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The Role of Judgment in Explanations of Politics

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As citizens, we recognize that judgment is an essential feature of political life.¹ Many of our daily political conversations, and much of what we read, hear and see in the media, involve this form of reasoning. We contemplate our aims, interests and ends, and how we might realize them. We also assess the judgments of others, both those who rule us as well as the multitude that comprise the governed, since our capacity to achieve our purposes partly turns on the actions of other human agents. A few contemporary examples make this self-evident:

History tells us that the current US-led attempt to stabilize Afghanistan will fail. Afghanistan is the graveyard of empires.

It was the widespread ideological belief of many officials in the Treasury and the Federal Reserve in the efficiency of markets – not the greed of large investment banks – that created systemic risks in the American financial system and ignited the Great Recession.

The willingness of the Democrats to pass healthcare reform in Congress through the reconciliation process, despite widespread opposition to the bill, was a shambling political spectacle. Worse, by using this controversial legislative maneuver, it represented a betrayal of democracy.

As these statements indicate, a variety of considerations inform our judgments. They range from the moral to the political, legal and historical, even the aesthetic. Moreover, our personal evaluations can vary considerably, sometimes tremendously. We could disagree with any of the preceding views and reach a different conclusion. Nevertheless, we would still grant that political judgment matters.

As scholars, however, we largely fail to study the workings of judgment in politics. Eminent philosophers, and recent students of political theory and intellectual history, have sought to define political judgment, explore its relation to other concepts and assess its

¹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, in August 2008, annual conference of the American Political Science Association in Toronto in September 2009, and MA Seminar in the politics department at the New School for Social Research in October 2009. I have greatly benefited from questions, criticisms and suggestions offered by numerous friends and colleagues, including Arjun Appadurai, Lopa Banerjee, Richard Bernstein, Rajeev Bhargava, Patchen Markell, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Tanni Mukhopadhyay, Philip Oldenburg, Gareth Owen, Timothy Pachirat, Torrey Shanks and Yogendra Yadav. I acknowledge more specific debts in the text. Any errors that remain are solely mine.

significance for politics in general. However, few of them, if any, systematically attempt to explain real world phenomena. Conversely, scholars of comparative politics and international relations – those who empirically investigate real world politics – largely ignore the role of judgment in their analyses. This is an odd state of affairs given the ubiquity of judgment in our political lives.

What explains this intellectual neglect? What are the ramifications of taking political judgment seriously for the types of inquiry we pursue as political scientists? Finally, what are the consequences of such disregard for the quality of our political judgment, as scholars and as citizens?

This essay addresses these critical questions. The first section attempts to define political judgment. I suggest that political judgment is a form of practical reasoning that prioritizes human action, entails our imperfect capacity to grasp the actual causal relations of a world, and attempts to discern the foreseeable consequences of our decisions. This definition draws on the insights of many classical thinkers and contemporary scholars from various intellectual traditions, from Aristotle and Arendt to Machiavelli and Weber. Yet it owes much to a tradition of realism in Western political thought that begins with Thucydides, runs through Machiavelli, Weber and Lenin, and finds recent articulation in political theorists as diverse as Isaiah Berlin and John Dunn.² In particular, I argue that a realist conception of political judgment helps to clarify its distinguishing characteristics vis-à-

² In several respects this realist approach provides a counterpoint to another powerful school of thought, inspired by Aristotle and more selectively by Kant, which gives equal standing to ethical considerations in political judgment. Recent and contemporary scholars influenced by this tradition include Hans-Georg Gadamer, Hannah Arendt, Alasdair MacIntyre, Richard Bernstein, Ronald Beiner, Seyla Benhabib and Linda Zerilli. Needless to say, there are important differences amongst these thinkers, reflected in the diversity of their purposes, arguments and conclusions. Nonetheless, I believe they bear a family resemblance to each other. In varying ways they all emphasize the ethical foundations of politics, focus on the significance of deliberation within a community for reaching collective agreements, and advance a vision of what an ethical politics would entail. In these respects, they differ from political realists. However, a recent attempt to marry the views of Aristotle and Thucydides, so to speak, is the work of Bent Flyvbjerg.

