A Genealogy of Rational Choice: Rationalism, Elitism, and Democracy

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It was another notable debate involving the complicated relations between popular government and political science. On one side were those who had introduced new assumptions, research techniques and theoretic models in an attempt to make the discipline more rigorously scientific. As a result they had developed arguments and theories that their detractors viewed as tending not only to undermine traditional values within the profession but also to defang its critical potency. On the other side were those who meant to salvage this potency and those values. They alleged that the new methods were not truly scientific, but above all they criticized the upstarts for the paltry and often disparaging picture that their work painted of democratic politics.

I am not speaking, of course, of the recent rational choice controversy. That debate has featured much comment on methodological pretension, real-world irrelevance and intradisciplinary hegemony, but little if anything on normative or ideological ramifications (see Green and Shapiro, 1994; Friedman, 1996; Shapiro, 2005: 51–99). The above description, rather, captures the debate of the 1960s over the new behaviourism in American political science. Lipset (1960), Dahl (1965), Sartori (1965) and others were being taken to task for using a ramped-up empiricism to develop theories of "democracy"—theories variously dubbed "empirical," "realist," and "elitist"—which appeared to undermine popular participation, egalitarian social change, and other traditional pillars of democratic value. Critics like Duncan and Lukes (1963), Walker (1966) and (especially) Bachrach (1967) did not of course eschew

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the possibilities of methodological criticism for reclaiming the mantle of science, but generally their motive force came more from a normative than a technical direction. (For more extensive bibliographies, see Ricci, 1970; Skinner, 1973.)

The more recent debate has inverted this order of priority, and then some. Thus the latest critiques of rational choice (Mackie, 2003; Shapiro, 2005) have followed the initial attack (Green and Shapiro, 1994) by speaking primarily from norms of scientific method and professional practice; even Mackie, though noting in passing that anti-democratic ideologies may draw support from the rational choice analysis of democracy, calls his an "internal critique" (2003: 4, 29), and its substance is heavily methodological. Notwithstanding a growing awareness of and focus on the normative and ideological complications endemic to empirical social research generally (Oren, 2003, 2006), these complications have been all but ignored by both sides of the rational choice controversy. For this reason I wish to bring "a plague on both their houses," to borrow the subtitle from Skinner's review (1973) of the earlier behaviourist controversy. My genealogy of rational choice theory attempts to uncover the neglected normative component of the debate, and more generally to back the call for a "normative turn" in political science (Gerring and Yesnowitz, 2006)—which is, to be clear, a call for normative *awareness* not *bias*. This is not to say that methodological critique has no value, or that the behaviourist debate was exemplary in all respects; it is merely to say that a set of concerns that was present then ought also to be taken into consideration now. My genealogy of rational choice will attempt to illustrate why.

I will first lay out the reasons for bringing the history of political thought to bear on this debate before beginning the genealogical exercise with three of the foundational texts of rational choice: Arrow's *Social Choice and Individual Values* (1963; orig. pub. 1951), Downs's *Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957), and Olson's *Logic of Collective Action* (1965). Next I will consider Schumpeter, an influential figure for both the behaviourist and rational choice schools in American political science. From Schumpeter I will trace a lineage back to Mosca, Pareto, and Michels, the seminal sociologists of elites whose writings from the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had a significant impact on social theorists of Schumpeter's generation and beyond. In conclusion, I will argue that the tradition of European social theory running from Pareto to Schumpeter has to a significant degree informed rational choice theory as a general approach to social research. This tradition laid a foundation for a rigorous, empirical social science modelled on the physical sciences and taking its methodological cues from neo-classical economics. It called for a "realistic" re-appraisal of democratic politics while endorsing a candidly anti-democratic scheme of values. But it also embodied a

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Abstract. Unlike previous methodological debates in political science, the recent rational choice controversy has excluded consideration of normative questions altogether. These can be recovered, in part, through a genealogy of counter-utopian democratic theory which connects modern rational choice theory to the fin-de-siècle sociology of elites via the mediating figure of Schumpeter. The family resemblances include the aspiration toward a pure science of society, the search for a "realistic" theory of democratic politics, and the shading of an empirical proposition about elite domination into a normative celebration. Though democratic theorists have learned much from the counter-utopian tradition generally, both sides of the rational choice controversy have failed to take seriously the elitists' recognition of the ineluctable normative and ideological dimensions of social research.

Résumé. Les débats récents sur le choix rationnel, à contre-pied d'autres disputes méthodologiques en science politique, ont exclu les questions normatives. Ces questions peuvent se rétablir, en partie, par l'intermédiaire d'une généalogie contre-utopiste de la théorie démocratique, qui lie la théorie moderne du choix rationnel au retour de la sociologie élitiste de fin de siècle, avec le personnage de Schumpeter comme médiateur. Les ressemblances familiales portent l'aspiration à une science pure de la société, la recherche d'une théorie «réaliste» de la démocratie et la transition d'une proposition empirique sur la domination des élites vers une célébration normative. Bien que les théoriciens démocratiques aient beaucoup appris de la tradition contre-utopiste, aucune des deux parties du débat sur le choix rationnel n'a pris en compte la reconnaissance élitiste des aspects idéologiques inévitables de la recherche sociale.

kind of methodological pluralism which critics of rational choice find congenial yet too often absent from the subjects of their attack.

The result of my genealogy is a new map of the intellectual terrain in an important region of political science. The Schumpeterian and elitist routes to modern rational choice theory are not unheard of but are relatively uncharted. My map describes previously unnoticed features of the terrain along those routes, and it attempts to depict them with a vividness attesting to their importance for the discipline. To use Ricci's more provocative metaphor in reference to the older behaviourist controversy, the question is whether and how far to remove the "figurative lid on a Pandora's box full of normative and methodological questions about democracy" (Ricci, 1970: 242).

