular textbook on political behaviour, symbolic issues create bitter conflicts because of the perennial importance given by people to "religion, national honour, personal status, civil rights, moral behaviour" (Mitchell/Mitchell 1969: 147). In general terms: symbolic issues represent superordinate values for which people are willing to sacrifice their instrumental interests, their careers and even their lives. As is the case with many generalizations of social life, this particular one will yield more insight if it is turned on its head: People prefer to make issues of no instrumental importance (to them) into pretexts for symbolic cockfights, because in such instances they can fully display their commitment at minimal costs.

This position implies that the reason why symbolic issues create bitter conflicts is their unimportance, in a specific sense of the word. When I discussed symbolic conflicts with Professor Theodore Caplow of the University of Virginia, he quoted a late colleague who used to say: "The reason why academic conflicts are so bitter, it that the stakes are so low!" One interpretation of this paradox is that little or no gains of any kind are to be achieved through compromise. Hence, the issue might throughout as well be used for the presentation of oneself, one's position or theoretical preferences.

One of the possible uses of academic opinions, like religion, national honour and moral behaviour, is that they can serve to distinguish the user from others – competitors or rivals. Men and women may march, petition and even fight for religious or linguistic issues, even if they would never do it for wages, prices or pensions, which may be of great instrumental significance to them. But does that necessarily mean, and if so, in what sense, that religious dogma and language are more important than economic success or survival?

My participant observations of Norwegian politics have led me to search for other explanations:

To me, as a politician, it may be very important to take care of the instrumental interests of my constituency, to change in the long term the physical set-up of the world, so that my constituents will enjoy a better life. In the short term, however, my most urgent need is to present myself, to communicate my values, good qualities and commitment to the highest ideals. For reasons dealt with above, I have to express myself through deeds, which symbolize what I have to offer. A symbol must be effective, strong and visible, so that it clearly shows the difference between myself and my rivals. At the same time a symbolic act, proposal or vote must be perceived by my audience without "mixed feelings". I must avoid addressing instrumental mat-
ters on which my audience may have different and conflicting interests.

In other words: "Symbolic issues" like religion, morality and national honour have a significance in politics that does not have to be ascribed to the primary importance of such issues to all and everybody, but rather to their qualities as *means of expression*. As we shall see, issues will sometimes be selected for symbolic uses because they have few and unimportant instrumental implications to the target audience.

As an exercise towards a complete grammar of the "record" language, we could make up a tentative preference list of issues as symbols, beginning with the preferred ones:

1. Those which *do* and *say* things simultaneously. An example may be a law that makes the party’s commitment, say, to the welfare of the working class, visible to the whole world, at the same time as it "alters the physical state of the world", by giving, say, everybody the right to unemployment benefit, preferably without demonstrably hurting anybody else.

2. Issues that are *visible*, have positive instrumental effects on *one’s own voters* (like 1), but which are likely to hurt others.

3. Issues that are visible, but which have few demonstrable instrumental effects on anybody.

4. Issues of high visibility, that are likely to hurt somebody.

A party or a politician is happy when it is possible to locate the ideal issue in the first category listed above. My most vivid memory of parliamentary budget work is of the desperate search for items that could *do* and *say* things simultaneously. However, they are hard to come across, in a modern economy, in which you cannot move one piece without risking the collapse of several others. I often envied my grandfather’s generation of politicians who could present themselves *and* change Northern Norway in fundamental ways with *one* clear-cut issue: The Raw Fish Act, which gave the fishermens organizations the right to fix legally enforced floor prices at fishing village level, thereby insuring that the primary producer reaped the benefit of rich fish stocks. But it was not easy to locate this kind of issues after 40 years of social democratic rule.

If it turns out to be difficult to find any first class symbols, we may have to make do with the second category. The only problem is that you alienate part of the electorate, which not only means that you may have to write that section off as potential voters, but also that they may be stimulated to join, support or go to the ballot box for your adversaries. In contexts of strong class or other forms of antagonisms, it may of course prove that hurting your voters’ exploiters or rivals is an extra bonus that increases the fighting spirit on your own side. In that case we are referring to a first class symbol. (That was probably the case with the Norwegian Raw Fish Act of the thirties: It hurt the old, semi-feudal merchant class, which made the most militant fishermen even happier.) . . . After 40 years of social democratic rule, and rapid economic development, it was not always easy to locate issues that could say and do things at the same time. The policies that might *do* something were often so complex, technical and generally colourless that they did not *say* anything loud and clear enough to present the party, nor set it apart from its competitors in the minds of the audience. On the other hand, highly visible issues that could present the party effectively would often be of very minor real instrumental potential, and thus difficult to defend intellectually, that many of us would be reluctant to be associated with them.

