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Author

Rosenberg, Shawn

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Shawn Rosenberg

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UNFIT FOR DEMOCRACY?
IRRATIONAL, RATIONALIZING, AND
BIOLOGICALLY PREDISPOSED CITIZENS

ABSTRACT: Decades of research demonstrate that most people have little knowledge or understanding of politics. Two recent works suggest that this reflects the limits of human cognitive capacity. Rather than being reasoned, political thinking is mostly preconscious, automatic, and recall driven. Consequently, it is vulnerable to contextual cueing, preexisting biases, and biological and genetic predispositions. However, this research is oriented by an inadequate understanding of cognition.

Keywords: citizenship; cognitive development; conservatism; ideology; liberalism; motivated reasoning; political cognition.

Opposing claims about people's cognitive capacities have been central to the debates of the last several centuries in Anglo-American political philosophy. Given the resurgence of right-wing, authoritarian populism in the United States and Europe, these debates acquire a new urgency.

For the most part, a liberal vision, articulated in various forms by theorists ranging from John Locke through John Rawls (1993) and Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson (2004), has been dominant. The assumption here is that people are (or are readily capable of being) logical, rational, and reasonable. Inasmuch as they think logically, they are able to consider and integrate an array of relevant evidence and

Shawn Rosenberg, swr@uci.edu, Department of Political Science, University of California, Irvine, CA 92697, is the author of *The Not So Common Sense* (Princeton, 2002) and *Deliberation, Participation and Democracy: Can the People Govern?* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

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arguments to come to a coherent understanding of themselves, their individual circumstances, and their collective condition. Inasmuch as they think rationally, they are able to reason deductively and inductively. They are thus able to consider immediate, specific concerns in light of longer-term goals or higher-order principles. Inasmuch as people think reasonably, they are able to recognize, respect, and attempt to understand their own and other people's perspectives. In the process, all perspectives are valued and considered relative to one another. Possessing these capacities, people are able to develop a coherent understanding of the social problems they must confront and a normative perspective from which to judge the value of alternative solutions. They are also able to communicate with one another productively and thereby come to shared judgments (or at least to a commonly understood and respected recognition of what they cannot share).

Building on these assumptions, liberal political theorists have argued that a liberal or deliberative democratic form of governance is both possible and necessary. It is possible because all (or at least most) people have the capacities needed for responsible democratic citizenship. They have the capacity to understand and judge themselves and their circumstances so as to exercise personal freedom effectively, and they can do so in a way that recognizes and respects the views and needs of others. Therefore, as citizens, people merit the rights and responsibilities of free and equal participation characteristic of democratic governance. This normative imperative is a practical, political one as well. People with these cognitive capacities will tend to understand themselves in a way that implies that only political institutions organized in this democratic manner will be regarded as legitimate and therefore acceptable.

This liberal view has been rejected by conservative philosophers (e.g., Edmund Burke and Michael Oakeshott). The central argument here is that liberal claims about the logical, rational, and reasonable capacities of individuals are grossly overstated or simply wrong. In this alternative view, people (or at least most people) do not think in a logical, integrative, or reasonable way. Instead, their thinking is narrowly focused on specific actors, actions, and events. These are understood in terms of the specific, concrete ways they are linked to one another in one's personal experience or in a learned cultural narrative. Affect and emotion are integral elements of personal experience and therefore play an important and prejudicial role in the definition of particular events and in the associations they evoke. Because thinking is concrete and fragmentary, it does not foster

a consideration overarching perspectives, either as a reflection on one's own perspective or as an appreciation of another's perspective. Thus, people are likely to be illogical, irrational, and unreasonable in ways that limit their capacities for autonomous self-direction and effective collaboration with others. In this light, conservative political theorists have advocated more authoritarian forms of governance. If, given personal freedom and political control, people will act in short-sighted, erratic, and group-undermining ways, then, for their own protection and that of the community, they must be carefully tutored, controlled, and, in this way, "civilized." Political power must be centralized in a few authorities who provide and enforce specific behavioral directives, complemented by the provision of moral guidance. The goal here is to foster the self-subordination of individuals by cultivating the value of obligation to others, loyalty to the group, and recognition of the moral authority of the community and its executor, the state.

This kind of governance is not only a political necessity, it is a psychological one as well. An authoritarian, directing state has a structure that is consistent with the simplistic understandings people can construct and the values they can learn. Any form of government that imposes more openness and self-determination on its people will only be regarded as directionless, confusing, unworkable, and illegitimate.

In the last 70 years, empirical research in political science and psychology has directly addressed these assumptions. The consensus view emerging from this research is that people's thinking is concrete, fragmentary, affectively laden, context driven, and short-sighted. These conclusions were strikingly articulated in the seminal work of Philip E. Converse (1964) and Robert E. Lane (1962) in the 1960s. Using survey data, Converse found strong evidence that people's political attitudes are incoherent, unreliable, and not organized by overarching principles. He concluded that when thinking about politics, people do not draw on some broad or higher-order framework to make sense of or judge political issues. On the basis of in-depth interviews, Lane drew similar conclusions. Rather than thinking in general or deductive ways, Lane claimed, people are "morselizers," their views dictated by small chunks of information that are largely unrelated to one another. Lane also went beyond Converse in a way that was consistent with other work in political psychology (e.g., Lasswell 1930; Adorno et al. 1950) by suggesting that people's political attitudes reflect their personalities. Consequently, their political attitudes are affectively loaded and their interrelationships are

dictated less by rational reflection and more by largely unconscious emotional processes. However, for Converse and Lane, both committed democrats, their studies led to uncomfortable conclusions about citizens' democratic competence. Prefiguring much of the research that followed, they minimized the broader political implications of their work by speculating that serious citizen deficiencies were either circumstantial (Converse suggesting they reflected a lack of motivation) or limited to a small number of people (Lane suggesting that only a small number had the personality of an "undemocrat").

