

Intersection or Collision Course? A Critical Look at Rational Choice Theory and Normative Political Theory

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Few methods of political inquiry have sparked such heated debate among academics such as rational choice theory. As Grafstein states; “(l)ike abortion rights, pluralism, and original intent, rational-choice theory has become a topic on which any self-respecting political scientist is embarrassed not to have an opinion” (Grafstein 1992: 259). Advocates of rational choice theory argue that it is a viable method of practicing social science, while its critics dismiss it as a vehicle for “economic imperialism” (Zafirovski 2000). A lot of the objections have come from normative political theorists (Bohman 1992), but voices of criticism also come from political scientists outside of normative political theory, most famously by Donald P. Green and Ian Shapiro in their book *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory*. While Green and Shapiro argue that most rational choice models do not stand up to empirical scrutiny (Green and Shapiro 1994: 9), normative political theorists along with psychologists and sociologists generally take aim at the assumptions that rational choice theorists make about human nature and society.

The general argument that I want to make in this paper is that most of these criticisms are unfounded, and really centre around one critique, viz., that some rational choice theorists had an ideological bias towards promarket conservatism, which led them to engage in shoddy empirical research and make assumptions that were flawed. I argue here that rational choice theory can operate on assumptions that do not betray any ideological bias. Certainly there have been some right-wing rational choice theorists, but that does not mean that rational choice theory is necessarily right wing. It can operate on any ideological bias, but I believe that in order for rational choice to be a true descriptive enterprise it should try to avoid ideological biases. This can compliment the prescriptive nature of normative political theory.

THE CHARGES MADE AGAINST RATIONAL CHOICE: THREE CRITICISMS

There are three criticisms levied against rational choice theory. They are the pseudo-scientific criticism, the ideological criticism, and the premise criticism. Green and Shapiro are the most famous proponents of pseudo-scientific claim. They submit that rational choice theory had yet to provide an empirically rigorous model that adequately explains any political phenomena.

“We do not dispute that theoretical models of immense and increasing sophistication have been produced by practitioners of rational choice theory, but in our view the case has yet to be made that these models have advanced our understanding of how politics works in the real world. To date, a large proportion of the theoretical conjectures of rational choice theorists have not been tested empirically. Those tests that have been undertaken have either failed on their own terms or garnered theoretical support for propositions that,

on reflection, can only be characterized as banal: they do little more than restate existing knowledge in rational choice terminology” (Green and Shapiro 1994: 6).

They accuse rational choice theorists of practicing methodological “pathologies”, and cites instances where rational choice theorists in their opinion have engaged in 1) *post hoc* theory development where data is used to fashion theoretical models; 2) building models with several unobservable variables, thus making the model impossible to falsify; 3) arbitrary domain restrictions where segments of the data are removed from observation for no discernable reason; and 4) projecting empirical evidence from their theories, where empirical evidence is consistently interpreted through the lens of the theory and thus making it difficult to find deficiencies in the theory (Green and Shapiro 1994: Ch. 3). Put simply, Green and Shapiro accuse rational choice theorists of practicing poor social science. Instead of producing theoretical, falsifiable models that have undergone rigorous empirical testing, they charge rational choice theorists of producing theoretical models that are empirically unverified and impossible to falsify.

Other critics charge that rational choice theory was never about producing good socially scientific models but rather justify a right wing ideology that prefers markets over political institutions (Udehn 1996). I call this criticism the ideological criticism. It claims that rational choice has been used to justify markets as the most efficient method of distributing goods to persons instead of political institutions (Buchanan 1975: 172; 1979: 73-75, cf. Udehn 1996: 195). As Udehn avers, “the argument (by public choice theorists) is that government is too big, and public expenditures, in Western democracies, a gigantic waste of resources” (1996: 195). Ideological critics charge that rational choice theorists are trying to make their method of inquiry the dominant one in political science. As Willer explains; “Not rational choice, but the assumptions of the economic approach all too often lead to pseudo-explanations that are expressions of its bias, a bias that expresses promarket conservatism” (Willer 1992: 76).