At the same time the need to communicate, to express priorities and adherence to values forms permanent pressure on any party in modern parliamentary systems, just as the need for calories is a permanent need for any living creature. Politicians can survive even if they solve no practical problem, but they are unlikely to do so if they are unable to *express concern*.

Hence, given that only visible *deeds* are adequate as means of expression, and that deeds of positive instrumental interest to the audience are very scarce, a considerable amount of parliamentary business will have to be about issues of categories 3 and 4 on the above preference list. Since most audiences will have conflicting interests on most issues, the modern politician will tend to look for issues of minimal practical interest to his audience to present himself.

Most people think that we should be kind to animals. Urban voters seem to think that we should be kind to *all* animals, except perhaps rats and cockroaches, whereas a willingness to protect animals is likely to be based on more selective criteria the farther you go away from the centre. If a member of parliament tells us in general terms that all of God’s creatures should be treated humanely, everybody yawns because that is what you expect, and words are cheap anyway. But when a law regu-
lating hunting is passed, politicians’ proposals, vot-
es and other actions in that respect tell the audience
what they really stand for. Deeds are the only
reliable indicators of their values, principles or pri-
orities. While protecting a specific animal symbol-
ize your principles, you obviously have to be prac-
tical in your choice of animal for that purpose.

If you want to communicate your humane qualities to a French audience, you will propose a bill to outlaw seal hunting, or block the import of whitecoat furs. If you want to tell Norwegians how good you are to animals, you may propose a ban on the forcefeeding of geese, or stop the import of paté.

For the same kind of reasons, foreign conflicts are very good symbolic issues: A Scandinavian socialist may have difficulties finding domestic issues to express what socialism implies in Norway or Denmark, but he can present himself unambiguously by proposals to expand sanctions against South Africa.

Like other countries, other worlds are good sourc-es of symbolic material, since we can commit ourselves wholeheartedly to one dogmatic alternative, not being inhibited by instrumental concerns. Hence the perennial importance of religion in polit-
ics.

Abortion is a very good case in point. A politician who votes for a law prohibiting abortion demonstrates, to a large audience, that people should have some absolutely binding moral principles. Of course, an absolutely fundamentalist standpoint to abortion will have important practical consequenc-es for some people, if it leads to, or maintains pro-hibition. Others may support individuals in their claim that the State has no right to reduce people’s freedom to choose an education and career, to de-stroy their economy and to make it difficult to pro-
vide a good home for children that have already been born. A law against abortion constitutes a category 4 issue on the list above, since it will hurt part of the audience. Politicians who propose or support such a law implicitly calculate that they will lose few votes by their action. They will feel that they have to communicate adherence to their voters’ moral principles, to secure their place in voters’ minds, and that those who hold liberal views would probably not vote for them anyway. The may irreversibly belong to a competitor’s audience, or even to a different category of people. If a politician wants to “keep the issue out of politics“, it may of course be out of concern for poor fami-
lies, with the knowledge that putting the question on the agenda would probably lead to prohibition.

But it may also happen that the politician’s own voters are divided on the subject, so that he or she is damned in either case.

If you want to tell an audience to whom crime is a real menace that you are more against Evil than your competitor, it may be tempting to support the death penalty. Blood and gore are nerve-tingling and, like in the case of abortion, death is a strong metaphor. The likelihood of pro-death politicians to have anybody remotely related on Death Row must be so close to zero that it does not have to be taken into consideration as a practical risk. This turns the electric chair into an ideal symbol: Strong, since it refers to Death, cheap, since the lives likely to be taken belong to abstract, almost non-human, categories of beings very different from yourself and your kind and kin.

Obviously the politicians’ struggle to avoid hurting somebody (instrumentally) by their choice of sym-

obich issue does not apply in such cases when these instrumental effects merely reinforce the message. That is, of course, the case when socialists propose an embargo for South Africa: a few businessmen may be hurt, or even be at risk of bankruptcy, but they do not belong to the socialist’s audience. On the contrary: They are symbolic enemies, and it is therefore right to make them pay for their sins. The fact that some people may be hurt may trans-
form the issue into a better symbol.