For the most part, the subsequent 60 years of research has corroborated pessimistic interpretations of the citizens sketched by Converse and Lane. They lack the capacity for integration and abstraction required to grapple with the complexities of public policy, to understand the perspectives of people whose views differ from their own, and to critically reflect on the issues of the day. The evidence for this view has been carefully collected and analyzed, in line with the trend toward increased specialization and methodological sophistication. However, for the most part, those doing the research have avoided considering the implications of their results for a critical assessment and possible redesign of democratic institutions. (For a notable and controversial exception, see Thaler and Sunstein 2008.)

Two recent books, *The Rationalizing Voter* by Milton Lodge and Charles Taber (Cambridge University Press, 2013) and *Predisposed* by John Hibbing, Kevin Smith, and John Alford (Routledge, 2014), complement each other, as well as the main lines of research in public opinion and political psychology, by arguing that people do not think about politics in a reflective, self-conscious, and integrative manner. Lacking this subjectively constructed context for interpreting and evaluating incoming information, people's political attitudes and responses are biased by immediate contextual cues. These cues or "primes" shade both the meaning and the affective loading of what people see, read, and hear and how they respond to it. For the most part, people do not reflect on their political attitudes and offer reasons for them. When they do reflect, this is not a process of rationally considering evidence and arguments leading to conclusions. Rather it consists of a rationalization of bias. Arguments and evidence are marshalled in support of conclusions already drawn on the basis of preconscious, context-driven considerations. In a direct rejection of the view of the citizen as a rational, reflective participant in political life, Lodge and Taber argue that "many political

scientists cling to an outmoded notion of rational behavior, in which citizens cause their issue stances ... through careful, intentional reasoning. Our research ... [shows] the citizen as subject to the eddies and currents of innumerable priming events, some of which carry the potential to significantly alter the course of information processing in ways that the citizen does not notice or control" (Lodge and Taber 2013, 42–43).

The Rationalizing Voter

I will begin with Lodge and Taber's *The Rationalizing Voter*. It adopts the dual processing model developed in cognitive psychology in the 1980s. The model suggests that there are two ways in which people process the information they are presented. One is referred to as "central or "elaborated" processing, which is akin to how we normally regard thinking. It is self-conscious, slow, logical/rational, reasoned, and integrative. The other is "peripheral" processing, which is preconscious, fast, automatic, narrowly focused, and affectively loaded. Lodge and Taber focus on peripheral processing and argue that it plays a central role in shaping people's political attitudes.

In the key theoretical chapter of the book, Lodge and Taber present a model of the political thinking of the prototypical citizen, whom they dub "John Q. Public." This model is grounded mainly on concepts of memory and learning that are consistent with the mainstream view in cognitive psychology. In this view, memory, which constitutes the architecture of the mind, has two components, long-term and short-term. Long-term memory is a weave of interconnected nodes; the nodes are objects or actions. Each node is defined in terms of its own objective characteristics (e.g., a chair as a node in memory is defined by the particular way it has a seat, a back, and four legs) and by its associative linkages (a chair may remind someone of a throne). All nodes have semantic meaning, but most also have an evaluative valence.

Both the qualities of nodes and the links among them are learned. This learning is either a matter of direct personal experience or of the assimilation of relevant social and cultural narratives. The store of memories is a cognitive resource that remains dormant until activated. When activated, a memory becomes part of short-term, working memory. Working memory is limited—constrained to the famous "seven plus or minus two" elements. It provides the material that can be consciously processed to define and evaluate the current object of attention.

In this model, three processes are fundamental to cognition. One is initial learning. (This is something that Lodge and Taber postulate but do not really elaborate theoretically or consider empirically.) It occurs either through direct experience or exposure to narratives about objects and the associations among them. The second, the focus of *The Rationalizing Voter*, is recall, the process of activating long-term memories. This involves initiating and directing a search of long-term memory, which then determines what will enter short-term memory. Most importantly for Lodge and Taber, this process is oriented by immediate and often irrelevant contextual factors—primes—that happen to be present at the moment when thinking and the associated recall are taking place. These primes activate long-term memories that share either their semantic or, most crucially, their affective content. This initial activation effect is then amplified as the activated nodes evoke other nodes with which they, in turn, are semantically and affectively connected. A matter of peripheral processing, this “contagion” of associations is automatic, fast, and preconscious.

As Lodge and Taber write, “The fundamental assumption driving our model is that both affective and cognitive reactions to external and internal events are triggered unconsciously, followed spontaneously by the spreading of activation through associative pathways that link thoughts to feelings, so that very early events, even those that remain invisible to conscious awareness, set the direction for all subsequent processing” (Lodge and Taber 2013, 18). For example, when placed in a messy rather than an orderly room, people are likely to make harsher moral judgments. And we tend to be more positive about almost anything when the weather is sunny and comfortable than when it’s dreary and harsh. The key here is that the prime is a “hot” cognition, one with evaluative content that primes memories that share its valence. *The Rationalizing Voter* presents several chapters of research and evidence that show the effect of hot cognition and how priming biases processes of political identification and candidate evaluation. For example, when watching a TV news broadcaster reporting on a candidate, viewers are likely to form more positive views of the candidate when the broadcaster has more positive facial expressions.

The third element of political thinking involves the handling of information in working memory for the purpose of judging the event or issue at hand. Lodge and Taber suggest that, here again, processing is simple, fast, and largely unconscious. In our working memory, we

carry an ongoing tally of the positive or negative associations connected to the issue or political candidate. We then add to this tally our evaluation of the newly presented information, the qualities of which have themselves already been colored by any associated primes that are present.