This celebration of markets has usually meant an attack on traditional political and social institutions, and there is evidence where we find rational choice theorists seemingly reaching conclusions that would be very pleasing to the neo-conservative ear. I will only cite three examples. Niskanen’s (1973) study of the civil service makes bureaucrats out to be budget-maximizers, which ultimately leads to an inefficient civil service. Mancur Olson’s *The Logic of Collective Action* in part put forth a stinging analysis of labour unions, saying that they in essence could only operate thanks to coercive membership and coercive picket lines (Olson 1972: 66-76). As Olson later generalizes; “...the development of collective bargaining for large groups must normally restrict economic freedom in that it implies that those who do not join the union must be deprived of the right to work in the unionized enterprise. In other words, the large union, though not a part of the government, must be coercive, if it attempts to fulfill its basic function and still survive” (Olson 1972: 96). Another example is William Riker’s criticism of populism and the Rousseauian view of democracy in *Liberalism Against Populism*. In it he argues that there was no fair or rational way to aggregate individual preferences into a coherent group outcome, and “so long as a society preserves democratic institutions, its members can expect that some of their social choices will be unordered or inconsistent” (Riker 1982: 136). He cites Kenneth Arrow’s theorem, which states that there can be no social choice mechanism that can translate individual preferences effectively without violating one of the following conditions; universal domain, independence of irrelevant alternatives, non-dictatorship, and Pareto optimality (Arrow 1951). Populism, he argues, holds that there is an effective way of revealing a coherent

group preference, or a general will, and that “the people are free when their wishes are law” (Riker 1982: 238). He then concludes; “Populism puts democracy at risk. Democracy requires control of rules by economic sanctions; the spirit of populism and populist institutions allows rulers to tamper with these sanctions” (Riker 1982: 252). He endorses the liberal interpretation of voting, which simply sees voting as the choosing or rejection of leaders, and “accepts that democratic voting and discussion are inaccurate and meaningless” (Mackie 2003: 35). Dowding (2006) notes that while criticizing the populist view of voting, Riker seems to endorse the populist interpretation of the market *carte blanche*. As he explains;

“There is a lot of manipulation in the market. If you put your house on the market at £320,000, but are prepared to accept £280,000 and I am prepared to pay £300,000 to buy it, offer you £260,000 and we finally agree a price of £290,000, then there has been manipulation. You tried to manipulate by setting a price higher than you were prepared to sell. And I offered a price lower than I was prepared to buy. What we revealed was what we were prepared to agree to under the bargaining constraints we were under. Now what I have described might be a ‘fair’ bargain. Given we agreed it, then, in some sense, it is an efficient one. But not all bargains are fair, and not all are efficient. If manipulation of this sort is okay in the liberal market, what’s wrong with it under liberal democracy? (345)”

There are several ideological critics, and many of them come from the rational choice camp. Udehn, among others, takes exception with Niskanen’s theory of budget maximization, stating that his explanation leaves out far too many variables, most notably voters and political institutions. “Bureaucrats are not discriminating monopolists. Budgets are passed by politicians, elected by citizens. In the end, it is only voters who can decide whether the government spends too much” (Udehn 1996: 201-202). Hettich also finds Niskanen’s exclusion of voters from his model problematic, and Breton and Wintrobe (1975, 1979) submit that the rent-seeking view of bureaucrats assigns too much power to the civil service, and that politicians ultimately want to control the bureaucracy if they wish to be elected (198-204; 213-218, Udehn 1986: 199). In terms of Riker’s condemnation of democratic irrationalism, Gerry Mackie offers possibly the most eloquent attack of Riker in his book *Democracy Defended*, although he offers his criticism at Riker directly and not at rational choice as an enterprise. Hauptmann on the other hand goes further than Mackie and submits that rational choice theory pitted itself against democracy. Hauptmann finds this puzzling given that rational choice theorists support the idea of free individual choice, they also maintain that the expression of that choice in a democratic vote is of so little impact that they end up undermining that whole democratic enterprise altogether (Hauptmann 1996: 4-5). Bruno Frey makes a criticism linking the pseudo-scientific criticism with the ideological one. “In much of public choice a further conclusion has been reached: it is argued that markets are generally superior, and that politics is almost always inferior. However, this conclusion is based more on an ideological presupposition than on analysis, and it certainly does not follow from Political Economy” (Frey 1992: 130).