Intellectual History

Skinner's analysis of the behaviourist controversy deserves the attention of both sides of the recent debates around rational choice because it calls attention to the ineluctable ideological features of methodological debate. Whereas Skinner laboured to clarify the sorts of normative force which attach to empirical theories in social science by a close textual analysis of some leading contributions to the behaviourist debate, my task is of a more historical character. Professionalized social science and popular government both took on their current shape in the course of the nineteenth century, and the discourses fostered by these two institutions have always

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intermingled in various ways (Runciman, 1969). More to the point, debates over the proper scope and method of social science have always implicated the principles and practices of democratic politics in contextual, subtextual, and at times explicitly programmatic ways. In short, the rational choice controversy is merely a variation on an old theme. An excursion into intellectual history promises to clarify our understanding of this debate, enrich our appreciation of the theoretic possibilities associated with it, and strengthen our grasp of its import for democratic norms. Specifically, it puts an important and tricky question on the table: What makes a political-science methodology democratic, anti-democratic, or agnostic?

The historical exercise I propose is limited in scope and genealogical (in the old-fashioned sense of that term) in nature. Other scholars have explored the origins of the concept of self-interest and of the practice of game-theoretic modelling, for example, often running through several centuries in the process (see Weintraub, 1992; Engelmann, 2003; Force, 2003). My present task is chronologically and thematically more modest. I will trace genealogical lines of influence backward from the acknowledged founders of the genre—not by following all conceivable lines but by concentrating on those most closely related to central democratic norms. As my title indicates, my subject is not so much contemporary rational choice theory as its forebears, and the goal of provoking reflection through genealogy does not include a mapping-out of all possible relationships between schools of methodology and schools of democratic theory. Put another way, my focus is on key figures in a roughly 100-year-old tradition of what might be called "counter-utopian" analyses of democratic politics.

My analysis is "genealogical" in the ordinary, non-technical sense of that word because it attempts to identify family resemblances and actual "spawning" or influence, using textual analysis for the former and contextual (biographical and historical) evidence for the latter. Previous inquiries into the intellectual history of rational choice have made valuable contributions to our understanding of its roots in neo-classical economics and utilitarian moral philosophy (Ball, 1988) and in the Cold War effort to unite science and democracy against Soviet communism (Amadae, 2003). Two other recent studies have pursued a two-step account, as I do below, of rational choice's genealogy. Palumbo and Scott (2003: 387–88) have traced a lineage from Downs through Schumpeter back to Weber, while Mackie has traced one from Riker (considered by some to be on a par with Arrow, Downs and Olson) through Burnham back to Pareto (2003: 425–30). Both these attempts are valuable and suggestive but cursory and unfocused. My genealogy proceeds as the strongest textual and contextual evidence of likeness and influence directs: it follows Palumbo and Scott in their first step, from the choice founders to Schumpeter, but follows Mackie in his second, from Schumpeter to the European social theory

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of elites, of which Mosca, Pareto and Michels are the widely acknowledged principals. Attending to this genealogy will illuminate not only an important recent debate but also, in the manner of a case study, the larger and recurring problem of the normative and ideological ramifications of the way social scientists do their work.

Before I proceed, a caveat is in order: a genealogist need not be a fatalist, and genealogy is not equivalent to critique. What I am proposing is less a new line of criticism of rational choice than an alternative context for the debate around it. Foes of rational choice may find in the sociology of elites new reasons for opposition, while its friends may find there a more sophisticated approach to social science than rational choice theory today is usually given credit for. My genealogy suggests that the controversy take on a new set of considerations; it neither dictates how the protagonists make use of these nor predicts what the outcome of their uses will be.

Rational Choice Founders

The distinctiveness of the rational choice approach among political scientists consists, in general terms, in the use of economic models to explain and predict political behaviour. More specifically, this theoretic project has involved elaborating a particular construct of rationality, one drawn in essence from the study of economics but adapted and adjusted in a number of ways to fit the political field. This sort of construct unites the three foundational texts of Arrow, Downs and Olson.

Arrow's seminal analysis revolved around a conception of "collective rationality" whose underlying purpose was to measure collective choices using standards normally applied to individual choices (1963: 2n, 13, 17, 19). Arrow called the principal conclusion flowing from this analysis the "General Possibility Theorem," but it cast such potent doubt on the ability of majoritarian voting procedures to construct coherent social choices out of many individual choices that it has come to be known rather as the "impossibility theorem." As Arrow summed it up, "If consumers' values can be represented by a wide range of individual orderings, the doctrine of voters' sovereignty is incompatible with that of collective rationality" (60). In the words of an admiring Riker, "the essence of Arrow's theorem is that no method of amalgamating individual judgments can simultaneously satisfy some reasonable conditions of fairness on the method and a condition of logicality on the result" (1982: 116). In short, the usual democratic method of decision making was shown to be collectively irrational.

Downs took Arrow's "collective rationality" as the starting point for his own analysis of "political rationality from an economic point of view"

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(1957: 4, 14). Downs's stated aim was to articulate a "behaviour rule" for democratic governments so that they could be included in economic theories of general equilibrium, alongside non-state agents like private firms and consumers (3, 20). Thus the idealized rational actors that inhabit markets were introduced into not only the voting booth (as in Arrow) but also the halls of government. Notwithstanding a professed desire to avoid specifying the norms that political actors ought to pursue, Downs gave his political rationality a definite content as to both the means and ends of politics. In the first instance it requires consistently choosing the most efficient means to any given ends (4–8), but by postulate it also revolves around particular ends associated with rational self-interest: citizens pursue their "utility income," including moral as well as material benefits derived from government action, while political parties pursue power (30–31, 36–38).