vis other evaluative considerations that bear on politics, particularly moral judgment and historical judgment. The next section of the paper discusses the intellectual prerequisites of good political judgment. It identifies five necessary features: its deep contextualism, practical focus, conditional strategic orientation, synthetic vision and dispassionate spirit. These traits constitute a cognitive disposition that stands against styles of inquiry that privilege universal, theoretical, rationalistic, analytical and value-neutral political explanations. I suggest that such a style of inquiry continues to dominate many spheres of contemporary political science. The third section considers the conditions in which political judgment matters. It examines three general arguments: its absolute necessity in everyday political life, general irrelevance over the long *durée* and particular salience during critical historical conjunctures. I contend that political judgment demonstrates its relevance most in unstable circumstances, yet always matters. The last part of the paper examines the relationship between judgment and explanation in politics, exploring the varying role of political judgment in dominant methodological approaches in contemporary political science. In particular, it examines the various explanatory approaches that differentiate large-N statistical analyses (such as covering laws, quantitative inferential models and nested research designs), small-N comparative research (including macro-analytic historical sociology and systematic process tracing) and micro-level case studies (such as rational choice histories and phronetic social research). In general, I argue that the failure of nomothetic theoretical accounts to take political judgment seriously limits their explanations of politics. Significantly, it also mars their ability to improve the quality of our political judgment. Conversely, in-depth case studies and mid-range comparative analyses that mine deep contextual knowledge, elucidate causal processes and countenance the possibility that diverse causal relations govern the

world are more likely to perceive the role of judgment in explaining political outcomes. As a result, they are more likely to improve our ability to judge well.

1. The distinctiveness of political judgment

What is political judgment? First and foremost, it is a distinct form of knowledge. It seeks to grasp “what is really going on” at a particular historical moment.³ To judge politically is to seek to understand the values, interests and relations of power that characterize a specific place at a given time. Significantly, it is a form of knowledge that presumes a reality – physical as well as social – whose existence is partly independent of us.

Some will oppose the notion of an independently existing reality on two grounds. The first is that our perception of reality is mediated by representations of it. Facts do not speak for themselves: they are laden with theory. Moreover, the facts of the world are subject to multiple true descriptions.⁴ The second objection is that our beliefs, intentions and actions partly constitute the social world.⁵ Interpretivists rightly insist that we must focus on the self-understandings of real social actors and the meaning they attach to their actions. These meanings help to create our reality. To the extent that they are widely and deeply shared, we must take them seriously, in order to understand what is happening in a given place and how to act in it. Indeed, pure constructivists might say social reality is wholly constituted by human agency; post-modernists that our discourses shape the reality to which they refer. Self-fulfilling prophecies – situations in which an initial belief, either

³ See Charles Taylor, “Interpretation and the sciences of man,” in idem, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: philosophical papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 15-57.

⁴ Ian Shapiro, “Problems, theories and methods in the study of politics, or what’s wrong with political science and what to do about it,” *Political Theory*, 30, 4 (August 2002): 596-619.

⁵ See Taylor, “Interpretation and the sciences of man,” op. cit.; Alasdair McIntyre, “Is a comparative science of politics possible?” in Peter Laslett, W.G. Runciman and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society, 4th series* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), pp. 8-26.

mistaken or partial, encourages social behavior that makes the former come true – demonstrate these insights powerfully.

Yet we can acknowledge the self-reflexivity of human agents and ‘plasticity of society’, as Unger puts it, without abandoning the idea of an independently existing reality.⁶ On the one hand, the fact that multiple true descriptions of the world exist does not mean they are equally compelling at a single point in time. To say that our beliefs, concepts and theories of the world influence our perceptions does not imply that our grasp of reality ought to be determined by these constructions. We may be wrong or deluded. Indeed, the fact that we make political mistakes – by misperceiving, misapprehending or misconstruing a situation – makes this self-evident. Put differently, to give up on the idea of an independently existing reality either renders the idea that we can ‘misjudge’ a situation meaningless, or implies that we never misjudge. But we do, all too frequently. On the other, our success in shaping the world in light of our desires depends on the will, capacity and fortune of any single agent or group, for the “skills of a political agent . . . have always to be deployed in a field of forces that is partly set by others”.⁷ Securing our preferred outcomes turns on far more than our intentions. Even if we have perfect comprehension of a given political situation, we may simply lack sufficient power to control events. Structures do exist and recur.⁸ The gap between our desire and capacity to shape the world is very well captured by Przeworski:

But what is a mistake? The very probability of committing mistakes presupposes simultaneously a political project, some choice among strategies, and objective conditions that are independent with regard to a particular movement. If the strategy of a party is uniquely determined, then the notion of ‘mistakes’ is meaningless: the party can only pursue the inevitable. . . . [The] notion of mistakes is also rendered meaningless within the context of a

⁶ Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *Politics: a work of constructive social theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁷ Geoffrey Hawthorn, *Plausible Worlds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 31.