There has been a link between rational choice theory and pro-market conservatives over the years. During the 1970s and 1980s, these arguments about market superiority provided intellectual ammunition for the emerging neoconservative policy agendas in Britain and the United States America, Australia and New Zealand (Dunleavy & O’Leary, 1987; Self: 1993; Stretton & Orchard 1994). The influence of rational choice theorists at this time was usually exercised via right-wing think tanks such as the Cato Institute in America and the Institute for Economic Affairs in Britain. To a certain degree these think tanks were responsible for the popularization of rational choice theory, at least outside of academic circles (Cockett 1994).

The final criticism, which I call the premise criticism, is the one most commonly levied against rational choice, and is usually made by normative political theorists, psychologists, and sociologists. This criticism takes aim at rational choice theorists for their minimalist views on human psychology and desires, for reducing human reasoning to a crude instrumental rationality, and for conceiving the human being as nothing more than a *homo economicus*. While these voices come from rather diverse camps, they all agree on one point, viz., that rational choice theorists are misplaced in trying to reduce all social and political interactions between individuals to an economic point of view. In other words, they argue that a strict economic lens cannot properly explain all social and political phenomena adequately.

Before looking at these criticisms directly, I will provide a brief summary of the assumptions that the majority of rational choice theorists make when constructing their theoretical models. Rational choice theory assumes that each individual actor acts rationally in order to fulfill his/her self-interest. As Shepsle and Bonchek explain; "We describe the hunches an individual has concerning the efficacy of a given instrument or behaviour for obtaining something he or she wants as that person's *beliefs*. Beliefs connect instruments to outcomes. Acting in accord both with one's preferences and one's beliefs is called *instrumental rationality*" (1997: 18). In other words, individual motivations are instrumental and not intrinsic (Laver 1997: 18). Self-interested utility maximization is usually assumed, but altruism with the perceived self-interested utility of others is possible (Dowding 1991: 18). Rational theorists assume that this calculation occurs whether the actor is aware of it or not. "People make this type of calculation many, many times a day, more or less unconsciously, and they will not think that they are performing a rational calculus" (Laver 1997: 22). Becker makes a similar point. "The economic approach does not assume that decision units are necessarily conscious of their efforts to maximize, or can verbalize or otherwise describe in an informative way the reasons for the systematic patterns in their behaviour" (Becker 1976: 7).

Scuilli outlines three more explicit assumptions made by rational choice theorists. The first assumption is that "actors' subjective interests or desired end are ultimately 'sovereign', both conceptually and in practice" (Scuilli 1992: 162, cf. Brennan and Buchanan 1985, Coleman 1990: 531-532). The second assumption is that "any society's distribution of rights and duties is also given or random" (p. 163). The third, which draws from Adam Smith's theories (Udehn 1996: 94-105), is that "actors' relatively unfettered pursuit of their own preferences is more likely to yield and sustain a benign direction of social change – a stable, liberal democratic society – than any effort to restrain this pursuit with institutionalized norms" (Scuilli 1992: 164).

The purpose of rational choice theory is the development of a "coherent, parsimonious, deductive theory" (Ordeshook 1993: 72). A rational choice theory, and indeed any social scientific theory for that matter, must aim at these three things. It should be *coherent* in the sense that the theory must aim to provide a logically clear and explicit explanation of the phenomena being studied. It should be *parsimonious* in that it must use the least amount of variables possible, and it should be *deductive* in that the conclusions that the theory comes up with must approximate direct causal inferences from its premises as much as possible. As Dowding (1991) explains, rational choice does not aim to answer all the questions that political scientists face. It only has the aim of describing how political interactions and/or institutions work. "It (rational choice) cannot and is not supposed to provide the final or definitive explanation of political behaviour. Rather, rational choice is a way of generating questions about society by

modeling social situations. A model of a social situation is just a description of it” (17). Ultimately, Dowding argues, the success of a rational choice model does not hinge on its assumptions, but rather on how closely the model approximates the real world. “The worth of a model is measured by its structural correspondence to actual conditions, and not by its behavioural assumptions, which can be varied with greater ease” (18).