Although a dual processing model is adopted at the outset, suggesting that both “fast” and “slow” thinking will get their due, Lodge and Taber allow relatively little space for the self-conscious elaborations and reasoning of central processing. What little remains of central processing is regarded as importantly biased by prior peripheral processing, which sets the stage upon which the central processing operates. The primed memories brought forth in peripheral processing provide the data upon which central processing operates and biases it accordingly. Lodge and Taber present research showing that when people (in this instance SUNY Stony Brook students) are prompted to think “harder,” their attitudes and conclusions become even more biased. As the authors explain, thinking harder leads to greater efforts at recall. This activates more associated memories, selected as much by the hot, evaluative quality of the guiding attitude as its semantic content. The result is the recall of even more memories that share a common evaluative valence, and thus a stronger and more extreme concluding evaluation. With regard to political attitudes, this contagion effect is most pronounced in political “sophisticates” (who have stored more political information and thus have more pathways for the contagion effect to follow) and ideologues (those for whom the attitudes in question have the strongest affect).

In *The Rationalizing Voter*, the closest John Q. Public gets to reasoning is when he is called upon to justify a political attitude. Lodge and Taber adopt the motivated cognition framework, according to which justificatory reasoning is more a matter of rationalization (hence the title of the book) than rationality. The claim here is that when confronted with an issue or event, people act more like lawyers than judges. Rather than considering all the relevant, available information and arguments, and then drawing a conclusion, they begin with a desired conclusion and then marshal evidence and argument to support it. “Conscious deliberation and rumination is from this perspective the rationalization of multiple unconscious processes that recruit reasons to justify and explain beliefs, attitudes and action” (Lodge and Taber 2013, 22).

Predisposed

Hibbing, Smith, and Alford's *Predisposed* complements *The Rationalizing Voter* by exploring the neurophysiological and genetic substrates of cognition, and by focusing on differences between individuals. The central thesis of *Predisposed* is that liberals and conservatives are, at least in part, different sorts of people. They have differing views of "bedrock" issues regarding society that reflect, in significant part, differences in underlying predispositions that are neurophysiological in nature and partly genetic in origin. Thus, at the outset, the authors contend that

liberals and conservatives have different tastes not just in politics, but in art, humor, food, life accoutrements, and leisure pursuits; they differ in how they collect information, how they think, and how they view other people and events; they have different neural architecture and display distinct brain waves in certain circumstances; they have different personalities and psychological tendencies; they differ in what their autonomic nervous systems are attuned to; they are aroused by and pay attention to different stimuli; and they might even be different genetically. (Hibbing et al. 2014, 6)

In part, the argument advanced by *Predisposed* is predicated on the model of thinking advanced in *The Rationalizing Voter*. The relative insignificance of central processing or any rational, integrative reflection leaves individuals vulnerable to the vagaries and particularities of the fragments of learning that they have accumulated and the circumstances under which that learning is primed. *Predisposed* adds to this model by postulating that different people may have different sensitivities that can affect how they learned from the same objective experience in the past and how they react to the same objective primes or contextual cues in the present. This leads Hibbing et al. to go beyond the effect of a specific prime or cluster of memories to consider how people may differ from one another across a range of responses such that they are predisposed to be liberal or conservative in their political outlook.

The authors argue that there are several different "interlocking" levels at which liberals and conservatives differ: the psychological, the cognitive, the neurophysiological, and the genetic. The most apparent level includes matters of personal preference and personality. Here the authors provide evidence that conservatives and liberals vary in their taste for food (meat or vegetables, familiar or new), poetry (rhyming or free verse), and art

(figural or abstract). They also present evidence of differences in personality and orientation. Drawing on work correlating the “Big 5” personality variables and ideology, they provide evidence that liberals tend to score higher on openness whereas conservatives score higher on conscientiousness and orderliness. Addressing differences in social orientation, *Predisposed* presents the authors’ work on attitudes regarding “bedrock” issues. While the difference between these attitudes and ideology is elided (I see no significant difference), it is clear (and unsurprising) that conservatives are more likely to favor tradition and hierarchy and to see outgroups as more threatening.

The next level on which conservatives and liberals are said to differ is in their cognitive processing. Evidence is presented on differences in how they attend to, decode, and define their environment. Compared to liberals, conservatives’ gaze or attention to stimuli presented on a computer screen is less sensitive to social cueing. Conservatives are less affected than liberals by the direction in which other people are looking. Conservatives are also more sensitive to negative or threatening stimuli presented this way. While they affect both liberals and conservatives, hostile faces have a significantly greater distraction effect on conservatives. People who hold different ideological positions also tend to differ in how they categorize objects in an experimental setting. Conservatives are more likely to place an object in one of two alternative categories, whereas liberals are more likely to assign it a mixed or cross-categorical status.

With considerations at the third level, *Predisposed* moves beyond mere evidence of psychological functioning to consider underlying physiological or biological factors that may predispose people to develop particular preferences, personalities, and cognitive styles. The aim here is to demonstrate that liberals and conservatives differ in their physiology. To illustrate, the authors report on MRI data suggesting conservatives have larger amygdalas (assumed to be the brain center for emotional responses) and that galvanic skin response data show that they are more sensitive to disgust. Somewhat disturbingly, *Predisposed* reports evidence that facial recognition software has been developed that enables computers to differentiate people’s politics and sexual orientation on the basis of facial images. This includes using not only current photographs of adults, but also photographs taken from their high school graduation albums years earlier. This otherwise surprising and incomprehensible relationship between face and ideology is readily explained, from the authors’ perspective. Because political orientations are in part physiologically based, it is

not surprising that differences might be detected in the physical properties of people's faces.