⁸ Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005), pp. 127-131.

radically voluntaristic understanding of historical possibilities . . . [but] if everything is always possible, then only motives explain the course of history. For an error is a relation between projects and conditions; mistakes are possible if and only if some strategies are ineffective in advancing the realization of a given project under existing conditions while other strategies would have advanced it under the same conditions. If everything is possible, then the choice of strategy is only a matter of will . . . ‘betrayal’ is indeed the proper way of understanding . . . strategies in a world free of objective constraints. But accusations of betrayal are not particularly illuminating in the real world.⁹

Thus the idea of political judgment must ultimately rest on the critical realist notion that human agents inhabit a world that is only partly shaped by their beliefs, purposes and actions. We must assess the possibilities and limits of the world in terms of our relative capacities to alter their balance.

Second, political judgment is a form of reasoning oriented towards action, not contemplation. The emphasis on action highlights the purposive nature of political judgment. For Aristotle, to judge well in politics was to focus on conduct.¹⁰ Lenin’s question – what is to be done? – captures its imperative. This is not to undervalue the importance of careful rigorous deliberation or the need to consider a variety of possibilities before taking a decision; on the contrary. Good political actors weigh their options. Recklessness and imprudence are poor ingredients for long-term success in any sphere of life, let alone politics. Indeed, good political actors show an ability to get things done.¹¹ Nor does an appreciation of the imperative to act necessarily imply that we must prioritize the actions of politicians in order to study political judgment. It is true that many students of judgment – especially political realists such as Thucydides, Machiavelli and Weber – focus on the prerequisites of strong political leadership. Moreover, there is a strong tendency in the realist tradition to study the judgments of individual political leaders amidst situations of

⁹ Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 1-2.

¹⁰ Whether Aristotle valued practical life more than philosophical contemplation remains much debated. For example, see D.S. Hutchinson, “Ethics,” in Jonathan Barnes (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 195-232.

¹¹ Isaiah Berlin, “Political judgment,” in *The Sense of Reality: studies in ideas and their history*, edited by Henry Hardy (London: Pimlico, 1997), p. 40.

crisis, war and revolution – bluntly, to study ‘great men’. There are arguably good reasons for this affinity.¹² But the need to judge in politics – as elites or subalterns, citizens or subjects, rulers or the governed – affects us all.

Third, political judgment involves an assessment of what it is possible to do in a given historical situation. Grasping the possibilities of politics implies an understanding of causality: how the immensely complex array of actors, decisions and structures that constitute the world generate specific outcomes. Causal models vary, of course. They encompass statements of correlation (‘if A, then B’), simple causal structures (‘X leads to Y’), a counterfactual understanding of causation (where saying that ‘X causes Y’ explicitly implies that Y would not have occurred without X),¹³ sophisticated causal mechanisms (‘X produces Y through A, B and C’), reciprocal interaction effects (where X causes Y which in turn causes X) complex contingent causality (where X produces Y in A but leads to Z in B, i.e. processes of equifinality, or where X¹ causes Y in A and X² causes Y in B, i.e. processes of multifinality)¹⁴ and multiple conjunctural causation (“when conditions A, B and C are present, X causes Y; however, if any one of these conditions . . . is absent, and X is also absent, then Z causes Y”).¹⁵

The relationship between political judgment and the causal relations of the world, frequently linked to the idea that political science can be modeled on the natural sciences,

¹² These reasons include the importance of leadership in crisis, war and revolution; the difficulty of judging in such circumstances; the fact that these conditions enable us to see its quality more acutely than we otherwise would. That said, not every political realist emphasizes the realm of high politics. A prominent example is John Dunn, *The Cunning of Unreason: making sense of politics* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000).