Premise critics argue that the economic lens that rational choice theorists use does not adequately explain social and political phenomena – other non-economic variables from philosophy, psychology, and sociology are needed. Specifically, they charge that using the economic lens entails making erroneous assumptions about human nature, specifically in their assumptions about human nature being fundamentally individualistic and rational, and thus rational choice theory is unable to explain some nonrational and altruistic motivations to pursuing some political actions. Zey makes a radical form of this charge. As she states, rational choice theory “cannot explain altruism because all human action is seen as motivated by selfish, instrumental rationality. This inability to explain altruism has normative implications. Because RCT (rational choice theory) considers nonrational action to be morally defective, actors judged nonrational must also be judged ethically deficient” (Zey 1998: 66). I should note here that this charge is not a fair one to make against rational choice. Most rational choice theorists admit that there are perfectly valid reasons for why people might not act along instrumentally rational lines, such as joining a protest group even though there are no obvious incentives for doing so. “Individuals, complicated things that they are, are bound to be animated both by the consumption value of a particular behaviour...and its instrumental value (...). To insist on only one of these complementary forms of rationality, and to exclude the other, is to provide but a partial explanation” (Shepsle and Bonchek 1997: 248). Dryzek (2000) argues that rational choice can operate without the assumption of rational egoism, taking an “anything goes” approach to utility. However he argues that the indispensable aspect of rational choice theory as he understands it is the fixed nature of individual preferences (32). Udehn makes a similar claim. “I tend to believe, however, that rational choice is...insufficient for the analysis of sanctioning power. Rational choice typically takes resources, like preferences, as given. But we would like to know why people are unequal in the first place and how it is possible to maintain the equal situation” (Udehn 1996: 162, Munch 1992:140).

Along with criticizing rational choice theorists for their economic assumptions about human nature, premise critics argue that the economic lens cannot adequately explain political phenomena, citing that they are far too complex. Udehn makes the argument from a sociological perspective. “Relations of authority lie outside the scope of rational choice in that it is, by definition, legitimate. Relations of authority include activation of commitments, of normative beliefs, that a command issued by a person in authority ought to be obeyed. This is not a ‘rational choice’, as defined by the methodological approach with this name” (Udehn 1996: 162). Simon submits that rational choice theory should look at psychological variables in order to more adequately explain political actions. “We already have in psychology a substantial body of empirically tested theory about the processes people actually use to make bounded by rational, or ‘reasonable’ decisions. This body of theory asserts that the processes are sensitive to the complexity of decision-making contexts and to learning processes as well” (Simon 1986: 39).

James Bohman (1992) on the other hand argues that rational choice theorists that go down the route of bringing in non-economic variables into their models do so at

their own peril. Doing so according to him means importing variables that contradict their own core assumptions (208). Furthermore, exporting these variables into a rational choice model means aiming at explaining every facet of political behaviour, which is not only absurd but also impossible to achieve (Hardin 1982: 14). Instead, Bohman argues that rational choice theorists should remain in their economic framework, as it is this the only way that rational choice models can yield empirically meaningful results. "Certainly rational choice theory does provide empirically adequate explanations of certain social phenomena. But such explanations are adequate only under precise conditions, and many of the unresolved problems of rational choice theory as a research program result from extending its explanations beyond their proper, restricted scope" (207).

