

7-11-1997

The "As Ifs" of Political Psychology

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Recommended Citation

Editor (1997) "The "As Ifs" of Political Psychology," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 11 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol2/iss11/2>

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International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: The "As Ifs" of Political Psychology

Author: Editor

Volume: 2

Issue: 11

Date: 1997-07-11

Keywords: Political Psychology, Postmodernism

Abstract. This paper describes different concepts of "as if" that are basic to political psychology for descriptive and inferential analysis.

As with most formal and lay sciences, the most common political psychological analyses develop, coin, and employ concepts to describe and make inferences about politics. Are these concepts valuable? Only as they are useful in nurturing (a) meaning about events--outside or inside people--that are otherwise without meaning and (b) shared meaning among those who employ these concepts. The meaning nurtured often comprises perceptual and interpretive forms, figure-ground pairings, patterns, signs, symbols, explanations, causes, and other attributions. In essence, concepts help create a semantic universe "as if" this universe had some sort of reality divorced from the concepts that create it. Conflating concepts and reality is often termed "hypostatization"--the reification of concepts that may have absolutely no ontological validity. Giving a sort of holiness through faith to that which may not even exist outside of faith--subverting the "as if" for "is"--is a scientific blasphemy that destroys the essence of "as if" and of most common approaches to science. Most postmodernist analyses of science have been successful at illustrating these basic points but harmful in positing cultural relativisms and nihilisms as more valid epistemological perspectives. It is "as if" relativism and nihilism more closely correspond to an ultimate reality--even when the very concept of ultimate reality is ridiculed and jettisoned by postmodernists! And by posing "as if" scientific endeavors are at best Sisyphean, if not fraught with ignorance, postmodernists may actually be strengthening scientific pursuits--especially in the social sciences like political psychology.

Within the "as if" of political psychology as a discipline, there are other "as ifs" worthy of note. The "as if" of Vaclav Havel is a psychological tool of coping and adaptation in totalitarian and other noxious environments. By acting within limits "as if" there is more personal and collective freedom than formally allowed, one cannot only lead a freer life through exploiting gaps in policy making, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating by the authorities but also best facilitate dynamics for desired change on and throughout the environment.

There is the "as if" of individuals who play at revolution as opposed to committing to it, e.g., some United States (US) New Leftists of the late 1960s, some Latin American and European intellectuals who attempted to aid the Cuban Revolution and its consolidation in the late 1950s and 1960s, or in a different way labor-union card-carrying members of the US Communist Party soon after its formation and throughout the Cold War. By acting as if they are revolutionaries, they feel better about themselves--creating and nurturing images of themselves in fantasy and protecting these images from outsiders through extensive ego investment in other players and the few coins of positive and negative reinforcement thrown to them as "chump change" by actual revolutionaries, counterrevolutionaries, double and triple agents, and others who exploit them.

There is the "as if" of individuals who can be many different types of people and play many different roles at different times in different situations. The same physical person may be many different psychological and social ones--revolutionary, counterrevolutionary, humane, brutal, charismatic,

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schizoid, the New Man and the common man. These chameleons may be accurately diagnosed as manifesting traits of an antisocial personality disorder but not necessarily possessing an alleged learning or conditioning anomaly so often posited for subgroups with the diagnosis. More often, however, the "as if" is the essence of the personality--the "as if" is.

There is the "as if" of individuals who are clinically "acting out" (in the psychodynamic sense) an intrapsychic conflict on the external, political stage. These "as ifs" are still best described in Lasswell's seminal *Psychopathology and the Politics*. The problem--threat and opportunity--for their colleagues, allies, adversaries, followers, and leaders is that these "as ifs" are perhaps more a prisoner of their internal psychological dynamics than the usual external cues that often can be used to reinforce, punish, model, mediate, moderate, and otherwise condition behavior.

Although still other "as ifs" can be profitably described, this article will end with the "as if" of learning from history. As posited by Neustadt and May among many others, the "as if" comprises choices in matching elements of the past with the present and future and in differentiating commonalities and unique aspects of stories that have been passed down, are being passed down, and have yet to be initiated. Who learns what, is doomed to repeat what, and most importantly what what is, are timeless concerns... "as if" they matter. So, too, the "as ifs" of political psychology need to be further explored, "as if" they matter. (See Havel, V. (1986.) *The power of the powerless*. In *Living in truth*. Boston, MA: Faber and Faber; Lasswell, H. (1930.) *Psychopathology and politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Neustadt, R. E., & May, E. R. (1986.) *Thinking in time*. New York: The Free Press; Sebek, M. (1996.) *The fate of the totalitarian object*. *International Forum of Psychoanalysis*, 5, 289-294.) (Keywords: Political Psychology, Postmodernism.)