Downs's moral utilitarianism is accompanied by a generic kind of political conservatism, as is evident in his endorsement of consistency and efficiency in choosing means:

> Because government provides the framework of order upon which the rest of society is built, political rationality has a function much more fundamental than the mere elimination of waste in governing. Rational behavior is impossible without the ordered stability which government furnishes. But government will continue to furnish such stability only so long as the political system functions efficiently, i.e., so long as it is rational. Thus political rationality is the *sine qua non* of all forms of rational behavior. (1957: 11)

In short, rationality is for Downs more than an analytical construct; it is also a political objective: its significance is not only methodological but also normative. For this reason it is impossible to regard as purely "positive" his most striking conclusions, couched as they are in the language of rationality: that it is irrational for most citizens to vote, that it is irrational for politicians to take all citizens' preferences equally seriously, and that any rational society is incapable of realizing the goal of political equality (see chs. 6, 13, 14).

Olson took the key elements of Arrow's and Downs's constructs and applied them to a narrower field. His own conception of political rationality used individual self-interest to derive a kind of impossibility theorem for group politics. As long as the service provided by a voluntary association is a public good on which an individual can ride-free, Olson argued, there is no incentive actually to take on the costs associated with joining, membership and participation, unless the marginal contribution of that individual appreciably advances the organizational cause (1965: 85–87). This strong condition, in the absence of either "selective" incentives or centrally directed coercion, is only likely to hold in very small groups (34–35, 126–27). In the nationwide pressure groups that play such

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a key role in American politics, accordingly, active participation turns out to be as irrational as Downs had found voting to be. Moreover, Olson was clear that the nation state itself was to be regarded as just another organization, albeit an especially large one (6–7, 13, 91).

The continuing salience and renown of the rational choice founders is a result of the creative and cross-disciplinary ways in which they challenged some of the core assumptions of political science. But the conceit that their significance and influence are purely methodological and positive in nature, rather than normative and ideological, is losing currency (see Hauptmann, 1997; Amadae, 2003: 296). In particular, the rational choice founders should be understood as having engaged in a particular kind of ideological discourse: counter-utopian democratic theory. None of them set out his stall to criticize the democratic form of government and recommend a better alternative; instead, all three intended to undermine received democratic assumptions and norms by characterizing them as "impossible," "unrealistic," or "irrational." Thus Arrow attacked the proposition that voting results have any social meaning; Downs, that voting has any individual efficacy; and Olson, that participation in interest group activity has any individual efficacy. This sort of counter-utopian discourse, however, has a history of its own to which we must now attend.

Schumpeter

The name of Joseph Schumpeter was frequently invoked in the behaviourist debate of the 1960s but has been less often heard in the recent rational choice controversy. This silence is significant in light of two facts: like other giants of twentieth-century economics, Schumpeter has had a major influence on the development of the genre, and his excursion into democratic theory sounded a shrill note of hostility to traditional democratic norms which continues to reverberate in social scientific circles to this day. I will proceed by first noting the scope and nature of Schumpeter's influence on rational choice, with special emphasis on his elitist theory of democracy, and then assessing the normative drift of his polemic statement of that theory.

The view that Schumpeter "paved the way for the public choice theory of today" (Andic and Andic, 1985: 464), or was at least a "precursor with many insights to offer" (Allen, 1991, 2: 252), has become common. These claims are perfectly defensible provided they are suitably qualified rather than presumed to indicate a comprehensive influence. Schumpeter relied heavily on studies of the irrationalities of human psychology (Ricci, 1970: 243–44, 247–48), was skeptical about methodological individualism (Medearis, 2001: 159–60), and assigned limited value to equilibrium models of social systems, including economic ones

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(144–56). But his basic insight that the public forum can be modelled on the market undoubtedly underpins the conceptual tool-box of rational choice theory. Whether the modifier be "public," "social," or "rational," Schumpeter's influence on theorists of "choice" has been channelled primarily through Downs (Amadae, 2003: 17). Downs' own paean to this influence is unmistakable: "Schumpeter's profound analysis of democracy forms the inspiration and foundation for our whole thesis, and our debt and gratitude to him are great indeed" (1957: 29n). Riker paid tribute to Downs, in turn, in a manner often repeated among American political scientists, calling his *Economic Theory* "one of the half-dozen outstanding works of political theory in this century" (1962: 33; see also Hardin, 2002: 183).

Schumpeter's bedrock proposition that democratic politics is best understood by analogy with market exchange is memorably set out in *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (1942): politicians are like entrepreneurs, voters like consumers, votes like currency, campaign propaganda like advertising, electoral victories like profits, and so on (282–83). Schumpeter was evidently (though without positivist fanfare) applying assumptions of rational self-interest, particularly that of politicians as profit-maximizing entrepreneurs, to democratic theory. On the back of the Schumpeterian premise that political is fundamentally similar to economic behaviour, rational choice theorists have been constructing their models ever since.

But arguably Schumpeter's influence goes beyond this analytic structure to the kind of polemic gesture that I have called "counter-utopian." Schumpeter, after all, intended his market analysis of democratic politics to establish the "more realistic theory" of democracy which he believed was needed to replace the traditional, far-fetched democratic ideology associated with the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (1942: 235). He made little effort to hide his opinion of what he derisively called "classic" theories of democracy and of the norms embodied in them. He believed they had plainly misunderstood the basic terms of their subject, and accordingly he sought to redefine the criteria of "democracy" itself, in the process thoroughly denigrating traditional democratic aspirations, particularly the goal of popular participation in public affairs and the conceit that elected officials represent popular wishes (see 1942: ch. 21).

