

# The Political Context of Collective Action

Power, argumentation and  
democracy

Edited by  
Ricca Edmondson

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## The Political Context of Collective Action

The study of social and popular movements continues to attract great interest, but little is known of political activity which takes place outside of traditional political structures. This volume looks at informal political action which arises when conventional frameworks are in crisis or decline. In such settings the usual expectations about political action may not apply, so what actually goes on?

A specific emphasis on context – in particular the link between power and knowledge and public argumentation in a given setting – is used to trace the development of collective action. Key issues are addressed, such as how informal political collectives come to define their aims, what communication processes take place within them, how far their action responds to that of other political bodies, and how far these processes affect the results of what they do, and how they impact on democratic processes.

Discussion is based around a range of empirical case studies, and we are shown that informal collective action is more widespread and significant than many realise, and that it often occurs in fields which appear to be non-political – as in Swiss neighbourhoods, welfare-state organisations in Holland or within technological research as well as in social movements.

Greatly expanding the scope for research into collective action, this volume will be of profound interest to students and researchers in politics and sociology interested in this important area.

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## Series editor's preface

It goes almost without saying that Collective Action is a crucially important concept in Political Science. Not only because Collective Action occurs and takes place at all levels of politics in any society, but also because it is the basis for understanding the emergence and viability of formal as well as informal types of political action. However, it must be noted that most theories and analysis of types of Collective Action in relation to the working of politics in a democratic society tend to focus almost exclusively on well-established actors in political systems: parties, encompassing interest organizations, special interest groups, trade unions, business associations, etc. These types of socio-political actors are – in particular in liberal democracies – *integrated* into the systems and may well be explained on the basis of, for example, rational choice theories and neo-institutional approaches. Partly, this is a consequence of their being part and parcel of the formal structure of those democracies. Hence, there appears little need to focus on their *external* relations (i.e. outside the political system), since their societal basis (members, voters, supporters, etc.) are formally organized and – almost by definition – regulated by means of the institutional devices that make up such a system. Yet, however valuable these studies and concurrent analyses are, they tend to overlook, or even exclude types of Collective Action and related political action which take place *in* civil society on the meso-level of public life and related types of informal, more or less spontaneous types and forms of Collective Action. In other words: many of the extant approaches to understanding the important linkage between Civil Society and Public Governance appear to neglect a large part of (f)actual *politics in society* and therefore are not capable of understanding how, when and where non-established informally driven and sometimes non-recognized Collective Action occurs and takes place.

This volume in the European Political Science Series is an attempt to fill this apparent gap in the literature. It does not only take issue with existing approaches and concurrent concepts of Collective Action, but it also offers alternative theoretical and methodological insights as well as empirical evidence on the basis of qualitative case analysis. In doing so we can not only learn more about what is going on the *meso*-level in societies regarding



political action and its eventual outcomes, but also about what implications these manifestations of Collective Action have for the use of social power and its ramifications for existing theories on, for instance, processes of democratization and related generation of power resources in civil society.

The crucial point of departure of this collection of essays is that the societal context – specified in terms of cognitive beliefs, cultural features, knowledge and argumentation available to (groups of ) individuals in society – is the foundation for understanding political action. Hence, not only ‘rational’ or ‘routinized’ behaviour is sufficient for explaining various types of Collective Action, but rather the existing ‘room to manoeuvre’ for (groups of ) individuals to actually exert *political action* is what matters.

This line of reasoning is followed and applied in all the contributions to the volume. In Part I the relationship between context and action is elaborated with special attention to its methodological implications. It appears to be important in this respect to pin down the causal mechanisms of political action before investigating the generation of (group)interests and developing power resources. Hence it seems vital to view the relation between context and action as fundamentally interdependent and reciprocal in nature. Therefore empirical evidence is a *conditio sine qua non* to establish the building blocks for analysing the relationships between Collective Action and Political Behaviour within a society.