¹³ Counterfactual reasoning creates difficulties for assessing the validity of our theoretical explanations, indeed, for the possibility of theory itself in the human sciences. Sympathetic critics reply that it generates problems of bias that are hard to resolve and implies a deterministic mono-causal view of the world. On the former, see Hawthorn, *Plausible Worlds*, op. cit; on the latter, see Adam Przeworski, “Institutions matter?” *Government and Opposition*, 39, 2 (2004): 527-540, and George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, pp. 230-232.

¹⁴ George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, p. 145.

¹⁵ Charles C. Ragin, “Turning the tables: how case-oriented research challenges variable-oriented research”, in Henry E. Brady and David Collier (eds.), *Rethinking Social Inquiry: diverse tools, shared standards* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Ltd., 2004), p. 134.

continues to generate heated debate. Several distinguished critics of positivism, such as Wolin, stress that political knowledge is ‘allusive’ and ‘intimative’.¹⁶ It is not reducible to laws of action. Nor is our knowledge of politics explicit and direct, or easy to communicate or impart, in terms of practice. Skilled political actors, like experts generally, possess tacit knowledge.¹⁷ Indeed, according to Bernstein, the mistaken belief that we can model human affairs on the natural sciences betrays our “Cartesian anxiety”.¹⁸

These powerful criticisms highlight the centrality of judgment and difficulty of accumulating hard-won knowledge in politics. Nevertheless, it remains the case that “knowing how” to do something requires “knowing that” the world has certain distinguishing properties, whether this is a “structure of meaning and truth”¹⁹, social forces that reflect material conditions and historical tendencies, or some other set of factors:

Objective conditions constitute at each moment the structure of choice: the structure within which actors deliberate upon goals, perceive alternatives, evaluate them, choose courses of action, and pursue them to create new conditions.²⁰

We can reject the notion that invariant laws determine social life, and retain the view that human agency itself helps to shape the future, and still accept the causal nature of the world.

In addition, in assessing the possibilities of politics we must consider our chances of success in probabilistic terms, as opposed to what is possible in principle. This is not to subscribe to determinism, champion political timidity or prohibit the exercise of imagination; far from it. After all, a political genius is an actor that brings into being a previously unknown or seemingly impossible reality. But acts of genius are rare. What is possible in principle, in a world that might be different, is not necessarily in practice. Determining that

¹⁶ Quoted in Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: science, hermeneutics and praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), p. 45.

¹⁷ For example, see Bent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter: why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 9-24.

¹⁸ See *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, op. cit.

¹⁹ See Peter Steinberger, *Political Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 281-304.

²⁰ Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy*, p. 3.

possibility in the here and now in itself requires astute political judgment.²¹ Thus our sense of possibility demands an awareness of what it would take to realize our intentions and an appraisal of our capacities for doing so.

Lastly, to judge politically entails an assessment of the foreseeable consequences of action, as Weber claimed.²² Reasoning about consequences is relevant to many human domains. What distinguishes such considerations in politics is that actors must evaluate the likelihood of multiple possible futures at the moment of decision, with partial knowledge, under various conditions of uncertainty.²³ We must grasp the real motives, capacities and propensities of other social actors (and sometimes even our own); the impact of rules, institutions and practices that define the political arena; and the effect produced by the interaction of all these factors with larger causal forces in the social world. Notwithstanding heroic models of rationality, our capacity to comprehend the world varies immensely both amongst ourselves and over time. Indeed, according to Machiavelli, fortune governs one half of our political lives.²⁴ It is for this reason that politics consists of unintended consequences. It is an exceptionally demanding realm of human action whose causes and ramifications are difficult to grasp entirely.

The preceding description of political judgment shares a number of attributes with moral judgment and historical judgment. It is dissimilar from both in crucial ways, however. On the one hand, both moral judgment and political judgment are species of practical reason. What differentiates political judgment from its moral counterpart, however, is the

²¹ John Dunn, "Unger's Politics and the appraisal of political possibility," in idem, *Interpreting Political Responsibility: essays 1981-1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 170-175.

²² Max Weber, "The profession and vocation of politics," in *Weber: Political Writings*, edited by Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 309-69.