Hibbing et al.'s presentation of evidence of conservative/liberal differences ends with a consideration of the putatively fundamental basis of ideological orientation, genetics. The best evidence draws on twin studies. To at least partly address the potential confound of twins being exposed to the same environment, recent studies now rely on a comparative analysis of monozygotic (identical) and dizygotic (sharing only half their genetic code) twins. Using the Wilson Conservatism Scale as a measure of the dependent variable, ideology, results indicate that monozygotic twins are significantly more similar to one another than dizygotic twins. The latter are in turn more similar to one another than ordinary siblings. The authors speculate that the prefrontal cortex, the presumed center for more advanced cognitive functioning, may itself vary in ways that yield politically relevant differences in more advanced reasoning. *Predisposed* concludes its analysis of the various levels at which liberals and conservatives are different sorts of people by claiming that a combination of genes, early psychosocial development, and recent experience combine to form a person's Behaviorally Relevant Biological Predispositions (BRBPs), which yield differences in "neuroception" (the physiologically based way one scans one's environment), which in turn affects the kinds of political attitudes one is likely to adopt.

Rationalization, Predisposition, and Democracy

What are the implications of this political psychology for our understanding of democratic citizenship and political institutions? When considering people as citizens, both books are ambivalent. As is typical of much literature of this kind, the authors are drawn in opposing directions by their research and their personal political commitments. In the case of Lodge and Taber, a ray of hope is allowed to intrude on the irrational, circumstantial, affectively biased, and rationalizing portrait of people's thinking by the authors' suggestion that future research might illuminate how the limitations of people's political thinking can be overcome. Such research would address where, when, how, and for whom the intuitive, contextually primed quality of attitude formation might be overridden. However, the research on political sophisticates and on thinking hard suggests that cognitively mediated strategies are unlikely to be effective, and no additional avenues are considered. Instead, a compensatory note

is sounded by suggesting that intuitively guided thinking has its advantages. Lodge and Taber cite research showing that some choices (e.g., choosing posters for one's dorm room) that are guided by intuitive, peripheral processing are better than reasoned judgments. However, *The Rationalizing Voter* (234) concludes in resignation: "Maybe John Q. Public is as rational as we homo sapiens can be." Notably, the authors fail to consider what this might mean for our understanding of democratic governance.

The political implications discussed in *Predisposed* are also ambivalent. In fact, they are sometimes self-contradictory. "The larger point," Hibbing et al. (2014, 252) write, "is that those with predispositions counter to yours do not see what you see, fear what you fear, love what you love, smell what you smell, remember what your remember, taste what you taste, want what you want, or think how you think." Underscoring its skepticism about people's ability to assess views different from their own rationally and reflectively, *Predisposed* recommends: "don't waste your breath" trying to convince the other side. Instead target the moderates in the middle, who are more pliable because their predispositions don't significantly orient them in either a liberal or conservative direction. On the other hand, the authors also suggest that their conclusions should lead readers to be more tolerant of one another, for when people recognize that others' views are more a matter of inherent traits than conscious choices, this "cannot help but increase tolerance and acceptance" (ibid., 253). Given the lack of any argument to support this conclusion and its inconsistency with the thrust of the research presented, I can only conclude that this is wishful thinking by authors who are otherwise committed to democratic political values.

Like so much of the related literature on political behavior, neither book has much to say about the implications of the research for democratic governance or the design of political institutions. Lodge and Taber are completely silent on the matter, leaving unsaid the fact that their evidence contradicts the assumptions that many normative theorists claim are fundamental to any workable concept of liberal democracy. As for the functioning and design of democratic institutions, Hibbing et al. mention in passing that institutions might be designed so as to ensure that people on the ideological extremes do not exert disproportionate influence on political outcomes. Thus, they recommend getting rid of political primaries. However, adopting the authors' perspective, it is reasonable to assume that the ideologically committed are also the most

politically motivated and thus not only more likely to vote in primaries, but to become active and involved in all levels of politics. Consequently, the more biologically predisposed and hence irrevocably divided ideologues are also more likely to lead political movements and hold positions in government.

A Critical Perspective on Current Political Psychology

Let me now reconsider from a critical perspective the view of political thinking adopted in these two influential books. To begin, I accept this view and consider seriously its broader, deeply troubling political implications. Then I criticize the theoretical perspective orienting these works and recommend an alternative, one that I believe offers a better understanding of both the limitations of what people are and the possibilities of what they might become.

Who are we, according to the view articulated by *The Rationalizing Voter* and *Predisposed*? In Lodge and Taber's view, we are most fundamentally learners. Thus, it is assumed that we are capable of perceiving the elemental and objective qualities of our immediate experience and the social narratives to which we are exposed. In either case, we recognize the objects in the environment, the people who are there, the specific actions they take, and our position in these little mini-dramas. We observe and remember how these objects, actors, actions, and the feelings they evoke in us are associated with one another. In this manner, we learn. What we learn is specific and affectively charged. Later, when called upon to act or voice an opinion, we perceive the objective features or the affective qualities of the particular issue and the immediate situation with which we are confronted, and then we recall those learned associations that share some of those features and qualities. In this way, our recall of past learning is primed by current circumstances. This priming occurs along affective as well as semantic dimensions of the new situation being confronted. If new information must be processed, it will be interpreted in light of the existing store of information recalled. If the situation calls for action, our primed memories are drawn upon to guide what we do or say. Hibbing, Smith, and Alford add to this formulation by suggesting that our perception of situations, both at the time of initial learning and the time of recall, may vary from individual to individual. As a result of genetic coding and neurophysiological differences, we may be more or less sensitive to aspects of the context to which we

have been exposed. But learning, memory, and recall operate in essentially the manner suggested by Lodge and Taber.