This approach constitutes the focus of analysis of the contribution in Part II of this volume. The case studies presented here are not primarily intended to inform us about politics in various countries, but rather to demonstrate that fixed concepts of Collective Action in relation to given political contexts need not be conducive to pre-determined outcomes. Rather the opposite appears to be the case if one allows the specific (societal) context to tell the story of (organized) action. The case studies presented demonstrate that related outcomes are in fact *pluri-functional*, i.e. similar actions may well lead to different types of behaviour and, more often than not, to unintended or unexpected outcomes. This observation may then well imply that rules are important, but cannot be considered as the sole causal mechanisms *per se* with respect to Collective Action and political behaviour.

Another lesson the contributors draw from their qualitative case analysis in Part II is that – by employing this type of analysis on the meso-level of observation – it allows for an inspection of what democratic governance really means for those directly involved at that very level. In other words: this type of approach allows for a ‘bottom-up’ perspective on democratic practices and therefore avoids the *macro*-level biases of investigating politics from a ‘top-bottom’ perspective: the former approach demonstrates neatly the dynamics of political *interaction*, whereas the latter tends to (over)emphasize the consequences of *intra-systemic* political interactions.

In Part III of this volume an attempt is made to combine the results of this alternative approach to Collective Action and democratic politics and the results of the empirical evidence from the case studies. Three topics

emerge from this discussion and are subsequently addressed: one, reflections on the *interdependence* of 'local' knowledge and political problem-solving; two, whether or not these processes, i.e. context and action, can be defined in terms of *general* rules; three, the role of knowledge and argumentation in terms of a (genuine) 'public debate' with respect to the generation and exercise of *power resources*. Although, of course, no definitive answers are given, the authors strongly believe that their ideas, evidence and reflections have made clear that approaching political reality from a *contextual* perspective is a promising direction in political science. This appears especially to be the case – so they argue – if such an approach is founded upon qualitative case analysis and discursive techniques.

To conclude: students of political behaviour, and of Collective Action in particular, will benefit from this collection of essays in order to improve their understanding of the role played by social movements and other political actors in the informal world of politics.

Prof. Hans Keman  
Binghamton, USA  
August, 1997

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# Introduction: the context of collective political action

*Ricca Edmondson*

This collection focuses on a type of political action which falls outside conventional patterns: it does not deal with party or governmental politics, but with action which has evolved outside these channels in response to specific aims or needs, uniting participants who would otherwise be dispersed. Political scientists are now devoting increased attention to social and popular movements, but this collection expands the area in which collective political action can be detected. Starting from protest movements, we find that collective action can also be discovered in fields which may appear non-political – such as technological research – and in unexpected aspects of conventional public settings: welfare-state organisations in Holland or neighbourhoods in Swiss cities.

How do informal political collectivities come to define their aims, how far does their action respond to that of other political bodies, what communication processes take place within them, how do these processes affect the results of what they do? The articles in this collection approach such questions specifically by emphasising *context* and its impact on action within it. This approach is necessary, first of all, because of the permeable boundaries characterising informal or unofficial politics. Participants in collective action may be dissatisfied with normal channels – like the anti-poll-tax campaigners examined by Rootes – or no established means may exist for making their views felt – as in the case of the miners' wives' groups studied by Beckwith. Here space must be created for political action where previously none existed, and there are no regulations to constrain interaction between the new collective actors and the political terrain surrounding them. Nor are there conventions to determine where the action itself begins and ends; this can only be established empirically, not a priori. Affected parts of civil society or the media, for example, may form part of the surroundings or part of the movement itself; other political groups may become part of the action or they may not. Collective action as it fluctuates over time, therefore, must be sought in a broad field without pre-set bounds.

The contributors here treat collective political behaviour as the conjoint public action of pluralities of people, action which combines to yield results which could not be accomplished by single individuals alone, and which

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both makes demands on and affects political processes. Collective political action is both commoner and more significant than is often assumed; research developments in ageing policy, or the ways in which civil servants execute government policies, are shown here to have collective aspects not immediately apparent. Interrogating this type of action makes it possible to approach areas of political life which at first appear inchoate, but which in fact form the stuff of everyday politics: what for ordinary participants is the nature of their political world.