WHAT RATIONAL CHOICE CAN DO: FALSE EXPECTATIONS AND PROPER USE

In essence I wish to argue that a lot of derision made against rational choice is wholly misplaced. Far from being hostile to normative political theory, or a tool of economic enterprise that acts as a competing normative political theory to Rawlsian justice or communitarianism as Zey claims (1998: 66), rational choice theory can serve as a useful tool to normative political theorists in their normative political assessments, as indeed can be the case with any empirical enterprise. As I will argue later, rational choice theory can and should occupy a descriptive space that can compliment the prescriptive plane that normative political theorists work in. I will do this by assessing the three criticisms made against rational choice theory that I have outlined above. In short, I believe that the pseudo-science criticism made by Green and Shapiro is overcritical of rational choice theory. I accept the ideological criticism somewhat, as I admit there were instances of ideological bias among some rational choice theorists. But this does not condemn rational choice as such. This bias also fed into their assumptions about political behaviour, which then led the premise critics to argue that rational choice assumptions about human nature were either flawed or incomplete.

I also submit that that the premise criticism of rational choice is unfounded, or at least became unfounded once rational choice theory began purging itself of its right-wing bias, and at the same time, accepting that there are limits to what rational choice can explain. Rational choice theory in my opinion necessarily adheres to two basic assumptions; 1) utility maximization, and 2) instrumental rationality. I argue that the notion of utility maximization can accommodate notions of altruism as well as individual self-interest, since it is conceivable that individuals can experience increases in utility if they act in a nonselfish manner, i.e., giving money to charity, just as much as they act in a selfish manner. As for the second assumption, instrumental rationality is defined here simply as taking the course of action which will optimally achieve their desired ends in any situation, the choice of ends being given. For these two assumptions to completely hold in a descriptive model, the end must be well defined and the course of action must be understood as directly leading to that end. In the political world, however, this not always be the case.

There are two main points that I want to draw here. The first is that these two assumptions do not necessarily lead to any real ideological conclusion. It should not lead us to believe that markets can never fail, or that government should remain small as Tullock and Buchanan concluded, or that the American model of government is somehow better able to accommodate the liberal interpretation of voting as Riker

concluded¹. It is certainly plausible that descriptive models that satisfy the two assumptions described above can in fact produce the polar opposite of these claims. In order to get to these conclusions described above, other assumptions about human nature had to have been made, specifically rational egoism or understanding humans as a *homo economicus*. But if I am right that non-individualist, nonselfish interests can be accommodated by the assumptions of utility maximization and instrumental rationality, then we must concede that rational choice theory does not necessarily equate a theory that justifies promarket conservatism. It instead seeks, or at least should seek, to explain human behaviour and model it in a way that can be seen as rational; i.e., the actor had a specific and well-defined goal or preference and acted to fulfill that preference. Dealing with how one should act is beginning to step outside the descriptive scope, although there might be times when rational choice theorists may want to do just that. I should also note that rational choice theory should not necessarily lead to left-wing conclusions either, and to reiterate, it is possible to create models that can describe actions that are total ideological opposites. But the standard that rational choice should concern itself with is accurate descriptions of the real world, and the appropriate method to find out if these models correspond somewhat to the real world is through empirical testing.

The second point that I want to make is that I fully agree with premise critics when they say that rational choice theory cannot fully explain all political phenomena. Indeed, we can certainly admit there are times when a rational actor is constrained through nonrational means in following his or her clearly defined desires. As Elster (2000) explains; “The social sciences today, however, cannot offer a formal model of the interaction between rational and nonrational concerns that would allow us to deduce specific implications for behaviour. As mentioned earlier, the idea of modelling emotions as psychic costs and benefits is jejune and superficial” (2000: 692).

Simply put, I agree with Bohman when he says that rational choice models that assume less will have more predictive power than those that assume more, but even the economics lens that focuses on the two assumptions of instrumental rationality and utility maximization may not always be appropriate for explaining the causes of some political phenomena. Elster (2000) uses the harbouring of Jews in the Second World War as an example.