One consequence of this shared perspective is methodological. It suggests that John Q. Public's expression of an attitude on a survey will be unreliable—the ephemeral result of the specific conditions under which it is elicited. The effect of context on attitudes has also been demonstrated in earlier research which showed that even slight changes in question wording or changing the order of questions in a survey produce significant differences in the political preferences expressed (Sullivan et al. 1978; Bishop and Oldendick 1978). The political “attitudes” measured by survey research are therefore not an appropriate object of analysis or study. Instead, the evidence presented in *The Rationalizing Voter* suggests that *context*—the interactive conditions one confronts when politically engaged—should be the focus of theorizing and empirical research. Politically relevant interactions can be dialogical or behavioral, so the focal research questions should be: What governs who can do or say what, when, where, to whom, and with what result?

At the level of the micro-dynamics of conversation, such work might usefully draw on approaches utilized in conversational analysis (e.g., Sachs 1992). At the level of the structuring of communicative exchanges, the mid-career theorizing of Jürgen Habermas (1984 and 1987) may provide a productive point of departure. My own work on the structure of communicative exchanges in deliberative democratic settings illustrates how this approach might be applied to the empirical analysis of political communication (Rosenberg 2007). The complementary study of the behavioral aspect of interactive contexts would focus on the politically relevant routines of daily life and how they delimit the ways in which people interact with one another. Anthony Giddens's work (1984) is suggestive here. It has the advantage of trying to anchor the analysis of specific interactions in a broader socio-politically structured context. Regardless of whether the focus is on communication or interaction, the object of inquiry would no longer be monologically expressed attitudes and the qualities of the individuals who express them. Instead the focus would be on the conversational and behavioral responses elicited in social interactions, and how the dynamics of such interaction are socially structured. Metaphorically speaking, this suggests that people be viewed as dancers. The steps they take are not best understood individually, as personal products, but rather as they follow on one another in the performance of a dance that has been orchestrated for the people involved.

A second implication of the theorizing and research presented in *The Rationalizing Voter* and *Predisposed* is political. As I have already suggested, the authors are too guarded in considering the implications of their work. Their research suggests that people's political views are produced through the cueing of earlier learning rather than critical reflection and integrated understanding. People are therefore more accurately understood as the flawed products of socialization (individuated somewhat by their Behaviorally Relevant Biological Predispositions) rather than as autonomous self-directing actors. This is hardly the material of democratic citizenship, especially in contemporary complex, multicultural polities. These democracies require citizens who make choices, advocate policies, and choose candidates by considering (1) the dynamic interaction among various elements of a given social or political problem, (2) the different perspectives brought to bear by the people affected, and (3) principles of egalitarianism, personal integrity and freedom, and justice and fairness. John Q. Public, with his hot cognition and BRPPs, does not and cannot meet these requirements. The conclusion to be drawn is that people in complex societies cannot be relied upon to self-govern. Instead, governance must be authoritarian, providing the requisite guidance and direction to create popular demand rather than simply respond to it. This has typically been the actual case in modern democratic societies. A small group of elites, influenced by the arguments of liberalism, motivated by its consistency with capitalist economic practice, and aware of the means of peaceful negotiation between themselves it offered, opted for the limited democracy of representative governance. Through the centralized control of education and mass media, these elites successfully legitimated their rule by inculcating particular beliefs, preferences, and practices in the population at large.

However, structural and technological changes have undermined this regime. With the advent of the Internet and social media, elites have increasingly lost control over the political culture. Alternative voices are being heard on the national stage. In the ensuing cacophony, the "legitimate" and "authoritative" sources of information and values are losing their special cachet. In a sense, there has been a democratization of the national political conversation. The irony is that, left to choose among the broader range of understandings and direction being offered, an increasingly sizable portion of the (John Q.) public is opting for the simpler and more readily comprehensible populist alternatives of an exclusionary and more authoritarian nationalism. This includes a racist

rejection of differences of perspective (as *Predisposed* would frame it) as differences in the nature of people themselves; and a desire for clear, authoritative direction from political leaders. This suggests that because the citizenry lacks the requisite cognitive capacities, the increased democratization of the public sphere has opened up political participation in a way that is undermining democracy itself.

While the foregoing rather dark conclusions follow, in my view, from the models and research in *The Rationalizing Voter* and *Predisposed* and in much mainstream of contemporary political psychology, these conclusions are rarely drawn by the political psychologists themselves. This may in part be because (as their own theories would suggest) their thinking about these issues has been oriented by their pre-existing biases and commitments. These include methodological training and practice that have led them to study individuals in isolation from each other, to use the political “attitude” as a working concept and dependent variable, and to a long-standing and culturally reinforced commitment to liberal democracy.

Thoughtlessness in Political Psychology

In the last part of this argument, I adopt a more critical perspective and consider to what extent the basic position taken in this work is too narrowly conceived, and thus, in some ways, clearly mistaken.

In my view, adopting some version of the dual processing model of thinking, as both sets of authors do, is appropriate. Automatic, preconscious, hot cognition probably does operate as suggested. This would fit with an evolutionary heritage that we can trace back to our roots in lower-order animals, as well as to early childhood learning. In any case, a great deal of evidence provided not only by *The Rationalizing Voter* and *Predisposed* but by cognitive psychologists supports this view of the peripheral-processing aspect of cognition. However, in the formulation of this dual processing model, *The Rationalizing Voter* adopts an overly empiricist epistemological position that precludes the development of an adequate concept of the second dimension of cognition: higher-order thinking. By assuming that the contents of experience are somehow objectively defined and are thus straightforwardly perceived, Lodge and Taber leave little need for higher-order processes that might operate on the contents of experience. Additionally, the authors’ failure to attend to individual differences—which might expose the different

ways that subjective processes operate on the contents of past and present experience—also precludes any recognition of the possible importance of higher-order processes.