²³ The title of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation current affairs show, "As It Happens", could be a motto for analyses of judgment in politics.

²⁴ "I am disposed to hold that fortune is the arbiter of half our actions, but that it lets us control roughly the other half": Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, edited by Quentin Skinner and Russell Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 85.

equal weight, relative priority or absolute primacy given to the character of intentionality in accounts of the latter. Notwithstanding utilitarians or other consequentialists, in the realm of morality we often seek to evaluate the goodness, purity or rightness of action, either in itself or because of its underlying motives. Consequences frequently matter in such reasoning, of course, but less than our intentions; sometimes, not at all. The following saying conveys this sentiment well: ‘It was the right thing to do, despite the consequences’. This contrasts strongly with the view that judgments in politics must give greater priority to the consequences of action. Hence political realists often retort: ‘The road to hell is paved with good intentions’.²⁵ It explains why Weber insisted that politics required an ethic of responsibility for the consequences of action.

Realism in politics does not necessarily push us towards crude means-end instrumentality or permanent amoral conduct. Weber himself declared that only someone with a passion for a cause, for which they assumed personal responsibility, had a vocation for politics.²⁶ The opposite of a mature political leader was a machine politician or a political amateur – a man without a soul.²⁷ The fact that citizens in various polities expect their representatives to resign in certain situations – if they fail to lead their party to power or cause a bad policy outcome due to their poor personal performance – invokes this norm of responsibility. Moreover, at some point we must forsake the calculus of instrumentality and

²⁵ A middle position is provided by Aristotle, whose notion of good conduct fuses ethical values and political ends: “An incontinent or wicked person will achieve by means of his calculations the end that he sets before him, and will therefore be in the position of having deliberated correctly – and secured something very detrimental. But the outcome of successful deliberation is generally assumed to be something good [ethically and objectively]”. Or put differently: “[It] is evident that one cannot be prudent without being good”, merely “clever”. See *The Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by J.A.K. Thomson, revised with notes and appendices by Hugh Tredennick, with an introduction and bibliography by Jonathan Barnes (New York: Penguin, 1976), Book 6, II42b12-31 and II44a25-b10.

²⁶ The third component was judgment itself, which Weber defined as “. . . the ability to maintain one’s inner composure and calm while being receptive to realities, in other words distance from things and people”. See “The profession and vocation of politics,” p. 353.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

be willing to suffer political defeat for the sake of our beliefs. Indeed, Weber's invocation of Luther's maxim – 'Here I stand, I can no other' – demonstrated his commitment to a politics of integrity in the final instance.²⁸ Commentators note a similar ethical tension in that other great realist of modern politics, Machiavelli, who defended the immorality of cunning, duplicity and violence in order to create a sovereign republic of free citizens.²⁹ Even Isaiah Berlin, who stressed the dangers of utopianism in politics, recognized the importance of visionaries in enabling transformative historical acts.³⁰ Finally, as discussed previously, it is clear that intentions shape consequences to varying degrees, even if they only rarely determine them completely. Inversely, unintended consequences are more likely to happen when our intentions are poorly examined. For example, the violent social disorder that followed the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 reflected the relative indifference of the Bush administration towards the welfare of its citizens. It also forced those who had ostensibly supported the invasion on grounds that it would greatly improve the life chances and political rights of ordinary Iraqis to re-appraise the quality of and reasons for their earlier political judgments.³¹

²⁸ Ibid, p. 367.

²⁹ For example, see Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner and Maurizio Viroli (eds.), *Machiavelli and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

³⁰ In particular, Berlin attributed the creation of Israel, which he defended, to the adept political leadership of Chaim Weizmann as well as the fantastic visionary zeal of Theodor Herzl. See Isaiah Berlin, "Chaim Weizmann's leadership" in *The Power of Ideas*, edited by Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 186-194. The fact that Berlin neglected the historical and moral claims of Palestinians in doing so, however, is no small irony. When it came to Israel, Berlin was a hedgehog, a cognitive temperament that he famously criticized for being unable to grasp the complex political realities of the world. For a very unusual critique of Berlin from this point of view, see Edward Said, "Isaiah Berlin: an afterthought," in his *The End of the Peace Process* (London: Granta Books, 2002), pp. 216–22.