It is by now well understood that the object of Schumpeter's attack was more a straw man of his own contrivance than an actual theory defended by identifiable theorists (see Pateman, 1970: 17; Ball, 1988: 129–30). But the attack has been famous and influential nonetheless. Schumpeter's redefinition boiled down to his famous dictum that "the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote" (1942: 269). Not only

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was it evidently his purpose to redefine "democracy," but the logic of his analysis showed that he rejected the idea of popular self-government, in any but the most euphemistic sense of the term, as incoherent, infeasible and undesirable (Skinner, 1973: 296).

In its place, a kind of elite rule was lauded as an independent good but christened with the same name. Schumpeter's elitism had appeared as early as 1927 in a critique of Marx's conception of class, in which he argued that "the ultimate foundation on which the class phenomenon rests consists of individual differences in aptitude" (Allen, 1991, 1: 232) rather than on ownership of the means of production. In turn, these "differences in aptitude"—inequalities of intelligence, creativity, and technical training—made the difference between good and bad government. Schumpeter reckoned not only that government in general was better left to the politicians than to the people but also that economic policy in particular was better left to the expert bureaucrats than the politicians (1942: 296–302). Possibly this view reflected his own unsuccessful spell as Austria's minister of finance after the First World War (Hanusch, 1999, 1: xiii), but in any case it nicely characterizes the way devotion to ideals of efficiency and expertise can lead to a favourable view of elite rule.

Recent work on Schumpeter's own intellectual history has situated him within a tradition of "conservative critiques and reconceptualizations of democracy" including Tocqueville and Weber as well as the sociological elitists to be considered below (Medearis, 2001: 4). More intriguingly, Schumpeter's first excursion into anti-democratic polemic predated *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* by a quarter-century. In Austria, after the First World War, where he was implicated in a plot against the very government of which he was a member, Schumpeter published pamphlets advocating a kind of "Tory democracy" featuring a monarchic figurehead, an aristocratic ruling class, and an expert bureaucracy (19–20, 34–38, 45–46). Schumpeter's famous redefinition of "democracy" appears to have been several decades in the making.

Pure description, then, was not the only salient feature of Schumpeter's social research, nor of that of his behaviourist admirers. This was Skinner's main point when he argued that Dahl's and others' redefinition of the minimum characteristics that a state must possess to qualify as a "democracy," because of the undeniably commendatory force of that word in our times, constituted an "ideological move"—particularly when the new definition seemed to fit the empirical findings of contemporary US politics rather neatly (1973: 298–99). Recent studies have made a similar point about rational choice's ideological orientation. Hauptmann (1997) has taken the scheme of values explicitly endorsed by an exceptionally forthright text (Buchanan and Tullock, 1962) and attributed it to rational choice generally: impugning democratic politics as an unjustifiable infringement on, and ultimately as an irrational alter-

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native to, individual choice. On another track, Amadae (2003) has argued that rational-choice theorists were straightforwardly intervening in the ideological theater of the Cold War between Soviet communism and American "capitalist democracy" (cf. Arrow, 1963: 1).

The fact that Schumpeter influenced both behaviourism and rational choice, two distinct and in certain respects mutually hostile schools, is an important wrinkle in the story I have been telling. But my argument in no way rests on a conflation of the two. Schumpeter's influence on behaviourism has been treated elsewhere (see Pateman, 1970: ch. 1); what I am concerned with is his independent influence on rational choice. What I have shown is that certain methodological features of Schumpeter's excursion into democratic theory—(a) the pursuit of a genuinely scientific understanding of politics leading to (b) a counter-utopian debunking of traditional norms by resort to (c) a market model of politics—were overtly rehearsed by the rational choice founders, while others—(d) an insistence on the inevitability of elite domination shading into (e) the celebration of elite rule in the name of "democracy"—arguably remain sublimated or covert. Extending the rational choice genealogy to include such forebears of Schumpeter's in European social theory as Mosca, Pareto, and Michels, as we will shortly see, strengthens the historical associations among these various elements, thus giving further point to whether and how the rational choice methodology can disavow the covert elements so long as it embraces the overt ones.

Mosca and Pareto

Schumpeter was unexceptional among social scientists of his day in his fascination with the elitist sociologies of the previous generation. This is particularly true of the North American milieu in which Schumpeter spent his last two decades and in which he wrote *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. Michels' study of German socialist parties was quickly translated into English and made available to British and American audiences as *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Trends of Modern Democracy* (1915). Mosca and Pareto had to wait until the 1930s (Schumpeter's first decade at Harvard) before they too had a wide American reception. Arthur Livingston, professor of romance languages at Columbia, supervised the publication in English of both Pareto's *Trattato di Sociologia Generale* (as *The Mind and Society*, 1935) and Mosca's *Elementi di Scienza Politica* (as *The Ruling Class*, 1939). Rapid responses to this exposure from the American social-science community included *The Machiavellians* (1943) by James Burnham and *The New Belief in the Common Man* (1942) by Carl Friedrich, Schumpeter's Harvard colleague.

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Schumpeter's own awareness of and interest in the sociologists of elites were well-known to his students and colleagues (März, 1991: 58). Pareto, in particular, occupied a prime place in his reading (Allen, 1991, 1: 52, 248) and exercised a lasting influence on his thinking (Bottomore, 1992: 107, 111), as Schumpeter's sympathetic memorial essay on Pareto attested (1951: 134–35, 138–39, 141–42). But Pareto in turn was in important respects a follower of Mosca. These two influential elitists exhibited precisely the sort of scientific purism coupled with a polemic counter-utopianism that rational choice theorists took from Schumpeter, but they also prefigured Schumpeter's celebration of elite rule in the guise of a redefinition of "democracy."