The contributors here show that progress in understanding collective political action can be made by using an approach characterisable in terms of the politics of knowledge and argumentation. They trace, for example, how elements of social movements come to be perceived as legitimate or otherwise, how collective problem-solving is approached in different urban neighbourhoods, or how technological research develops differently in national settings with different political priorities. The authors do not set out with a preconceived theory of the relations between knowledge and power; instead they trace avenues of effective power by answering knowledge-related questions about the development of perceptions, aims or tactics. The decidedly empirical approach taken in most of the contributions confirms that the politics of knowledge can be grounded on non-speculative foundations, promising to replace more intuitive aspects of culturalist explanations.

In methodological terms, attention to context widens the frame of reference used in the empirical study of collective political action, emphasising aspects of political action which may be systematically ignored – partly because there is no everyday language in which to describe them. In the cases of neighbourhood politics or the interaction between employment and social service agencies, for instance, effective contexts cannot be inferred from formal regulations but must be sought and defined, and their impacts on participants determined; but participants in collective action themselves often give unclear accounts of its boundaries and appear unconscious of its precise relations to its surroundings. Hyvärinen's study of the Finnish student movement, in particular, shows that the knowledge bound up in collective action may be so much part of its setting that action and context are intrinsically interrelated. These aspects of collective behaviour cannot be elicited by straightforward questioning alone but require intensive empirical investigation.

From a normative point of view, it is significant that collective action often arises from discontent with conventional politics; it may involve impacts on public life undertaken by groups of people without officially representative roles, or whose roles have effects different from those formally intended. This must have an impact on the working of democratic politics. Either actors are aiming to alter the course of public affairs by bypassing established modes of decision-making and resource-allocation, or this is an unintended side-effect of their behaviour. Chapters in this volume describe

attempts to broaden public participation in environmental policy-making, citizens' groups supporting the rights of people living on polluted ground, or organisations of the unemployed. The collective actors in these cases are aiming to enhance the democratisation of contemporary societies; and it is precisely because of its normative standing as a potential source for redemocratising society, as well as because of the range of its public impact, that unconventional collective action is attracting increasing interest from political scientists. But, as Foweraker notes, collective political participation should not be seen as a unitary phenomenon, inevitably praiseworthy. We need to know more about the generation and results of collective behaviour if we are to understand under what conditions it contributes to the intensification of democracy and when it might do the reverse.

Since collective political action is intimately related to its settings, diffuse rather than tidily organised and packaged, it has much to indicate about the workings of politics which are democratic in the non-normative sense of being associated with 'grassroots' activity. But democratisation may also be understood to include developing the opportunities open to informal political collectivities; here the normative status of any particular case of collective action cannot be assessed until we know more about how to trace concealed or unnoticed patterns of power which develop within collective groups, and until we can render visible those influential patterns of opinion which at present remain implicit and taken for granted by the actors concerned. The campaigners for miners or for the unemployed described here, for instance, develop different solutions to problems as their interaction with changing contexts progresses; we need a better understanding of the factors affecting these pragmatics of public life.

The chapters in this collection, all focusing on political behaviour which mediates between official political arenas and the politics of everyday, begin with Beckwith's account of a women's organisation in support of the British miners' strikes culminating in the early 1990s. Her analysis shows that movement action is not directed by discrete, identifiable decisions about what should be done, but evolves and changes as its setting does. Concerned with the development and effects of social movement 'standing' as groups achieve recognition as political actors, Beckwith shows that political, social and historical contexts shape the legitimacy accorded to aspirants to action. Protagonists' own expectations and strategies (how do they conceptualise themselves as political actors? what are they aiming for?) are shaped by the terrain they enter, then shape that terrain in return – although within limits, as Beckwith demonstrates. The 'knowledge' involved in the evolution of a movement, this implies, is not an isolated cognitive phenomenon, independent of the world to which it is applied. It is shaped by structures of power – by what it is practically possible to perceive and to believe within the changing, fluid contexts in which action takes place.

Hyvärinen's work on the Finnish students' movement extends this approach. He deals with strategies, expectations and beliefs, items relatively



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familiar to political science, and augments them by considering the public roles of hope, optimism, fear and disillusionment. These should not be dismissed as private, psychological phenomena; they are on occasion intrinsic to political action, and their effects can be traced without subjectivism. Moreover, these elements may derive in part from the context of political action: informal political action and its context may be inextricably blended. 'Knowledge', in this sense, does not inhabit an exclusively cognitive sphere, but it is itself a constitutive part of human political interaction.