To a limited extent, the latter concern is introduced by *Predisposed*, which highlights variations in the way different people respond to external stimuli. However, any consideration of higher-order cognition in this light is truncated by Hibbing, Smith, and Alford's focus solely on the affective or evaluative quality of associations, and by their explanation of variation in terms of biological and genetic predispositions. However, they do make passing reference to research that raises the question of subjective processing as not only a matter of instinct, which affects the positivity of evaluations, but also as a matter of cognitive construction, which affects the quality of how objects are defined. I refer to the authors' report of research showing that conservatives tend to define objects in simple categorical ways, while liberals tend to use more ambiguous and complex means of defining the same objects. This suggests that there is something in the structure of how these two groups think that leads to different kinds of conceptualizations of the attributes of the same observed objects, producing different kinds of memory structures and thus different pathways of association and recall. This implies that there is more to cognition than simple observation, association, learning, and primed recall. There is also reasoning.

There is little elaboration of or attention to reasoning in this research. The focus is almost exclusively on the learning and memory-driven qualities of peripheral processing. This allows the authors to focus on the power of priming and the relatively unfettered effects of behaviorally relevant biological predispositions. To the small degree to which central processing is conceptualized, it is viewed as having a similar structure to peripheral processing and to be mostly oriented by it. Keep in mind that central processing is frequently equated with political sophistication. But this is not sophistication as it might be colloquially understood, that is, as a matter of more abstract, reflective, and perhaps critical thought. Instead, like peripheral processing, it is a matter of learning and memory and is differentiated by the greater number of nodes and their substantive and evaluative associations. Sophisticated citizens do not think differently than their less sophisticated comrades, they just know more. Thus, they are subject to the same limitations and biases of peripheral processing that affect everyone else. In fact, as Lodge and Taber point out, they are even more subject to them: when asked to think hard, the

orienting primes to which they are exposed elicit memories with more associations, therefore producing a more pronounced “affective contagion” and, consequently, greater bias. Similarly, prompting people to think hard or carefully is simply a matter of more effectively priming the same recall and memory processes that are characteristic of peripheral processing.

In sum, central processing or self-conscious reasoning is not well differentiated from its peripheral counterpart. To the degree that it is, it is vaguely defined as consisting of the provision of reasons or justifications for a claim made. But, as again suggested by the title of *The Rationalizing Voter*, this reason-giving is by no means a higher-order, independent process that might operate on peripheral processing in a way that transforms or minimizes its effects. To the contrary, this reason giving seems to operate at the same level and in much the same way as peripheral processing. It begins with an intuitive and immediate conclusion that an individual has reached, presumably, on the basis of prior learning. This primes the recall of evidence and reasons that are linked to the substance of the claim or attitude voiced and that share its evaluative valence. The result is a rationalization of the conclusion, a dynamic that parallels that of peripheral processing.

While not denying the evidence of peripheral processing and rationalization, I suggest that these works suffer from not developing a concept of reasoning. What is reasoning or higher-order cognitive processing, properly conceived? To begin with, it is something distinct from, and operates differently than, peripheral processing. Higher-order cognition not only assimilates and is thus influenced by the contents produced by peripheral processing; it also actively reshapes, redefines and reframes those contents. The content of experience may be regarded as raw data that is inherently ambiguous, partial and, in its appearance, distorting. As such, these contents must be interpreted, a process that goes beyond the simple apperception of the objective qualities of the elements of experience to the active definition of the nature of those qualities.

For example, depending on the interpretive reasoning of the observer, the observation of a man moving his arm and striking a child may be subjectively reconstructed variously as (a) a simple sequence of man-striking-child; (b) an intentional act of punishment or domination; or (c) the concrete manifestation of the authority structure of a society. Thus, the elemental quality of what is observed is reconstituted as a physical act, an expression of purpose or intent, or a culturally defined and systemically

constituted interaction. The contents of peripheral processing are reconstructed in ways that render them subjectively meaningful. In the process, these ambiguous contents are cognitively structured, given specific form, and placed in a larger context. They are thus defined, understood, and evaluated in subjectively constructed terms. In the process, the results of peripheral processing—learning, memory and primed recall—are *superseded*. Something new is created. Any abstraction, generalization, or logical deduction would be an example of this. At the very least, the results of fast and hot cognitions are reordered and their influence is muted.

There are a couple of clarifying points I would like to make about higher-order cognition or reasoning. In the relevant social and political psychology literatures in general and in *The Rationalizing Voter* and *Predisposed* in particular, peripheral and central processing are often distinguished by their levels of self-consciousness. The former is not self-conscious and the latter is. However, in my view this distinction obscures the more complex of nature of higher-order processing. This process of the cognitive restructuring of the perceived contents of experience may at one level be more or less conscious. Thus, when stopping to think about something, a person may self-consciously hold initial perceptions in abeyance and actively attempt to understand their “real” meaning or value. Thus, attempts to define the contents of experience and relate them to one another may be conducted in a clearly self-conscious way. This may include recognizing the potentially flawed or biased quality of one’s initial perceptions and automatic associations. Still, there is an even higher or more general level at which this reasoning is operating that is always active and is largely unself-conscious. Here I am referring to the *structuring* quality of higher-order processing. This involves determining the qualities of both the elemental content of thought and the relationships among them, as per the example of various ways the man striking the child can be understood. These general qualities define the kinds of things that can be thought about, how they can be related to one another (the qualities of possible association), and thus the nature of the understanding constructed. As such, this higher-order cognition frames conscious mentation and therefore is typically not its object.