Vilfredo Pareto is by now best known for his influence on modern economic thought, where his name graces the key concept of "Pareto-optimality." He was also one of the earliest social theorists to pursue the dream of a pure social science, imitating physics and chemistry (Pareto, 1980: §5). He conceived his sociology as a kind of general equilibrium model of society, presaging Downs (Barry, 1978: 168–72; Bottomore, 1992: 44–45); according to Mackie's account, "Pareto, more than anyone, imported the concept of equilibrium into social theory" (2003: 430). Pareto also practised extensive quantification of social and psychological phenomena as well as formal modelling of social processes (1980: §35). In these senses he is an obvious methodological forebear of rational choice theory, though like Schumpeter (as we will soon see) the precedence is neither comprehensive nor unqualified.

Pareto's brand of social science, anchored by the so-called "logico-experimental method," led him to his master concept. He posited that each individual in society could be assigned an index score ranging from zero to ten in his or her chosen occupational field; it was then possible to "make a class of the people who have the highest indices in their branch of activity, and to that class give the name of *elite*" (§§792–94). This attempt to define the elite with some precision may be responsible for Pareto's reputation as the founder of the concept in modern social theory, but his general ambition to model social theory on the hard sciences and his more particular account of elite domination were both drawn from his compatriot Gaetano Mosca; indeed Mosca was said to have resented Pareto for the credit the latter received for the theory of elites (Meisel, 1965: 15; Finocchiaro, 1999: 24). Where Pareto argued that, "in fact, whether universal suffrage prevails or not, it is always an oligarchy that governs, finding ways to give to the 'will of the people' that expression desired" (1980: §909), Mosca had already written that "in reality the dominion of an organized minority, obeying a single impulse, over the unorganized majority is inevitable" (1939: 53).

Both men understood the relations of elites to one another and to non-elites in competitive terms similar to those of the later models of

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Schumpeter and Downs, and both understood the necessity of elite control to arise from organizational impulses similar to those later detailed by Olson. Mosca, in a mature statement of his fifty-year-old theory, wrote in 1933 that "the electoral contest takes place between organized minorities controlling the disorganized majority of voters, who may choose between a small number of candidates presented by those minorities" (Meisel, 1962: 388).

But Mosca and Pareto, like Schumpeter and unlike both sides of the recent rational choice controversy, were explicit about the normative dimensions of their work. The thesis about the inevitability of elite rule underlay Pareto's explicit criticism of conventional democratic values, for it was the "realism" of elitism which was meant to puncture the visionary aspirations represented by concepts like equality and popular sovereignty. Well before Schumpeter, the elitists were targeting a loosely apprehended eighteenth-century celebration of popular rule, one evidently understood to be simultaneously Rousseauvian and Benthamite. Pareto sneered at "the fiction of 'popular representation'" (1980: §960), and Mosca had written in the first edition of his *Elementi* that "to refute this democratic theory ... is the task of this work as a whole" (1939: 52). When Pareto claimed that "a political system in which 'the people' expresses its will ... without cliques, intrigues, 'combines,' and 'gangs,' exists only as a pious wish of theorists" (1980: §972), he was giving his critical project the familiar counter-utopian cast. For his part Mosca often appealed to "reality," "practice," and "the facts" in his critique of what he called "doctrines which the eighteenth century thought out, which the nineteenth century perfected and tried to apply, and which the twentieth century will probably dispense with or modify substantially" (1939: 153). Thus there can be little surprise that Schumpeter named Mosca and Pareto (along with Sorel) as the outstanding systematizers of a "current of thought ... that issued in derogatory criticism of parliamentary democracy—the current that was anti-intellectualist, anti-utilitarian, [and] anti-equalitarian" (1951: 137).

At times Mosca and Pareto seemed to endorse the goodness or fitness of the actual state of things they claimed to have uncovered, much as Skinner later showed the behaviourists to have done. A division of quality or superiority was built into their basic understanding of society, and (following a long tradition begun with Plato) it seemed natural to assert that only the best should rule. Mosca, for example, posited "a certain material, intellectual, or moral superiority" among members of the governing class (1939: 53). This assumption of quality or fitness played the same circular role which rationality sometimes assumes in rational choice models: "the 'best' man is the man who possesses the requisites that make him best fitted to govern his fellow men. Understood in that sense, the adjective may always be applied to ruling classes in normal times, because the fact that they are ruling classes shows that, at the given

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time, in the given country, they contain the individuals who are best fitted to govern" (450). The same sort of logic long ago characterized Aristotle's defense of natural slavery by resort to the evidentiary power of the status quo to reveal varying levels of human intellectual endowment (Aristotle, 1998: 1255a15).

The alliance of scientific purism and normative "realism," then, is explicit in Mosca and Pareto. But the classical elitists' polemics contained a further wrinkle of sophistication, by dint of training their critical eye not only on the "pious wishes" of utopian theory but also on the political realities of their day. For them, the only thing worse than a democratic utopia was a plutocracy masquerading as one. Thus Pareto judged (echoing the old complaint of American populism) that "our democracies in France, Italy, England and the United States are tending more and more to become demagogic plutocracies" (1980: §970), and that "the regimes in many 'democratic' countries might be defined as a sort of feudalism that is primarily economic and in which the principal instrument of governing is the manipulation of political followings" (§972). For his part, Mosca acidly remarked that the democratic idealism found in the United States "does not prevent a rich man from being more influential than a poor man.... It does not prevent elections from being carried on to the music of clinking dollars. It does not prevent whole legislatures and considerable numbers of national congressmen from feeling the influence of powerful corporations and great financiers" (1939: 58). "In these circumstances," he added, "of the various organized minorities that are disputing the field, that one infallibly wins which spends most money or lies most persuasively" (156). For the Italian elitists, then, the proposition that elite domination is inevitable was meant as both a statement of fact and an article of belief, but they were far from using it to exonerate existing regimes from scorn.