³¹ For example, see Michael Ignatieff, "Getting Iraq wrong," *New York Times Magazine*, 5 August 2007. The failure of Ignatieff to credit his critics for foreseeing the consequences of invasion, by characterizing their opposition as 'ideological', unfortunately mars his attempt to accept personal responsibility and understand why he was mistaken. For a more in-depth analysis of the havoc played by self-delusion and cynicism in the invasion of Iraq, see David Runciman, *The Politics of Good Intentions: history, fear and hypocrisy in the new world order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

Nevertheless, our political judgments must ultimately emphasize the consequences of our proposed actions. The quality of our intentions matters, but considered alone they neither provide sufficient grounds for justifying political decisions, nor can they guarantee the efficacy of our actions. Ultimately, we must concede that it is possible for someone to exercise good political judgment – regarding their grasp of how the world operates and how to achieve their preferred ends – without fine moral intentions or even through clearly immoral means. This neither fully justifies such judgments nor protects them from severe ethical criticism. Conflating the crux of political judgment with that of moral judgment, however, serves to obscure the significance of both.

On the other hand, political judgment differs from historical judgment, but for quite different reasons. Both appraise consequences. The tendency to compare different situations, and ascertain what is peculiar about each, is also a shared feature. Lastly, in varying degrees historical knowledge either should or does inform political judgment, for the past may heavily shape the possibilities of the future. To not recognize this fact, or refuse its potential significance, is to court political danger. As a Russian proverb warns: Those who focus on the past are blind in one eye; those who forget it are blind in both.

Yet several important differences remain between these two forms of judgment. First, we make political judgments prospectively. In contrast, historical assessments are fundamentally retrospective.³² They come after the fact, with the benefit of hindsight, as

³² Not every theorist of political judgment characterizes it in this way. The most important exception is Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, edited and with an interpretative essay by Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 3-85. On the one hand, as Bernstein demonstrates, Arendt addressed the judgment of actors as well as spectators. On the other, she emphasized that “judgment” primarily concerns the past. It was “a mere preparation to willing”, the faculty oriented towards action and the future (p. 3). Moreover, given that political actors suffer from incomplete knowledge, only spectators can arrive at a satisfactory judgment. As Arendt states: “... only the spectator occupies a position that enables him to see the whole; the actor, because he is part of the play, must enact his part – he is partial by definition. The spectator is impartial by definition – no part is assigned to him. The spectator is impartial by definition – no part is assigned to him. Hence, withdrawal from direct involvement to a standpoint outside the game is a

information comes to light and previously unknown consequences transpire. Second, as a result judgments of the past tend to involve the assessment of consequences that were foreseen, foreseeable and unforeseeable at an earlier historical moment.³³ In contrast, political judgments only concern what was foreseen and foreseeable. We can praise a political agent for grasping an issue on both these grounds, or criticize them for not doing so.³⁴ But we cannot hold them accountable for what was unforeseeable when they acted. Hence we can exercise good political judgment yet still fail.³⁵ Third, our judgments of the past and of the future are both provisional, but in dissimilar ways. Historical judgments are indeterminate because they keep playing out into the future. When asked by a Western reporter about the consequences of the French Revolution, the Chinese leader Zhou Enlai apparently replied, ‘It is too early to tell’. Political judgments are provisional in a different sense. They are conjectures of the future made at a point in time, once, in various conditions of uncertainty. In politics, we often try to make up for poor earlier judgments. We can respond to the consequences of our previous actions by engaging in counterfactuals

condition *sine qua non* of all judgment” (p. 55). Hence for Arendt the historian embodied the ideal of judgment: “If judgment is our faculty for dealing with the past, the historian is the inquiring man who by relating it sits in judgment over it” (p. 3). If this is a valid interpretation of her argument, however, it raises two significant problems. First, it strangely assumes the impartiality of spectators. Second, it evades the principal question for most students of political judgment: how we – as actors, with partial knowledge, facing the future – should act in the world. See further discussion, see Richard J. Bernstein, “Judging – the actor and the spectator,” in *idem*, *Philosophical Profiles: essays in a pragmatic mode* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), pp. 221-237; Ronald Beiner, “Hannah Arendt on judging,” in *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, op. cit., pp. 89-156; and the collection of essays in Ronald Beiner and Jennifer Nedelsky (eds.), *Judgment, Imagination and Politics: themes from Kant and Arendt* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001).