The effect of this cognitive structuring effect is to determine the quality of the objects of thought and the relationships between them. In the language of Lodge and Taber, what is being structured is the architecture of memory, the quality of the individual memory nodes (their content)

and of the kinds of associative linkages that can be established among them. The contextual cues that prime memory are similarly structured. This defines the qualities of how perceptions are represented and are interrelated to each other and to memories. This introduces a powerfully subjective element into how individuals will understand both their personal experiences and the cultural narratives to which they are exposed. Both will be reconstructed in terms the individual can understand. For example, a cultural narrative regarding the “checks and balances” of American governance may refer to complex relations that exist among the roughly equal but different institutions of the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of the federal government. However, if the audience for this narrative is an individual who constructs cognitive relationships that are based on simple causal connections, the cultural narrative of “checks and balances” will not be subjectively assimilated in the complex terms presented. Instead, in the process of rendering that cultural narrative personally meaningful, the individual will reconstruct the complex dynamics of American governance as a matter of one branch telling the others what to do, with the branches understood hierarchically. The suggestion here is that when people actively engage their higher order cognition they will actively, if unconsciously, reconstruct information in terms consistent with the structure of their thinking.

A final consideration is cognitive development and the related issue of individual differences. Here we return to the relationship between individuals’ subjective reconstructive structuring of their experience and the reality of that experience as actually defined and organized, either naturally or socially. Eschewing the extremes of philosophical idealism and empiricism, the view adopted here is that subjectivity and objective or social reality, while distinct, are intimately intertwined. Both of them structure social interaction and are realized in it. Because these sources of structuration are both distinct and intertwined, the relationship between them creates a dynamic tension, one that engenders the potential for structural transformation and development.

For present purposes, let us consider this dynamic tension from the perspective of the individual actor. In attempting to render their experiences subjectively comprehensible, individuals cognitively reconstruct the objects and relationships they encounter in their natural and social environments in terms they can understand. They thus identify the nature of objects experienced and attempt to determine how they acted or related to one another. This is not an idle exercise, but a very pragmatic

one. The aim is to be able to draw on this understanding to direct future action for the purpose of achieving some desired result. Thus, cognitive structuring of experience both builds from and then applies to that experience.

When the structure of individuals' cognition, their framework for understanding, is inconsistent with the actual structure of the objective and social world in which they operate, their learning from experience will be flawed. They will tend to misidentify objects and inappropriately relate them to one another. Their attempts to act purposively on the basis of those flawed understandings will therefore tend to fail. From the perspective of the acting subject, their action will yield results that are unexpected and incomprehensible. With experience, these specific failures become more numerous and clearer. This produces self-doubt. As a result, individuals tend to focus less on the particular things they are thinking about and more on how they are thinking about them. As Piaget (1970) suggested, this leads to "reflexive abstraction," a sort of cognitive bootstrapping that builds away from prior ways of understanding and produces new and higher-order considerations. L. S. Vygotsky (1978) argued that this also entails drawing on the "proximal zone" or "cognitive scaffolding" provided by the social environment to guide the search for a more adequate basis of thinking. Together, these two processes lead the individual to develop a new way of thinking, a new form of cognitive structuration, that builds beyond the less adequate form it supersedes. The result is cognitive development.

The trajectory of cognitive development is assumed to be universal. We all begin with the same initial sensorimotor-based means of constructing understandings and we all are equipped with the same capacities to develop. Development occurs in response to environmental challenges to the adequacy of our way of thinking. This involves a social psychological process in which we reflexively abstract beyond the structure of an existing form of understanding to construct a new one. Theorized in this way, developmental psychology suggests that the trajectory of development, the steps in the structuring and restructuring of higher-order cognition, will be the same for everyone. At the same time, though, it highlights how this universal process of cognitive development is dependent on the individual's social environment to stimulate and support that development. Insofar as social environments are significantly different, they may be more or less encouraging of the cognitive development of the individuals involved.

Social environments may differ significantly in two relevant respects. Most fundamentally, they may be differently structured. Some are more simply structured and others are structured more complexly. To the degree to which individuals' social interactions involve immediate considerations that are oriented to short-term outcomes and are conducted in familiar contexts with the same people, there will be little pressure for the development of more complex, abstract structures of thinking. However, as the social structuring of daily life introduces remote considerations, long-term goals, and novel contexts, the demands for such development will be greater. At the same time, social environments may be more or less supportive of the cognitive development they require. The transition from one structure of thinking to the next, from one type of thinking to another, is fraught with self-doubt and insecurity and requires the exploration of novel considerations. To the degree to which some environments provide the socio-emotional support and encouragement this requires, the requisite exploration will occur and individual development will be facilitated. Where it does not, development will be inhibited or halted altogether. In the latter case, individuals will not work through their limitations but instead withdraw to environments more suited to their limited understanding. Thus, both social-structural and socio-emotional factors can affect cognitive development, such that there is no reason to assume that everyone will develop to the same extent.

The resulting differences in development will be reflected in individual differences in the quality of higher-order cognition. Thus, some people are likely to think in more fragmentary, short-term ways that focus narrowly on the concrete, immediate circumstances they confront. Other people are likely to think in more integrative ways that are oriented by more abstract considerations. Therefore, when considering any specific problem, their focus tends to be broader and their concerns more long term.¹ These differences are of special relevance here, first because they underline the importance of recognizing the structural qualities of higher-order cognition. Insofar as individuals are thinking in structurally different ways, they will be construing the content of their personal experience of either natural events or social interaction and cultural narratives in different ways. They may therefore define, evaluate, and respond to the apparently same stimuli in different ways. Similarly, the specific things they say or do may carry with them very different meanings and therefore different implications for other things they may say or do in

the future or in other contexts. Therefore, it is important that these different structures of thinking be clearly identified and their implications explored.