Pareto's targets in particular were not only the believers in participatory democracy but also the bourgeois constitutionalists whose advocacy of universal suffrage put up a kind of ideological screen. It is for this reason that Pareto's *Trattato* has been called "an analysis and critique of ideology" even more than "a research into the form of society and its stability" (Albertoni, 1992: 30). Interestingly, Pareto extended his critique of ideology not only to political actors but also to social scientists. He recognized that scholars sometimes try to pass off their normative predilections as "rigorously logical," "scientific," and "experimental" theorems: "if it is shown that a certain ideal, *T*, is not a consequence of experimental, or at least 'rational,' principles, it is assumed as proved that it can only be harmful" (1980: §724). This is precisely the analytic structure of counter-utopian democratic theory in modern times, whether in the rational choice founders or in Schumpeter—or indeed in Pareto himself.

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One of the favourite charges of critics of behaviourist democratic theory was that it defanged the critical bite of political research and reinforced established social hierarchies and their supporting institutions. The Italian elitists, as grandsires of both behaviourism and rational choice, offer a glimpse into the potential normative drift of their descendants' research program, but attending to their approach to social science could do still more for the recent controversy. For their research, and also Schumpeter's, was not only normatively candid and ideologically alert but also methodologically plural.

Methodological Pluralism

If the critics are correct about its methodological universalism, rational choice has embraced Schumpeter the Harvard economist but not Schumpeter the European social theorist. He came of age in turn-of-the-century Vienna, where he studied law while pursuing his passion for economics on the side. In this milieu he was exposed to the decades-old debate between Schmoller and Menger over the proper approach to economics: the former upholding the orthodoxy of the German universities that all social science should be essentially historical in nature, the latter challenging this received wisdom by appeal to abstract theoretic models (Hanusch, 1999, 1: xii). Schumpeter identified more with the latter camp, and when he was appointed to a chair at the University of Bonn he helped turn the tide against the prestige of Schmoller's position there. But Schumpeter, a keen admirer of Weber, had always been interested in effecting a kind of union of historical and theoretical approaches (Swedberg, 1989: 509–10). When he was made president of the American Economic Association in 1949, it was in recognition of his success, principally in *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, at combining historical research with formal models and qualitative with quantitative analysis (Hanusch, 1999, 1: xiv).

Schumpeter recognized Pareto as an exemplar of the basic model of social theory that he and his Austrian and German colleagues had been pursuing: not only a sociology modelled on the rigour of economics but also an economics informed by social and historical research (1951: 134–35). Mosca provided, if anything, even more powerful inspiration on this point. He referred to economics as a precocious "sister science" whose theoretic parsimony "undoubtedly accounts for the rapid progress that political economy has made, but at the same time it may be held chiefly responsible for the fact that certain postulates of the science of economics are still open to controversy"; thus economics needed supplementation by "other phases of human psychology" (1939: 2–3). He added that "if political science is to be grounded on the obser-

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vation of the facts of political life, it is to the old historical method that we must return" (41).

To be sure, there have recently been moves in the elitists' direction in the literature on rational choice: hence the oft-repeated dictum that rational self-interest greatly underrepresents the range of human psychological motives at play in the political field (Amadae, 2003: 293–96; cf. Olson, 1965: 159–62); hence also recent efforts at combining models and mathematics with historically informed and qualitatively sophisticated "analytic narratives" (see Bates et al., 1998). But assimilating rational choice to a sound methodological pluralism, ultimately, might require abandoning the presumption that a pure science of society is in fact possible (Murphy, 1996); indeed the characterization by Bates and others of "the universal approach to social science" as "overconfident" and "naive" represents a step in that direction (Bates et al., 1998: 11). Thus Mosca and Pareto, though in key respects the methodological forebears of rational choice, merit the attention of all sides of the recent debates by dint of both their pluralism and their normative and ideological sophistication.

Michels

The work of Robert Michels lacked the scientific universalism of Mosca and Pareto which would later characterize rational choice theory, but it retained other essential features of sociological elitism and added a few of its own. Michels' "iron law of oligarchy" anticipated Olson's principal finding in particular while laying a foundation for the rational choice approach to democratic theory in general, and his particular brand of counter-utopianism showed a remarkable subtlety to go along with its candour, two qualities which have gone unappreciated in the recent controversy.

Like Pareto and Schumpeter, Michels was a man of political practice as well as theory. He was involved in labour agitation and socialist politics in both Germany and Italy and was a friend of Weber and a close reader of Mosca and Pareto. His *Political Parties* (1915) contains numerous citations of the Italian elitists and in many respects echoes their disparaging words on democracy. In his preface Michels laid out three types of social force opposing "the realization of democracy": those found in (a) "the nature of the human individual," (b) "the nature of the political struggle," and (c) "the nature of organization" (1915: vi). Under the first heading he touched on many of the same themes that were later discussed by Schumpeter under the rubric of "Human Nature in Politics" (see Schumpeter, 1942: 256–64), amounting to a series of objections to the desirability of popular control: the inattention, ignorance, and irrationality of ordinary people. Thus Michels referred to the "pathology of the

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crowd," claiming that it is "easier to dominate a large crowd than a small audience," and that large groups are "readily influenced by the eloquence of great popular orators" and "accessible to panic alarms, to unreflective enthusiasm" (1915: 28–29). He added that "the incompetence of the masses is almost universal throughout the domains of political life, and this constitutes the most solid foundation of the power of the leaders.... From this point of view it cannot always be considered a bad thing that the leaders should really lead" (93).