A very important element of the tactics of symbolic politics is raising issues that may not concern your own voters, or at least not in a negative way, but that are bound to split your opponent’s forces. During the Cold War, and when the Labour Party had the Government, issues of military security of no real significance were often raised by the Con-
servatives as well as by the (new left) Socialists, under the most threadbare justifications. These two opposition parties were both in complete internal harmony in military matters, one slightly more in favour of NATO than Labour, the other militantly against. But the Labour Party had a left wing critical to the security policy favoured by the great majority, which meant that whenever security policy were on the agenda, Labour risked loos-
ing terrain on either front. The internal divisive processes within the party would be triggered of immediately by the Conservatives proposing, say, some new restrictions against conscientious ob-
jectors, to symbolize their will to defend the nation, or by the Socialists proposing cuts in defense spending, symbolizing peace values.
William Riker explained that the U.S. civil war was triggered by this kind of symbolic tactic: The Democrats wanted to keep the slavery issue “out of politics”, since they consisted of a coalition of Southern slaveholders and the “broad masses” of the North, many of them zealous Christians of the more or less puritanical varieties. In other words: One of the coalition partners had an instrumental interest in the slavery issue, while the other had “principles” that could be symbolized by support for abolition. So long as the Democratic leadership managed to keep the issue “out of politics”, the Republicans were prevented from gaining power. Republican tactic therefore had to be an attempt to place the issue on the political agenda. Once they managed to do this, the Northern Democrats risked presenting themselves as hypocrites by supporting slavery, and since they had no instrumental interests in the issue they let the coalition fall apart. The Republican tactic was a success as far as electoral outcome was concerned.

Quite a different matter is the unplanned, unanticipated, and long-term consequences of well-planned short-term tactics, like war and economic setbacks. We will return to that in the next section. But, first, let us summarize the elementary grammatical rules of the political “record” language in the context of modern, complex economic systems:

Express yourself through political acts that convey your message efficiently but have limited and predictable instrumental implications. Take care that these practical implications do not affect your audience, constituency or potential supporters in a negative way. Acts referring to foreign countries, the next world or very remote menaces, like the Bomb or the Soviets, are thus convenient symbols. If possible, select symbolic acts that cannot be used by your opponents or rivals, in the sense that they imply instrumental inconveniences for parts of their constituency.

The dynamics of political symbolism

Many symbols, like the Star-spangled Banner, the Union Jack or the Norwegian blue and white cross on red, are practically weightless: at dusk, we take the flag down, fold it carefully and put it in a cupboard until the next celebration of national values. Concealed in a drawer, the flag troubles or profits nobody since it has no instrumental or material uses, or effects worth mentioning.

But, by definition, the symbols of which the “record” language is constituted are of a very different kind: they are only charged with meaning if they are deeds, i.e. they must be “backed” by some visible practical referent, like the weightless one-thousand-kroner note under the gold standard. Sometimes, the symbol used to fulfil a passing need for self-presentation remains as a tangible part of the environment for a long time, even eternity, for that matter.

Roads may illustrate this point. In a country like Norway, where a large, even if shrinking, number of people live in scattered settlements, politicians have been in constant need of symbols to show their concern for the decentralized population. Over the years, most of the settlements have been reasonably well served by roads and ferries. In the province that I represented in parliament, less than 1% of the population had no access to the national road system. Still, there remained a few settlements that could only be served by projects that were very expensive in per capita terms.

Roads connecting small fishing villages to regional centres are of paramount instrumental importance to the people living there, but probably to nobody else. On the other hand, they hurt nobody, except, of course, in that they have to be financed from the public purse. As means of securing the economy and welfare of the scattered population, roads could be compared with legislation protecting regional fish resources, and giving preference to coastal fishermen over the mobile fishing fleet. Such means would cost the public purse nothing, help the decentralized population generally, but would hurt well organized national business interests. As a mean of expression, roads have many advantages over new rules of the fishing game.

For politicians who are under pressure to demonstrate that they are concerned about the future of the scattered local communities, supporting road projects comes easy. Hence the decision to build a new road may, like so many other decisions that shape our world, come about as an aggregate result of 100 villagers’ struggle to survive, combined with 100 politicians’ temporary urge to communicate their values, which is a message that can only be sent through the medium of “altering the physical state of the world”.