“(N)onrational motivations are important and pervasive. Wars have been lost because soldiers were taught that it was dishonourable to take defensive measures. Analyses of why some individuals harboured Jews in Germany or German-occupied territories during World War II whereas others did not suggest a major factor was that the former were asked by someone to do so. On a rational choice account, this would be a matter of information: To harbour someone, you first have to know about their existence. On an alternative and more plausible account, it is a matter of the emotional difficulty of refusing a face-to-face request” (2000: 694; Dixon 1976: 54-55; Varese and Yaish 1999).

Indeed, it is very difficult not to say impossible to model emotions through an economic lens, and that suggests that there is indeed a limit to what rational choice can adequately explain.

¹ This is not to say that the American model of government is bad or good. But for Riker to draw the conclusion in the final chapter of *Liberalism Against Populism* that somehow the American system of government is better suited to the idea of using elections to throw out leaders than, say the British system of government is a bit shaky to say the least, given his analysis in the previous chapters of the book.

But admitting that rational choice has an explanatory limit does not mean to say that the theory is wholly inappropriate in explaining anything, or that the philosophical, psychological, or sociological lens has more explanatory power. As Johnson (1996) argues, in order for this criticism to hold it must be shown that “critics of rational choice theory possess a catalog of plausible alternative mechanisms - prospective candidates include ‘normative, cultural, psychological and institutional’ factors that are embedded in theories well founded enough empirically and conceptually to sustain such competing hypotheses” (86; Green and Shapiro 1996: 184). If we are to accept that the economic lens is completely inappropriate in explaining why political actors behave the way they do, then those who makes this charge have the onus of convincing others why and how another lens is superior.

I do not believe that a convincing argument can be made along these lines; to do so means firstly completely ignoring the flaws of the other lenses. It secondly means ignoring the advances that rational choice theorists have made in the study of politics. Take voter turnout as an illustration of this point. Rational choice theorists have done a lot of work in voter turnout. Green and Shapiro maintain that voter turnout is an example where it fails empirically (1996: 47; cf. Tullock 1967; Hardin 1982; Brennan and Buchanan 1984; Satz and Ferejohn 1993). Anthony Downs (1957) first elaborated the traditional rational choice understanding of voter turnout. He argued that the costs of voting are high, and that voting does not provide much of an incentive since a single vote is unlikely to affect the outcome of the result. Voting takes “time to register, to discover what parties are running, to deliberate, to go to the polls, and to mark the ballot. Since time is a scarce resource, voting is inherently costly” (Downs 1957: 265; Cunningham 2002: 105). I will not review all the criticisms made against this view of voting, as there are several, so much so that Green and Shapiro conclude that “readers interested in the determinants of voter turnout, in sum, derive little insight from the empirical work in the rational choice tradition” (1996: 68).

I admit that there are problems with this theory. Specifically I believe that it proves too much. If the act of voting is so costly, then we should expect to see voter turnout drop off at a more dramatic scale than it has over the past thirty years. Voter turnout should be 25% or lower, not at 55%. The real question should be; “Why do people vote given the high costs and low incentives?” (Blais 2000). Downs himself was aware of this problem, and argued that voters bore the high cost of voting because it would prevent the breakdown of democracy (Downs 1957; Blais 2000: 3). In other words, people feel a civic duty to vote and close their eyes to the high costs and low incentives of voting. This argument is of course tautologous and unfalsifiable (Blais 2000: 4, see also Barry 1978: 16; Mueller 1989: 351). When voter turnouts are high, then it is due to people following their civic duty. When it is low, then the high costs of voting are to blame.