Under the second and third headings Michels developed a catalogue of objections to democracy from not only desirability but also feasibility. He argued that direct democracy in a large organization is a "mechanical and technical impossibility" (29); this impossibility is the "direct outcome of the influence of number" (30) on problems of co-ordination in large groups. He moved on to an analysis about how the enlargement and differentiation of organizations, together with the concomitant role specialization required for them to carry out their complex functions, favoured a skilled elite leadership. Once this elite had established itself in power, there always followed a "continuous enlargement of the gulf which divides the leaders from the masses" (36); in particular, procedural powers would be concentrated in the hands of the leaders (38–39). "In theory the leader is merely an employee bound by the instructions he received. He has to carry out the orders of the mass, of which he is no more than the executive organ. But in actual fact, as the organization increases in size, this control becomes purely fictitious" (38). Accountability is reduced to infrequent reports and oversight committees, while salaried professionals manage matters according to their own hierarchic norms (39–40). Michels added that the group solidarity of the leading elite, combined with the gratitude and passivity which the rank and file tend to exhibit, constituted a "psychology of organization" reinforcing oligarchic patterns of influence (417–18).

The parallels with Olson are basic. A focus on the specifically organizational features of politics forms the basis for a thesis about the lack of participation in collective action by ordinary people. Michels' account of the passivity and gratitude of the masses, for example, prefigured Olson's notion of a "privileged" group in which a small minority of the members undertake the costs of co-ordination while the rest are happy to leave them to it. Michels also forecast Olson's recognition that "small groups will further their common interests better than large groups" (Olson, 1965: 52). Yet Olson and Michels in some respects have fallen some way from the family tree: they both adopt a case study method of sub-state organizations, and their anti-democratic implications share a certain ambiguity and perhaps a sense of tragedy (see Olson, 1965: 165–67). (True to the generational pattern, however, Michels wrangled much more explicitly with this than did Olson.) Missing from Michels, of course,

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was the rational choice theorists' characteristically self-conscious reliance on the presumption of rationality, as distinguished from a thicker notion of self-interest, but clearly present is the thesis of the inevitability of elite domination which would later pass through Schumpeter.

Michels went on to strike the same sort of counter-utopian pose assumed before him by Mosca and Pareto and after him by Schumpeter and the rational choice founders. His aim was to dissipate the mists that had settled over the eyes of democratic idealists. The radical theories of the nineteenth century, he wrote, "cannot override a sociological law," and clinging to them only "serves to conceal from the masses a danger which really threatens democracy" (1915: 40). He stressed "the impossibility of a complete practical application of the principle of mass sovereignty" (93). His "iron law" was meant to show that "the majority is thus permanently incapable of self-government" (407). Yet social scientific realism was not to be, for him, a prompt to moral scorn or political surrender. Michels summarized what he took to be the standpoint of socialism in the new century: "If democracy is to be effective it must assume the aspect of a benevolent despotism.... From the democratic point of view this is perhaps an evil, but it is a necessary evil. Socialism does not signify everything by the people, but everything for the people.... Social democracy is not democracy, but a party fighting to attain to democracy.... Democracy is the end, but not the means" (95). This claim appears to reverse Schumpeter's strictly instrumentalist view of democratic politics, but Michels also seemed to endorse the contemporary German socialist mantra that democracy is "only a form of organization," and that "where it ceases to be possible to harmonize democracy with organization, it is better to abandon the former than the latter" (40). On this view, democratic procedure ought not (for Schumpeter, cannot) be an object of moral valuation.

Michels' critique of democracy, then, attempts to occupy a position that in later terms would fall somewhere between egalitarian or participationist democrats and Cold War elitists: he refuses to abandon equality but concedes the necessity of oligarchic organizations to conduct the rescue. The evident paradoxes of this position may pose a challenge for resolution to some, a cautionary tale to others. Michels himself verged on contemplative despair: "the democratic currents of history resemble successive waves. They break ever on the same shoal. They are ever renewed. This enduring spectacle is simultaneously encouraging and depressing.... This cruel game will continue without end" (425).

Conclusion

The Schumpeterian-elitist genealogy of rational choice has no claim to exclusivity; other chapters in the intellectual history of the social sci-

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ences could equally illuminate the origins of rational choice methodology. But it has nonetheless a strong claim to our attention by dint of placing us in a position from which to view a neglected aspect of rational choice's significance for politics and political science. It focuses our gaze on questions related to the normative and ideological dimensions of social research and their bearing on democratic theory. Recent explorations of "reflexive political science" (Oren, 2003) and of a "normative turn" in the discipline (Gerring and Yesnowitz, 2006) have bidden us to take a similar perspective.

The family resemblances in this genealogy of rational choice might also provide the basic elements of an answer to the question of rational choice's pro-democratic, anti-democratic, or agnostic orientation. The chief complex of characteristics revolves around a normative rejection of democratic politics, but this ideological inheritance is not so much a hostile analysis of democracy as a form of government as a general fear of something like mass participation or popular control of elites—what we might call "democratic accountability." This elitist fear used to inspire invective against the term "democracy" with greater frequency than it does now. Indeed, the near-universal deference of modern social science toward democracy is a notable departure from both Schumpeter and the European elitists in their most lucid moments. But this departure reflects a universal shift in political language over the last century, for "democracy" now covers a wider range of referents than it did even before the Second World War. This terminological difference between the descendants and the antecedents, in short, is greater than their substantive conceptual and normative differences.

The key family traits include (a) the aspiration to a pure science of society and (b) its pursuit by using empirical results to debunk the assumptions of normative theories, thereby making democracy appear more "feasible" or "realistic." These two traits add up to what I have been calling the "counter-utopian" challenge to democratic theory. But there is a third shared trait as to method: (c) the employment generally of parsimonious assumptions of rational action and specifically of economic models of politics. Even Schumpeter, for all his emphasis on the irrationality of ordinary people, was prepared to treat politicians as perfectly rational producers and salesmen within the political market. Heretofore critics of rational choice have levelled their sights on (a) and (c), but they should not forget (b), which is the essential point of similarity between rational choice and behaviourism. Notwithstanding their apparent differences (but cf. Amadae, 2003: 161, 255), these two schools shared a fundamentally counter-utopian impulse animating the scientific study of democratic politics.