Clever local politicians are of course acutely aware of the needs of more centrally placed politicians to communicate concern for the periphery, or at any rate that they are reluctant to allow themselves to be classified as supporters of centralization.
luck, skill and endurance, local mayors have managed to “sell” their projects on the “symbol market”. I am certainly not the only M.P. who has voted for projects to avoid being labelled as a traitor to the platform on which I had been elected, even if it implied a waste of public money, compared with alternative policies towards the same ends. – The problem always is that it is the unsound road project that is on the agenda, whereas alternative solutions are not.

Partly through this kind of mechanism, the Norwegian countryside has been remarkably well served by expensive infrastructure projects – roads, harbours, schools, health and leisure institutions. At the same time, the industry in which they have large comparative advantages as against the rest of the world have been destroyed, – through government decisions as well as non-decisions, which have led to turning a productive population into subsidy-receivers (Brox 1990). I think it could be demonstrated that symbolization have played an important part in this transformation process, i.e. in the use of political deeds as symbols that may stand for certain political values, but that may also, like all symbols, stand instead of the values or priorities that they are supposed to symbolize.

But contrary to ordinary, verbal political lies (words that do not work as symbols, i.e. those which would not generate acquiescense), roads do modify the material structure. The fact that they may have come about for expressive reasons do not stop them modifying economic/demographic processes in the countryside, even if these effects may not have been effective motives in the minds of the decision-makers.

An urban development project may be used to show that the material world in which we live can be partly explained as an aggregate of permanent traces left by communicators who have been here before us.

The context of the story is Oslo in the mid-eighties, when the sky was the limit for real-estate ventures, and the ideological climate was strongly in favour of “urbanism”. The dominant media hailed the “Cappuccino and Perrier” lifestyle, and ridiculed the green, rural, conservation-oriented-small-scale Norway sentiments of the seventies.

In 1984 an ambitious project was launched to build thousands of shops, offices, flats and garages above a railway yard in an attractive, but densely populated, part of the city. In the media, where the agenda was set, the granting of building permission was effectively turned into a question of whether one was for or against urbanism, mobility and progress.

The instrumental aspects of the issue are easily summarized. The way the prospects of the property market were articulated in 1984, there was potentially an immense profit to be made by the lucky companies involved. At the same time, the development was threatening to destroy the neighbourhood, and to increase the noise and traffic volume in narrow residential streets. For the municipal authorities the project promised to lure back tax-payers who had deserted the city for the suburbs.

The ruling Conservative party needed support from Labour in order to have the project approved by the City Council. The Labour politicians had few instrumental interests in the issue, getting no support from the property companies and few votes from the threatened neighbourhood. However they felt embarrassed by the “greenish” or anti-urban image with which their political adversaries and their newspapers had managed to brand them. If they voted against the project, media would have assisted to reinforce this image. Hence, the party used the issue as an attempt to destroy an unfortunate image, thereby saying that Labour was as much in favour of “urbanism” as their adversaries.

However, the subsequent crash of the property market has led to the shelving of the project. In the future, political trends may be different, which means that there may be political capital to be made from “green” issues, which will help to create a majority against the project on the same kind of non-instrumental premises.

But the general point should be clear: Labour would not have been considered really committed to urbanism simply by expressing its programme in ordinary language. To send an effective party message, a deed was needed to “back” the words.

In contrast with words and flags, a property development that is realized through political symbolizing is far from weightless. Thousands of tons of concrete and steel change the material structure of the city for the time to come. (The present street pattern in Piraeus is said to have been determined by buildings erected under Pericles.) Traffic and human movement patterns changed mercilessly forever. Properties have been created, inflated, reduced and lost, and career patterns have been heavily influenced by the changes in opportunities and restrictions affecting thousands of people.
The world around us is full of heavy, tangible things materialized through the symbolization of those who have been here before us, permanent reminders of their sometimes temporary and passing need for symbols.

A temporary need to say, in the strongest terms possible, that it is pro-growth, a political party may use a particular case in which it has no instrumental interests, and tip the balance in favour of material installations that forever change the world. In a very concrete sense, this case falls in the same category as mediaeval cathedrals: the feudal lord may have felt the need to present himself to be more in favour of the Saints than his neighbour or rival, and his temporary communication problem was solved in a way that gave all subsequent generations a thing of beauty and a joy forever, on the one hand, or a block to traffic and property development in the area, on the other.