Gorges investigates action which might initially appear fundamentally individual and anything but political: the development of technological research knowledge. Even in this least likely case, action is shown to be both collective and subject to political processes exercised within the contexts where it develops. This implies that other types of knowledge will also be more collective in nature and less purely cognitive than might have been assumed, and gives further grounds for objecting to models of action which conceptualise strategy and choice in clear-cut, decisionist terms.

Next, Foweraker shows why not only political action but also the *analysis* of political action must be examined in context; the knowledge of political scientists itself is heavily shaped by the political contexts in which they live and work. Theorists based in Western Europe and America are led by what Hyvärinen would call their own 'expectational horizons' to press social movement behaviour in other settings into theories formed on the assumption that defects in Western political contexts are decisive for movement activity. This omits to recall that taken-for-granted aspects of this background are both desperately aspired to in places such as South America and possibly more threatened in the West than is commonly acknowledged; and it distorts theorists' ability even to perceive collective action which occurs in patterns they do not expect. Ironically, Foweraker also points to South American cases where some of the prerequisites of resource mobilisation theory (Olson 1965) are satisfied in ordinary political life rather than purely in the abstract. In repressive political contexts, the assumption that political actors will routinely possess intelligible motives for public action is transformed from an artificial assumption to an everyday probability; its over-rationalised conceptualisation of human action is expunged in settings where the mass of people do have good grounds for resentment, and their decisions whether and how to take action really are primarily instrumental.

In different ways, then, all these four chapters identify real connections between knowledge and argument, political action and context; moreover, there is nothing about the connections traced here which suggests that they are rigidly limited to the world of unconventional politics. These findings have implications for political action overall, suggesting that effective patterns of knowledge and power may be located in contexts broader than those which formal channels indicate. In methodological terms, the accounts provided here of relations between political behaviour and its contexts both rule out rational-choice analyses (cf. Ward 1995) and, by tracing intelligible

regularities without attributing 'rules' to actors, bypass neo-institutionalist ones (cf. e.g. March and Olsen 1989).

It is consistent with this line of reasoning that the contributions in Part II should cast doubt on forms of political analysis which treat 'context' in terms of discrete, dichotomous variables. Hyvärinen suggests that parts of this approach are simply unnecessary; Rootes and Aarts both show that much is also mistaken, since sweeping characterisations of entire political arenas obliterate crucial variations in resources and political power, as well as distinctions between what is genuinely structural and what is not. As Rootes points out, even in situations where, within a given timespan, aspects of setting such as institutional rules may be regarded as relatively stable, informal practices associated with them often are not, and these may be decisive in influencing action. To understand politics we need to know what happens in real cases; to the extent that collective political action is not precast in terms of standard analytical expectations, it forces attention on the empirical world and enables us to notice where dichotomies fail to hold.

Rootes makes explicit what the preceding chapters imply: much systematisation about collective action has been premature. 'Political opportunity structures', he argues (in opposition to Kitschelt 1986), frequently are not really structures at all; the metaphor is misleading. Much that shapes political possibilities is 'essentially contingent and in practice relatively unstable'; dimensions such as 'openness' and 'closure' do not apply consistently across political systems, and cannot be used to predict when collective action will occur. Instead, the responsiveness of established political élites to collective action varies, and collective actors' knowledge, their perceptions and evaluations, have significant effects. The impact of political contexts on collective actors is mediated by their evaluations both of themselves and of others; their beliefs and values may constrain them from seizing opportunities or stimulate them to create new ones. The forms taken by collective action, therefore, cannot be deduced from impacts of structures on the one hand or contingencies on the other. They are shaped, in ways which change over time, by actors' beliefs and values as well as by the availability to them of particular political repertoires.