³³ Or, as former US defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld put it, ‘known knowns’ (the foreseen) and ‘unknown unknowns’ (the unforeseeable). It is revealing that Rumsfeld’s notion of ‘known unknowns’ does not easily translate into ‘the foreseeable’. In any event, the failure of his military strategy to stabilize Iraq and the disastrous wider consequences of the decision to invade expose his terrible political misjudgments and those of the Bush administration more widely.

³⁴ As the management theorist Peter Drucker apparently once said: ‘I never predict. I simply look out the window and see what is visible but not yet seen.’ Stefan Stern, “Drucker’s ideas stand the test of time,” *Financial Times*, 23 November 2009.

³⁵ Ancient Athenian democracy apparently held individuals responsible for outcomes they could not have foreseen, however. See Jon Elster, “Accountability in Athenian politics,” in Bernard Manin, Adam Przeworski and Susan C. Stokes (eds.), *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 253-278.

to formulate new goals, tactics and strategies. But these subsequent appraisals cannot undo our previous decisions. We have to live with them. Nor can we easily recreate – some would say we never can – their original conditions. Thus we cannot recast our prior judgment, merely judge again, only hopefully better.³⁶

To summarize: political judgment concerns our ability to grasp the actual causal relations that shape a given historical situation. It is a form of understanding that presumes a reality that exists partly independent of us. As a faculty, it demands that we prospectively grasp the opportunities, possibilities and limits of the world, and our capacity to alter their balance, in order to realize our respective ends. Judgments in politics require us to consider our purposes, strategies and actions by weighing their likely consequences.

2. The intellectual prerequisites of good political judgment

What constitutes good political judgment? To some extent, the preceding discussion suggests two possible answers. Both are straightforward. On the one hand, good political judgment involves getting it right: the capacity of an actor to succeed in politics because they grasp how it works. On the other, we might invoke a folk wisdom: good political judgment consists in knowing what we can change, what we cannot, and to know the difference.

Hawthorn synthesizes the fusion of traits that it requires:

There is no great mystery in the formidable set of qualities, personal and political, that good political judgment demands: a clear purpose and a practical view of what has to be done to realise it; an achievable idea of how to command the power and resources to succeed, including a sensitivity to the views and likely strength of those who might support one and those who might not; a sense of how and when to tell the truth, varnish it, lie or be silent; confidence, courage, patience and a good sense of timing; the capacity to imagine the next move but one and the choices that this can present; and what, all along, might go wrong.³⁷

³⁶ For an insightful discussion of the provisional nature of political judgment of a significant historical actor, see Sunil Khilnani, “Nehru’s judgment,” in Raymond Guess and Richard Bourke (eds.), *Political Judgment: essays for John Dunn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

³⁷ Geoffrey Hawthorn, “Pericles’ unreason,” in Guess and Bourke, *Political Judgment*, op. cit.

Still, what enables some political actors to possess such practical knowledge remains elusive. It appears to be a gift of intuition, know-how and character that some human beings enjoy but which most of us strive to acquire.³⁸ Indeed, Machiavelli believed that it comprised “an ability only given to the few”.³⁹ Moreover, the ultimate horizon of good political judgment is debatable as well.⁴⁰ For some, it comprises survival, implying prudence. Aristotle claimed that politics should aim for a morally virtuous life. Machiavelli encouraged rulers to seek glory. Despite their differences, however, both counseled their readers to avoid rash decisions: Aristotle because the reckless were boasters and pretenders to courage and failed to recognize that some things should be feared;⁴¹ Machiavelli since men were “fickle, ungrateful, feigners and dissemblers” and because war was inevitable.⁴² For others, the standard of good political judgment is much higher, culminating in dramatic social transformation. Amongst classical theorists of judgment, Lenin exemplifies this supreme aspiration in his desire to create an emancipated society, even if his political revolution failed to do so.⁴³

That said, most students of political judgment acknowledge that it is a distinct faculty of knowledge, reasoning and understanding. Hence we are compelled to ask a more specific

³⁸ Berlin, “Political Judgment”.

³⁹ *The Prince*, p. 51.