Mainstream research, like that contained in *The Rationalizing Voter* and *Predisposed*, is positivist and analytical in a way that militates against constructing (and hence comprehending) a theoretical conception of meaning as structured or subjectively constructed. It leads to a methodological focus on isolated stimuli, specific memories, and particular attitudes, which precludes the possibility of discovering through empirical research the qualities of their structuration and construction. Such research would require an interpretive method predicated on the assumption that the person being examined may construct meaning very differently than the observer. Such a method would examine a number of the claims a given person makes and how that person relates those claims to one another through definition or argument. Examples would be an in-depth interview or an open-ended interactive problem-solving task. The interpretive analysis of the data collected would be predicated on the working assumption that the observer's initial determination of the meaning of the claims, arguments, and definitions made are potentially problematic. Therefore, analysis would be a several-step process of observation, interpretation, and then further observation designed to test if the inferred cognitive structure is in fact operative. Such methods, needless to say, are not part of the mainstream research toolkit. (My own work suggests that although most participants in the type of experiments discussed in *Predisposed* and *The Rational Voter* reason in a way that might be extrapolated from the theoretical model assumed by the researchers, participants who reasoned differently from the majority tend to go undetected, at best appearing as experimental noise.)

Future Research

The approach taken in experimental work such as that reported in *Predisposed* and *The Rational Voter* is well suited to the task of exploring peripheral processing and the fragmented, "hot," and context-vulnerable quality of the perceptions, evaluations, and behavioral responses it generates. The evidence the books provides is stimulating and persuasive. However, both books elide higher-order cognition—the other half of the dual processing model. More adequate research would, I believe, go in three related directions.

One would focus on the structural qualities of reasoning and more clearly elaborate the nature of its functioning and the understandings and judgments it generates. The structural development psychologies of Piaget (1970), Vygotsky (1978), Kohlberg (1981/84) and Kegan (1994), and my own work on political cognition, are suggestive.

A second line of research would address the question raised by Lodge and Taber: What are the conditions that give rise to higher-order cognition, and for whom? A variety of theoretical work suggests that examining how individuals' reasoning emerges in response to social interaction, and operates in the context provided by it, would provide a useful point of departure. The research reported in *The Rationalizing Voter* does this by considering how social contexts constitute primes. However, this may better be considered from the sociological perspective of Anthony Giddens (1984). He suggests that most significant social interaction is routinized and requires no higher-order reflection or critical assessment. Priming is one way those routines, when they are enacted appropriately, operate on those involved. Behavior is relatively mindless, automatic, and contextually cued. However, Giddens suggests that matters change when routines are violated. Here the parties involved are called upon to provide reasons for their behavior. For a review of social-psychological research that addresses how this kind of disruption of expectations promotes higher-order cognition (albeit not the kind theorized here), see Oyserman 2017.

While Giddens places little emphasis on cognition and views it only as rationalization, the disruption of a social routine is a very likely candidate for evoking higher-order cognition. All of a sudden there is something novel to be understood personally and, perhaps, to be communicated to others effectively. In this context, a fruitful line of inquiry would address the questions of (a) what kind of break (b) in what sorts of routines (c) under what kind of conditions (d) for what kind of thinking stimulates higher-order cognition. The earlier discussion of individual differences in higher-order cognition suggests that this future research should recognize that what constitute felicitous conditions for higher cognition may differ depending on the quality of thinking of the individual involved. This raises the broader concern with the conditions that facilitate development. Research on childhood cognitive development offers a considerable literature upon which to draw. However, the concerns of political science focus more on adults than children, and systematic study of the

conditions which facilitate or inhibit adult cognitive development have received much less attention and are less well understood.

In my view, this type of research is of critical importance to political theory and practical politics. As noted, the work presented in *Predisposed* and *The Rationalizing Voter* is theorized in a way that not only emphasizes the limited, irrational, and unreasonable qualities of political thinking, but also precludes the possibility of meaningful development. The research therefore leads to the conclusion that people do not and cannot have the kinds of abilities that democratic theorists tend to stipulate that democratic citizenship requires. It may thus lend support to the more authoritarian, caretaker form of governance suggested by certain varieties of conservative theory.

However, from a structural-developmental perspective, these conclusions are premature. They do not reflect the necessary limitations of people but rather those of the research. Properly conceived, the study of higher-order cognition suggests that people have the capacity to develop. In so doing, it recognizes the limitations of the political thinking of most citizens today, but also suggests the possibility that they may develop the cognitive capacities that democratic citizens require.

Accepting this view necessitates modifying democratic theory accordingly. Such a developmental view of democratic citizenship would place considerations of the goals and practices of citizen pedagogy at the center of the design of democratic governance. This would necessarily entail addressing adult as well as child development. In so doing, it would have to resolve difficult normative as well as practical issues of how best to institutionalize structures of political participation in a way that effectively addresses the limitations of citizens while at the same time respecting their integrity and potential. The concerns here are not only theoretical. Given citizen limitations and the related anti-democratic tendencies emerging in many Western democracies, this inquiry needs to translate into public policy and political action. More than ever it is apparent that a critical requirement of democratic governance is to foster the kinds of citizens it requires.

NOTE

1. I have described these differences at some length in *The Not So Common Sense* (Rosenberg 2002) and briefly in more recent work on deliberative democracy (Rosenberg 2014) and on nationalism (Rosenberg and Beattie 2016).

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