Cathedrals and property developments have some concrete, tangible qualities that make them suitable illustrations of the permanent, material consequences of certain symbols. They remain, and by their very massiveness influence our movements for all time to come. But not only buildings compel us to walk or drive around in a semi-circle rather than in a straight line: laws have the same potential to modify our behaviour. The risk of being fined or jailed channel my movements as efficiently as thousands of tons of reinforced concrete.

An episode from a Socialist party group meeting in the Norwegian parliament in the seventies may illustrate how symbolization changes the world. A bill proposing to increase penalties for smuggling narcotics into the country was on the agenda. Some of us, heavily influenced by the social sciences, argued that penalties exceeding ten years' imprisonment had neither any additional deterrent effect nor were they meaningful in terms of individual rehabilitation.

The most skillful politician among us (Hanna Kvanmo, who later became Party leader and second only to King Olav V in personal popularity according to national opinion polls) listened carefully to us, and had no problem in accepting our instrumental arguments. But to her this did not settle the issue: "I do not feel like coming out of the debate only 50 percent as committed against drugs as Mr. Kristiansen!" (then head of the Christian People's Party).

The competition among politicians to display committed opposition to narcotics generates, as a by-product, laws that keep some people in prison for longer terms than could be justified by reference to instrumental objectives, like deterrence or rehabilitation.

That laws also have symbolic uses has long been emphasized by sociologists of law (Aubert 1976: 154). If you say "there should be a law against it" you may of course want to do something, such as changing the structure of the world so that certain types of actions become less likely, but you also say something, i.e. find a way to express your strong opposition. The very drama of courts, judges, jails and electric chairs makes the judicial system a suitable source of symbolic material that is very often utilized when you have no other means of presenting yourself. Everybody does it: Socialists, who generally do their utmost to discredit the repressive institutions of the capitalist state, often express their strong opposition to phenomena by proposing to legislate against them, and even George Bush put forward the idea of introducing penalties for not engaging in patriotic rituals.

For people who believe strongly in "instrumental" explanations, like the independent logic of the property market, or the necessary prevalence of profit interests in capitalist states, my attempts to explain regional, urban and penal structures in terms of traces of symbolization processes may sound frivolous. But I do not necessarily question the general tendencies of capital to flow towards profit opportunities, Western democratic governments' commitment to business values, or current criminological beliefs. Even the soundest business policies must be legitimized to achieve majorities in democratic assemblies, and property profiteers will only get what they want if the community acquiesces. But creating legitimacy and maintaining acquiescence presupposes symbolization, and in some cases decisions may not have come about unless minorities with instrumental interests had not coalesced with other minorities with symbolic interests in the issue. When symbols consist of stones and gravel, asphalt and concrete, schools and prisons, they modify our physical environment or society "as a thing" generally, just as much as those installations that are put in solely for clear-cut instrumental reasons.

Symbols and the production of knowledge

Peter Berger sums up a few basic insights of the social sciences in his Invitation to Sociology: By saying or otherwise doing what we feel we have to say and do, we come to believe in what we say, and we
construct legitimacy for what we do. The sergeant turned lieutenant has to act in a special way (e.g. answering salutes from his former comrades, but somehow signalling, initially, equality) and very soon comes to think and feel like a lieutenant, getting irritated if their salute is sloppy. The young church minister, riddled with doubts as long as he was in University, starts to believe strongly as soon as he is allocated his flock and performs rituals for the believers (Berger 1963, ch. 5). If we apply this transformation to politics we can argue that the opinions you symbolize, even if they are selected from opportunistic motives, will probably become your inner conviction in the process if they work for you, regardless of whether or not they were there when you entered the game.

Exploring the symbolic aspects of political and organizational behaviour tends to convey the impression that actors are carrying on an intentionally deceptive game. Politicians create images of themselves, regardless of what they instrumentally intend to do. But as J. Pfeffer (1981) bluntly puts it: “management and politicians fool themselves as well as others with their symbolic acts”. Nobody can tell whether a politician is really committed to the causes that he expresses commitment for. But the insights accumulated over a hundred years of social research indicate that politicians, like other people, come to believe, sometimes very strongly and emotionally, in the causes for which they express commitment. Reinforcement occurs: if you achieve something (votes, support, a favourable reputation) by your symbolic act, the chances are high that you will stick to the values and cognitions supposed to have caused it. Your party decides to symbolize its strongly moral values by proposing a law against abortion. Regardless of your initial private opinions, the chances are high that if you are able to move an audience by your presentation of a message, you will internalize it. Thus it may make as much sense to say that your beliefs are generated by your symbolic acts, as vice versa. Symbols beget emotions, superordinate values and cognitions.