Everyday life in late modernity recurrently involves the common defence of their interests by citizens with no regular involvement in 'conventional' politics, and Aarts draws attention here to the salience of 'valence issues', where knowledge has a special status. In such cases, the situation to be attained commands wide agreement – purity of the environment, for instance – but knowledge of the means to attain it is violently debated, and collective access to the knowledge in question may also be disputed. Aarts is dealing with action taken by people affected by a common catastrophe – polluted ground in housing areas – making demands on the political sphere in order to deal with it. He tests expectations about the formation and subsequent action of protest groups, derived from such sources as collective action theory in the Olsonian tradition and the theory of 'political

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opportunity structures'. These approaches, Aarts demonstrates, generate expectations about collective political action which this selection of cases disconfirms. He shows that groups' interaction with context may on occasion be crucially important – but not in ways which theories put forward by Olson and others would suggest. Size and resources lacked their promised predictive value for his cases, and 'left-wing' parties were no more anxious than others to assist environmental protesters. Theoretical work on the impact of context on collective action, moreover, tends to focus on features of the overall political structure: whether, for example, it is inclusive or exclusive. Aarts exhibits a contrary case, where the tactics of the *group* seems to have determined those adopted in the *setting*, rather than the other way round.

Rootes argues that abandoning preoccupation with (often non-existent) structures does not imply that we cannot begin to understand informal political action, and the work of van Leeuwen *et al.*, Royall and Joye concurs. Their chapters show that different forms of the activation of knowledge – argumentation, in effect – can be traced as key elements connecting a context and the collective action within it. At a time when hitherto dominant political frameworks, such as those provided by welfare states, are in crisis or decline, collective forms of behaviour respond to public problems in different ways: adapting to adjustments in the social services in Holland, attempting to defend the interests of the unemployed in France and Ireland, crystallising local forms of problem-solving in Switzerland.

Van Leeuwen *et al.*, contrasting practices in employment and social services in three Dutch cities, show that even institutions are influenced by self-concepts derived in part from their contexts. The authors trace government organisations' reactions to policy directives; interaction between these collectivities can produce outcomes different from what the directives would predict, according to local contingencies encouraging different perceptions and conventions to prevail. The authors track developments in these self-concepts empirically, charting differences in their effects. Their work underlines the need in political analysis to recognise the significance of collectively produced new meanings, responsive to their political settings, with fluid boundaries and uncertain futures.

Investigating movements of the unemployed which seem similar until their contexts are taken into account, Royall shows that the problem of organising the unemployed has different pragmatics in different settings. Collective action of the unemployed in France has remained fragmented and uncoordinated in comparison with that in Ireland, where it has attained wider range and more stability. Royall sees differences in political context between the two cases as pivotal for their different developmental trajectories. Similarly, Joye's analyses of settings within cities – neighbourhoods – expose regularities of mixed political, social and cultural form, which make it likely that certain types of problem will be solved efficiently in one setting

and others elsewhere. As both these chapters show, knowledge as expressed in collective problem-solving is crucially context-related.

Like van Leeuwen *et al.* in relation to institutions, Joye emphasises that contexts cannot be straightforwardly identified; to determine the bounds and impact of an effective context it is necessary to investigate empirically what activities occur over given regions, and how they are related to their settings. Contexts may be indicated partly by participants' cognitive maps, and partly by the activation of various sources of power; but these are not necessarily conceptualised distinctly by those concerned. Further to this, Joye's own discriminations between regional contexts bring to light their capacities to facilitate or inhibit solving types of neighbourhood problem. He argues that they facilitate or inhibit in a probabilistic, not a deterministic manner: they make room for some approaches and make others more difficult, illuminating or obscuring different types of issue.

This highlights investigation of connections between knowledge, public policy and democracy. Running throughout these chapters is the aim of discovering how knowledge and context affect collectivities' capacities for participating in ordering aspects of their own societies. The recurrence of this theme in this volume implies assent to the Habermasian claim that knowledge is not simply neutral but necessarily based on some interest – here, an intendedly emancipatory one. This does not entail accepting the division of knowledge into domains in which separate interests prevail; many of the contributions in this book indicate scepticism about rigid conceptual divisions among public spheres. But for the authors here, investigating the interaction between political action and context repeatedly returns to a key aspect: the way knowledge functions as argument in the political world.