In addition to these aspects of kinship as to method, there are equally important family resemblances as to findings. These include (d) a thesis

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about, or at least a presumption of, the empirical inevitability of elite domination which underwrites (e) a normative celebration (usually in the earlier generations), or at least an acceptance (usually in the later), of some version of aristocracy in the name of "democracy." Even Arrow and Olson, apparently the outliers in these respects, accepted that a functioning democratic politics requires elites to control the agenda and procedures of "social choice" and to manage voluntary associations. But it is important to note that the empirical finding does not necessarily, analytically lead to the normative acceptance. Ricci has recounted how empirical domination by elites achieved widespread recognition in social scientific circles by the middle twentieth century, but also how political writers made two different kinds of theoretic response to this recognition (1970: 259–65). Some searched for new insights into how political realities could be reformed into more democratic shapes while others (notably the behaviourists) accepted the empirical findings as normative, in other words, as normal and therefore not to be worried about or tampered with. Arguably the choice founders also offered the latter kind of response, and in a similar institutional and intellectual context of wartime mobilization (see Ricci, 1970: 263–64n; Amadae, 2003; Oren, 2003, ch. 1). To the extent that Schumpeter's "ingenious resolution of the ethical contradiction between traditional liberal ideals and political reality" (Ricci, 1970: 255)—by dint of redefining democracy—has been tacitly accepted by rational choice theorists, they have treated as "democracy" what could be candidly regarded as "aristocracy" before the Second World War (Oren, 2003: 224).

Given the historical association of the methodological with the normative traits in this genealogy, it makes sense for *individual studies* that employ a rational choice methodology to take cognizance of these normative dimensions of *the general approach* to political science with which they identify or from which they borrow. We should be willing, in Ricci's words, to take the lid at least partially off the Pandora's box of greater normative and methodological awareness (Ricci, 1970: 265–67).

It is possible that what rational choice shares with its antecedents is less a distinctive family trait than a general characteristic of modern social science. So much is suggested, indeed, by the place of Weber as a key precursor of both Schumpeter and the choice founders (see Palumbo and Scott, 2003). But we must distinguish the counter-utopian pose—the quest of modern science for knowledge undistorted by righteous passion—from the elitist fear—the ancient revulsion from the normatively menacing consequences of democratic accountability. The counter-utopian pose corresponds to the first three "family resemblances" identified above; the elitist fear, to the fifth as a tendency following on from the fourth. There appears to be no necessary, analytic connection between the first

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group of traits and the second; binding the two together is a distinctive characteristic (vis-a-vis modern social science *tout court*) precisely of the family tree that I have sketched above.

Of course genealogy is not destiny, and rational choice theory is not trapped in Poe's House of Usher. Descendants are never perfect copies of their forebears: potentialities can go unrealized, inheritances can be squandered or repudiated, traditions can provoke rebellion as easily as imitation. Defenders of rational choice may be able, by squarely facing the normative and ideological considerations in which social science has always been enmeshed, to answer the damaging and repetitive charge that they leave political science out of touch with political reality (see Shapiro, 2005). The sociologists of elites, Schumpeter, and the rational choice founders were all engaged in social scientific work with a definite sense of purpose; their purposes were even normative and ideological to some degree. They all strove to do "good science," and to achieve knowledge of the world untainted by partisan bias. But all but the rational choice founders also acknowledged that scientific discourse purporting to be value free cannot be taken at its word. The exceptional character of rational choice in this respect arouses the suspicion that its practitioners, in quest of a scientific purism, risk taking its founders' pretense of normative innocence all the way down the road to purposeless irrelevance.

Finally, however, the Schumpeterian-elitist genealogy of rational choice also focuses attention on the multifarious conceptual tool-box of modern "democratic" theory. Counter-utopian analyses of democratic politics, and the body of reflection they have spawned, have yielded a wide-ranging typology of modern constitutional regimes. Mosca could be credited with (a) a frankly aristocratic brand of constitutionalism or (b) a "democratic elitism" (along with Gramsci) resembling (c) a proto-Dahlian "balanced pluralism" (see Finocchiaro, 1999). Pareto added to Mosca's anti-egalitarianism his own (d) economic libertarianism. Michels countenanced a kind of (e) oligarchy committed to egalitarian change which forecast (f) Schumpeter's account of "socialist democracy" (see Medearis, 2001: 133–39). But Schumpeter was patently uneasy about this development, and he had previously urged (g) "Tory democracy." Later the (h) "capitalist democracy" of the rational choice founders combined Paretian laissez-faire with Schumpeterian electoral duopoly, which in turn inspired Riker's (i) "liberalism against populism." All these counter-utopian constitutional designs are arguably versions of the "mixed regime": a constitution balancing democratic and aristocratic (and often monarchic) elements, whose roots go back to Aristotle (1998: 1294b35). But to give this sort of regime the name that has always stood for the extreme populist end of the spectrum of political possibility isn't "scientific"; it's something of a rhetorical dodge.

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Notable adherents of the rational choice school have addressed some of these options in a preliminary way (see Cook et al., 2005), and constitutional design is an important area of political science which could be enriched by collaboration and debate among various approaches to the discipline. Though the Schumpeterian-elitist genealogy of rational choice may be taken by some as grist for the mill of condemnation, it could equally be taken as evidence of that approach's place in a tradition of critical and often constructive engagement with central problems in democratic politics. The durability of the rational choice founders' pretense of normative innocence, however, threatens to limit the possibilities for further engagement of this kind.

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