My field experience may illustrate this simple point:

Before the Norwegian parliament election of 1973, the Socialist Party felt a strong need to communicate its strong concern for low-income families having to spend most of their income on daily necessities. The abolition of high VAT on food was selected to symbolize this concern.

After its successful election, a budget alternative had to be prepared. Our leaders expected some criticism that it might appear too “expansionist“ by increasing the purchasing power in the lowest and middle income groups. Taking billions of kroner away from the corporate sector in order to eliminate the VAT on food might be inflationary and stimulate “growth“ (at that time a word with negative connotations!) as much as corporate investment. It was necessary to be ready to meet the opponents’ anticipated attempts to attach an “expansionist“ label on us. I remember sitting in the parliamentary library, armed with a pile of books on public economics, having to think about a problem that had never crossed my mind before. The intellectual task was to create a justification, or “scientific“ legitimacy, for a budget alternative that I had to take for granted.

The job in itself turned out not to be too difficult: a certain amount of purchasing power used by the masses to buy themselves a Volkswagen could not create more inflation or balance of payment problems than the same amount used by the large corporations to buy bigger bulldozers. In the process more and more arguments in favour of our budget alternative arose: For example, since households are more evenly spatially distributed than expansive corporations, we would help to increase decentralized (unproblematic) growth at the expense of (problem-generating) big-city growth, and so on. The point that I want to stress here is not how easy it turned out to be to create legitimacy in the library, but how the needs of political communication stimulated the production of cognition that motivated me to explore fields that I would otherwise have kept out of. I started out feeling rather unhappy about having to do things that I did not really believe in, but came to believe very strongly in my own constructs in the process, and therefore propagating them enthusiastically.

I am not saying or implying that the arguments that our symbolization compelled us to develop were wrong, nor am I prepared to defend them. My simple point is that symbols came first, and cognition second, or that cognition is generated by the symbolization process.

But symbolization not only stimulates us to discover new aspects of the world or interpret it in new ways. At the same time as our symbols beget knowledge, they have the power to kill or abort it, or to make certain aspects and properties of the world invisible to us. Symbols govern our interpretation of our environment negatively as well as positively.
Sometimes messages are unavoidably attached to our acts, and in such a way that we can only commit these acts if we want to emit the message. Or inversely: we will have to commit the necessary act to send that message, regardless of the instrumental or other aspects of the act.

The issue of immigration is a case in point. Since the early seventies, Norway has been closed to immigrants looking for work, and only those wanted for their special skills by some employers have been admitted. (Refugees and asylum seekers are a different case.) The Socialist Party and the left generally, as well as many Christian, humanist and “green” activists, are committed to an ideology based on “international solidarity” and the “sharing of goods”. But here again the general principles of political symbolization apply: only deeds are effective means of expression. As immigration laws in practice tend to keep out poor, dark-skinned people, but admit rich white people, the Socialist Party has proposed the abolition of the above immigration laws in an attempt to say that it is against “state racism”. This is of course a very clear-cut case of symbolic politics, i.e. it is a policy that is not meant to be implemented since the Socialist Party says nothing about how unlimited access should be handled in practice. The Party hopes to appeal to all of us who feel ashamed that the nation does not share more of its wealth with the more unfortunate, but is dependent upon its adversaries to save us from all the potential inconveniences an open door policy would give rise to.

But of course, if you express “global solidarity” values through the vehicle of “yes to immigration”, it becomes neccessary to legitimize the policy that you have chosen as a symbol. This may have important consequences for the production of knowledge. For example: Most Norwegian newspapers and weeklies, from Conservative to Marxist-Leninist, as well as TV and radio, have over the last three or four years presented stories and comments about the contribution made by poor immigrants to the country’s economy, i.e. that they do things “that Norwegians don’t want to do”, like cleaning and washing dishes. If they were not there, nobody would clean offices, and dirty plates would pile up in restaurants. You do not have to be a trained economist to realize that this is nonsense: office managers and restaurant owners would simply have to pay more, rearrange functions or invest in machinery to maintain the level of service. The result may not have been economic collapse, but only smaller wage differentials (a little more to the cleaner, a little less for owners or managers) or a slightly modified structure in certain branches of the economy (more family-run restaurants, fewer national chains). But to my knowledge, no economist has ever written a letter to the editor or appeared on TV to correct or supplement the media on this point. Yet there is no doubt about the reason for this: economists are decent people, and ugly forms of racism are erupting all over the country. In this context it must be taken for granted that a text that merely corrected the economic logic of the situation would function exactly like myths in the processes that generate and maintain racism. The economist’s elementary lecture would necessarily carry the same symbolic message as stories about immigrants keeping pigs in the bathroom. It is very easy to understand the economist who knows better, but who prefers to do nothing about economic misconceptions catching on in popular opinion. If the economist did chose to do so, he or she would run the risk of being labelled “racist” by the people most concerned about making life a little easier for immigrants fleeing from persecution and poverty in their homelands.