Fischer, again in relation to environmental questions, brings the relation between knowledge and the collective activity of political argument directly to bear on the question of democracy. Are the principles of collective, democratic participation in public decisions becoming outmoded in the 'knowledge society', making way for a politics of expertise? Resoundingly rejecting this option, Fisher explores attempts, derived from environmental movements in particular, to build on the collective nature of knowledge itself in collaborative processes of 'popular epidemiology'. These processes are practical forms of researching contexts in such a way as to locate individuals' problems within the logic of their everyday lives. 'Experts', rather than assembling discrete pieces of evidence and diagnosing problems with technical solutions, support participants in conceptualising and exploring their own arguments. This is a method which contextualises the resulting assessments of risk themselves. Through such approaches to knowledge, Fischer argues, both collective democratic decisions and scientific method can be revitalised together.

Schmalz-Bruns extends this concern with the normative character of the demands made by sensitivity to context. If policy analysis is intrinsically

connected with the search for genuinely democratic forms of living, then responding to the effects of contextuality demands a thorough reconstruction of contemporary political institutions, centring on questions about the nature of the public and how to ensure unrestricted access to public dialogue. Such a reconstruction might meet stipulations about democracy which have been made from the beginning of this century onwards, for example by the Pragmatist school; but Schmalz-Bruns shows that these stipulations are so difficult to satisfy that the pursuit of democracy in contemporary societies poses a challenge of intimidating proportions.

The *Gestalt*-switch in this collection distances analysis from decisionist tendencies in conceptualising political action; rather than isolating the action, it highlights the grounding around that action, utilising some approaches more familiar in sociology. This is an approach necessary to the study of informal politics, whose connections with context are particularly strong, but it also draws attention to the impact of context on political action in general. There is an urgent need for systematic empirical accounts of the contextual dynamics of fluid, developing political journeys. It is not enough to recognise the role of context by conceptualising it in terms of interacting variables, where individuals and groups are conceived of on a billiard-ball model: the interactions concerned are more like compounds than like mixtures. Nor, on the other hand, will it suffice to treat 'culture' or 'tradition' as 'black boxes' whose influence on action is appreciated rather than analysed: hence the empirical approach in the cases investigated here.

Exploring the possibilities to which this text draws attention requires an approach which can remain systematic while dealing with data which refuse to be so. Edmondson and Nullmeier, beginning from the question of the role of knowledge in political life, suggest a methodology for political analysis as well as a model of political action systematically related to questions of argumentation and power. In line with the evidence put forward in other chapters, the model specifies that political actors need to be understood as interdependent with their contexts, and it provides an approach to analysing political communicative action in these terms. It is also consistent with the evidence in this volume that Edmondson and Nullmeier emphasise that political phenomena are heavily influenced by the actors' own knowledge-related contributions. The political and sociological examination of knowledge, therefore, should not concentrate simply on unmasking manipulation, but should explore how the sociopolitical shaping of knowledge underlies processes of political communication – and how political processes in turn affect what is taken to be knowledge. In order to analyse the deployment of modes of knowledge-organisation within particular terrains, a model of action is needed which both takes systematic account of the ways in which power and politics permeate communication and permits open-mindedness towards the empirical exploration of this field.

Edmondson and Nullmeier therefore employ an Aristotelian rhetorical model whose conception of action presents knowledge as inextricably linked

to place, time, culture and setting – but which does not legislate in advance about the discursive forms these links must take. The cases in this collection show that knowledge and power can take effect without being easily traceable via discourses identified by clear linguistic markers; their analytical categories often need to accommodate the ‘fuzziness’ of empirical data on collective action. A rhetorical approach is designed to respond to these features analytically, as well as to facilitate the search for procedures enhancing constructive forms of collective political action.

In terms of theory construction, while the contributions in this book are closer to neo-institutionalism than to rational choice theory, they eschew the neo-institutionalist emphasis on rules as analytical devices. Behavioural regularities in the political world are often casually ascribed to rules; but the strictures raised by Rootes apply here too. Like ‘structures’, ‘rules’ demand sceptical empirical examination. The usefulness of a notion is degraded when it is too widely applied, and the analyses offered in this collection are able to make sense of the unofficial political world without emphasising ‘rules’ at all. On the contrary, problems which appear similar if we concentrate on their initial descriptions – how to begin an environmental movement or how to enhance participatory democracy in an urban setting – do not seem so similar when their contexts are taken into account, casting doubt on the transferability of ‘rules’ in real-life political contexts. Instead, argumentational analysis offers a more flexible and context-sensitive approach to reconstructing patterns of public behaviour in practice.