But to reach the conclusion that Green and Shapiro make is going a bit too far I believe. Before rational choice theory came along, there was general agreement that voting was a rational thing to do and it was part and parcel of what citizens did in a liberal democracy. After all, it was understood that your vote made a difference. After Downs, academics were hard pressed to explain exactly why voting made any rational sense along individualistic lines, and forced them to consider other reasons for why people went to the polls. Civic duty became a focal point in explaining voting behaviour, and there have been debates as to whether civic duty can be modelled along rational choice lines (see Dowding 2006; Parsons 2006). It also seemed to make little sense to justify voting along purely self-interested lines. As Blais (2000) states; “The rational

person should allow more time, resources, and attention to those decisions that have greater implications on her well-being than to those with marginal consequences” (142). Ferejohn and Satz (1996) further point out that the Downsian model argued for the interdependence of strategic voting and voting behaviour and “greatly increased the demands that proposed explanations of either voter or candidate behaviour would have to satisfy” (72). The study of civic duty and strategic voting I believe are real advancements in the study of voting, notwithstanding the limit of this particular model’s explanatory power. Advancements of study and limits of explanatory power I believe are not mutually exclusive. That is to say, a model with limited explanatory power can also make useful theoretical and empirical insights.

RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY AND NORMATIVE POLITICAL THEORY

So far I have said very little about normative political theory. Normative political theory is here defined as the study of politics that choose to focus on normative issues. In other words, it deals in the realm of the “ought” (Elster 1986: 1) and works primarily, but not exclusively, in the realm of values. It should deal in assessing whether certain ideas, actions, or policies, are good or bad, just or unjust, moral or immoral, permissible or impermissible. Zey, as cited above, argues that rational choice theory is a normative theory that exalts selfish individualism as rational, and altruism as irrational. As I noted earlier, we can see how such an argument would place rational choice theory in direct competition with any conception of justice that believes in redistribution or consideration of other interests other than one’s own, mostly notably the theory of justice posited by John Rawls (1971). If we accept this argument, then it seems quite natural for political theorists to rally against a theory that justifies a specific ideology in the guise of rigorous social scientific inquiry.

In the previous section I tried to defend the merits of rational choice theory. I believe that most of the problems and criticisms with certain rational choice theories that arose came from the link between rationalism and promarket conservatism. I agree there has been ideological bias on the part of some rational choice theorists, but this does not mean that we should dismiss rational choice as a viable social scientific enterprise. Indeed, we can observe the work of some rational choice theorists, Jon Elster, Keith Dowding, Gerry Mackie, Adam Pzeworski, and Iain McLean to name a few, who do not exhibit this ideological bias at all in their work. Rational choice theory properly understood can function with the assumptions of utility maximization and instrumental rationality, and aims to come up with explanatory models that correspond as closely to the real world as possible. As I argue above, this understanding does not betray any ideological bias, but instead aims to make descriptive or explanatory statements about political phenomena. Normative political theory on the other hand aims to make prescriptive judgements about the political world. Both aims are quite different from each other, but not necessarily antagonistic to each other. Thus I submit that rational choice theory practiced well allows for a descriptive space in which a mutually beneficial dialogue between normative and rational choice theory can develop, providing normative theorists with sound descriptive models to support their own prescriptive claims. Rational choice theorists can look to normative political theorists to measure their work along normative lines, while normative political theorists can look to rational choice, along with other empirical exercises, to help ground their primarily philosophical work in the real world.

While the two enterprises are distinct, I do not believe that there should be a division of labour between rational choice scholars and normative political theorists. Put simply, one person can do both tasks. I do not wish to say that rational choice theorists should leave the theoretical work to political philosophers, or that normative political philosophers should call in the “number crunchers” when they want to test their theories. What I am simply arguing for here is that there should be recognition that the tasks are different. To use an analogy, alternating between the two disciplines should be seen as simply taking off one hat and putting on another. It is certainly possible for a rational choice theorist to look at his or her own work and examine whether it has any normative significance, or perform some normative assessment of it. And of course normative political theorists often go out and test their theories empirically, and could well decide that the economic assumptions of rational choice serve as the more appropriate lens for their theory. The point that I wish to stress here is that the tasks are separate, and if a political scientist wishes to engage in both tasks then a clear distinction should be maintained, and there should not be a blurring of the two.

On another note, focusing on a descriptive plane also means remaining true to scientific principles as much as possible. That having been said, I think the pseudo-scientific criticism made by Green and Shapiro goes too far in criticizing rational choice. In other words, I think that they raise the scientific bar so high that few if any social scientists could ever meet it. Take for example their argument against *post hoc* theory adjustment. In order for their argument to hold up, there must be some social scientists out there that can come up with a theory, test it, and have the testing support the theory without there being any problems.