The long-term, and rather dismal, implications for the growth of knowledge and insight in how society works, are not difficult to trace. Knowledge that we cannot develop, communicate or take care of because of its potential of symbolic meaning, atrophies or disappears through non-use. Or inversely: if it is necessary, or profitable, to produce bogus information, for the same kind of symbolic reasons, it will squeeze out real knowledge and take its place. A case in point is that if second-rate economists publish calculations documenting the benefits of immigration, and commit elementary blunders in their published reports, they avoid professional criticism, as the very decency of those who know better keeps them from destroying bad arguments for good causes.

Not only can these channelling effects of political symbolizing give us irrelevant social sciences, they can also generate “counter-knowledge” that competes with information and insights established by scientific procedures. Thus, if the university professor conceals a simple truth because it lends itself to unacceptable symbolic uses, or tolerates untruths that may serve good causes, “naked emperor” effects may occur. Even the unsophisticated senses of a redneck can see what the academic cannot see, like the monkey in the fairy tale. The aggregate effects for the future of a “communicative community” need not be spelled out.
Raymond Boudon, utilizing Z. Medvedev's book on the rise and fall of Trofim Lysenko, has demonstrated how scientific knowledge need not necessarily grow cumulatively, contrary to commonly held beliefs (Boudon 1981: 114). Knowledge may disappear, be squeezed out and superseded by sheer superstition or pseudo-knowledge without the active agency of dictators, secret police or concentration camps. The symbolic mechanisms exemplified above may channel the growth or atrophy of knowledge as efficiently as did Joseph Stalin.

Concluding Remarks

Given the part played by "non-decisions" in the economic and political processes transforming modern Western nations (Bachrach/Baratz 1963), the invasion of political workshops by actors looking for symbolic material, rapidly transforming them into theatres, deserves more attention than it has been given.

The uninhibited expressive escalation in political communication tends to undermine the credibility of political statements. Hence, those who want to be listened to and believed will have to express themselves through their "record", i.e. acts, and therefore symbols that cannot be cut loose from their instrumental referents. The "grammar" of the "record" language may be derived from the relationship between expressive and instrumental aspects of political acts. A's symbol may have important practical implications for B.

We live in a material world that is partly formed by the ways in which those who have been here before us have solved their communication problems. And we also change this world by means of buildings, laws and organizations in our struggle to present ourselves. Not only do our symbols lead us along uncharted channels to new realms of thought where sheer curiosity would never have brought us. They also block some channels or close our eyes. Thoughts that we cannot express (because we cannot avoid the expression carrying meanings that we do not want to emit) evaporate, atrophy, and disappear. We come to believe in opinions that we have to voice, or choose to voice for tactical reasons, e.g., because that is the only way in which we can say that we are more in favour of the Good, or more against the Evil, than our rivals and adversaries.

Note

This article is based mainly upon observations made through political participation. I have been involved in Norwegian politics since 1945, when I helped distribute pamphlets for my father's Liberal Party. In 1961 I joined the (new left) Socialist Party, serving some years as chairman of the Tromsø and Bergen chapters, as well as a spell on the National Board. Apart from 4 years (1973–77) as an MP for Troms, my most intensive, time-consuming and interesting involvement in off-campus politics was the struggle to keep Norway out of the EEC in the early seventies.

I am deeply indebted to Robert Paine for encouraging me, despite my strong resistance, to write down my participant observations of politics, as well as for his helpful and critical comments on the book-length text of which this article is a fragment. Another source of inspiration is having had to lecture upon the writings of Fred G. Bailey (1969) and Murray Edelman (1964), as well as their personal encouragement. This article would have been unreadable without the generous patience of Anthony Cohen.
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