To place them in a broader theoretical setting, the approaches taken in this volume are compatible with the Aristotelian suggestion that political knowledge should be seen as intrinsic to interaction rather than separate from it, and with much that is characteristic of Pragmatist writers. Their emphasis on the contextuality of knowledge and their opposition to ready-made, misleadingly clear-cut solutions relinquish abstraction and control as defining features of knowledge. Like Aristotelian rhetoric, Pragmatism declines to search for certainty; both are differentiated from post-modernism in refusing to deny that some beliefs can be considerably better or worse founded than others, even though the criteria used in reaching such judgements go beyond those of nomothetic philosophies of science. This volume’s emphasis on contexts for collective action concurs in dispensing with deep dichotomies between knowledge and value, logic and experience, and in exploring the development of grounded knowledge as a co-operative enterprise.

An instance may be taken in Gorges’ study of how ‘the state of knowledge’ at any given time not only varies between sociopolitical and economic contexts, but varies as a result of collective interactions on intellectual, sociopolitical and economic levels. Technical knowledge itself, like aspiring social movements, can acquire or be denied ‘standing’ in a setting made up of changing markets and local and national political systems and economies, so that what is accepted as known in a given place, at a given

time, is crucially influenced by its context. Even in technological terms, the world looks different from the vantage-points of different settings, and this can be tracked in empirical detail.

The approaches taken here have implications for the conceptualisation of knowledge itself: not framing it in over-rational terms, nor discussing it over-speculatively. One dominant view of knowledge in the West tends to concentrate on its manifestations in the public world, evading reference to subjective aspects of intentions and expectations. The most positive elements in this tendency owe much to the influence of philosophers such as Austin (1955), whose interest was in practices and performances rather than rules, and Ryle (1949), who stressed that many 'internal' states are noticed by their bearers by means of the same behavioural observations outsiders use. Ryle's approach is in turn essential to ethnographers such as Geertz (1973), whose study of cultural knowledge locates it firmly in the public sphere, in effect downgrading the analytical relevance of subjective experiences. Hyvärinen's meso-level approach provides a corrective to *exclusive* concentration on what happens in public; like Mannheim (1936), he emphasises that subjective cognitive elements can also form part of public politics. Horizons of expectations or attitudes of mind are subjectively experienced and derive their power from the force of their subjective impressions – but they originate in public constellations and influence them in return.

An emphasis on meso-level interaction clears the way for future empirical analyses of how cultures and traditions affect collective action: not in ways which are irrational and in the end inscrutable, as Weber would have had it, nor in modes which are as immovable and external as Durkheim made it appear. Hence, much that is important in the politics of effective knowledge can be learned from what is done by, and what happens to, collectivities taking part in informal politics. Contexts' effects on action can be understood by tracing ways in which the action is disputed and discussed; argumentation between collective actors highlights what, within a particular collective context, it works to say, what is accepted as reasonable and practical politics in one setting as opposed to the next. Thus patterned elements in different contexts may be analysed and their significance assessed. Collective action is shaped within shared settings which have evolved subject to changing constellations of power, themselves operating on local, national and supranational levels moving out from the action itself, and fluctuating at different rates in time.

Such characterisations of context tell us *where to look* for explanations of collective action; but they do not invite us to generalise too hastily about how collective action arises. There is much still to be discovered about how political action takes place in informal areas of public life: empirical research still has much to explore in terms of how collective opinion takes shape and takes effect. Fields of public life such as those investigated here exhibit a wide range of attempts at involvement in politics by unofficial groups or in unofficial ways, but we do not know enough about how these

attempts take place and develop over time, nor about how their normative aspects arise. This argues for a return to analysing the connections between argumentation, power and politics as concerned with the good life for collectivities of human beings; it displays a strong affinity with the classical origins of discourse on politics as well as attempting to respond to pressing contemporary needs. The blurred but fruitful arena of collective political action will be a productive field for discovery.

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