We all know that this rarely happens. Often when engaging in empirical work our empirical testing will not support our original theory, so we have to go back and reconsider it. This is fairly common in political science, and rational choice theorists are not the only ones to do it. Johnson (1996) charges that social scientists of other camps experience similar problems. “To take only one prominent example, those who advocate a ‘renaissance’ in survey-based ‘political culture’ research as an alternative to rational choice approaches themselves raise serious doubts about whether their explanatory claims are well founded in either conceptual or empirical terms (87; cf. Eckstein 1988: 790; Inglehart 1988: 1204-1205). Herne and Setala (2004) argue that *post hoc* theory adjustment might be acceptable so long as the adjustment allows for the introduction of new variables. “Although we admit that difficulties in the empirical testing of complex models can emerge, we do not see the prohibition of *post hoc* theory development as a good solution to these problems. Instead, we consider *post hoc* modifications, which introduce new variables to rational choice models, to be an adequate strategy for theory building” (79). They cite Larry Laudan (1977) who argued that post hoc theory adjustment can only be a problem if there exists another model with stronger explanatory power (114; Herne and Setala 2004: 79).

I certainly agree that *post hoc* theory adjustment should not happen in an ideal world, but it does occur with some frequency. If *post hoc* theory adjustment invalidates social research, then few if any work done today in political science would meet the lofty standards of Green and Shapiro. Why just pick on rational choice? Fiorina (1996) makes a similar point that I make here about the practicality of Green and Shapiro’s criticism, and adds that the “collective nature” of the academic world will act as a safeguard against the corruption of the scientific enterprise. As he states; “Any kind of dishonesty,

or even an unintentional but egregious error, is a cardinal sin that threatens one's reputation, if not career" (92).

Green and Shapiro warn about the possibility of poor social scientific inquiry, and I believe that these warnings should be taken seriously. Rational choice theorists should be very careful in practicing *post hoc* theory development, while all the while looking other models that could do a better job of explaining political phenomena. But this warning should not serve as a reason to dispense with rational choice. Quite the contrary, it should serve as a reminder to rational choice theorists that a key component of producing descriptive statements about the political world is respecting the rules of good social science as much as possible. Following this principle as well as steering clear of ideological biases as much as possible, should allow rational choice theory to occupy a descriptive space, from which a dialogue of sorts can occur with normative political theory.

In this paper I have tried to argue against most of the criticisms made against rational choice theory. I believe the pseudo-scientific criticism goes too far in criticizing rational choice theory, and sets a standard that is impossible for most social sciences to achieve, much less rational choice theory. I think the ideological critique has some merit, but is not able to rule out rational choice as a viable social scientific enterprise. I have argued that the premise critique does not warrant a valid critique either, since rational choice I believe functions best without ideological bias, working only with the assumptions of utility maximization and instrumental rationality. If rational choice theory stays along these lines, it can occupy a stronger descriptive space in the study of political science. This will serve as a good compliment to the prescriptive work done by normative political theorists. This will allow the two camps to enter into a mutually beneficial dialogue. Rational choice theorists can benefit from normative political theory since it lets them examine their work through another dimension as it were. Along with modelling how the real world works, normative political theory can examine the question of whether the implications of rational choice models are just, moral, etc. As for rational choice theory aiding normative political theory, I can speak from my personal experience with my own research. I do work in democratic theory, and I can certainly say that rational choice models have helped my understanding of voting turnout and the democratic process. Normative political theorists, myself included, often make statements that are empirically verifiable. Finding empirical studies, some of which use the rational choice framework, that support these statements can help give the work of normative political theorists the ring of veracity as it were. It is harder to argue against a normative statement when it is backed up by empirical analysis. Such a dialogue can only be for the benefit of political science, which after all aims to understand and make sense of the political world at large.

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