⁴⁰ I thank Gareth Owen for pressing me to consider the following distinction.

⁴¹ *The Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 129, III5b19-III6a6. That said, Aristotle advised that “anyone who is aiming for the mean [e.g. courage] should keep away from the extreme which is more contrary to the mean” [e.g. cowardice] . . . “notice the errors into which we ourselves are liable to fall . . . and drag ourselves in the contrary direction” . . . and “in every situation . . . guard especially against pleasure and pleasant things, because we are not impartial judges of pleasure” (p. 109, II09a25-b15).

⁴² *The Prince*, p. 59. That said, Machiavelli proclaimed: “I certainly think that it is better to be impetuous than cautious, because fortune is a woman, and if you want to control her, it is necessary to treat her roughly” (p. 87). For a powerful feminist critique of Machiavelli, see Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Fortune is a Woman: gender and politics in the thought of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

⁴³ As Kaviraj notes, the fact that Lenin achieved a political revolution by toppling an oppressive Tsarist regime must be distinguished from his failure to create genuine democratic socialism in Russia. See Sudipta Kaviraj, “Marxism in translation: critical reflections on Indian radical thought,” in Geuss and Bourke, *Political Judgment*, op. cit.

question: what intellectual qualities enable good political judgment?⁴⁴ I wish to suggest that good political judgment has the following related characteristics of the mind: namely, its deep contextualism, practical focus, conditional strategic orientation, synthetic vision and dispassionate spirit. Suffice to say, good political judgment may exhibit other important characteristics. Yet these attributes, while perhaps insufficient, appear necessary. Let me elaborate.

First, good political judgment requires a focus on particulars, as opposed to general principles or universal truths. To judge well in politics requires an actor to possess deep contextual knowledge of the situation they face, of what exactly is going on at a specific time in a certain place, in order to act successfully. This claim is relatively uncontroversial. Indeed, it is widely shared by theorists of judgment that otherwise strongly disagree on the constitution of political judgment and its relation to moral values, aesthetic considerations, legal reasoning and historical understanding, not to mention power itself. For Aristotle, to act virtuously is to aim for the mean, to avoid the vices of excess or deficiency. But it is precisely the variance of the world that makes it difficult to do so:

[It] is a difficult business to be good; because in any given case it is difficult to find the midpoint – for instance, not everyone can find the centre of a circle; only the man who knows how. So too it is easy to get angry – anyone can do that – or to give and spend money; but to feel or act towards the right person to the right extent at the right time for the right reason in the right way – that is not easy, and it is not everyone that can do it. Hence to do these things well is a rare, laudable and fine achievement.⁴⁵

Similarly, Machiavelli claimed that context determined conduct.⁴⁶ In *State and Revolution*,

Lenin cited the theoretical postulates of Marx and Engels chapter and verse to explain the

⁴⁴ In this essay, I leave aside the question of the personal qualities good political judgment demands.

⁴⁵ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, pp. 108-109.

⁴⁶ For example: “Because Pertinax and Alexander were new rulers, it was useless and harmful for them to act like Marcus, who was a hereditary ruler. Likewise, it was harmful for Caracalla, Commodus and Maximus to act like Severus, because they lacked the ability required to follow in his footsteps,” *The Prince*, p. 71. That said, Machiavelli is unusual amongst classical theorists of political judgment. On the one hand, he offers several political maxims that are general in scope: “... anyone who enables another to become powerful, brings about

inevitability of socialism and how it would be achieved.⁴⁷ Yet during his own attempt to foment radical change, in the period between the February and October revolutions in 1917, he stressed the primacy of practice, experience, adaptability, timing and the concrete.⁴⁸

According to Berlin, this is because

In the realm of political action, laws are far and few indeed . . . [success in politics] requires grasp[ing] the unique combination of characteristics that constitute this particular situation – this and no other . . . a kind of almost sensuous contact with the relevant data.

Berlin famously suggested that skilled political actors are like foxes, which know many little things about the world. Moreover, the facts of the world often lie in conflict. In contrast, hedgehogs, which see everything through the prism of an overarching idea that explains all, fare less well in the political world.⁴⁹ According to Berlin, general causal theories, universal moral truths and strict rule-following are unlikely to contribute to good political judgment because they fail to discriminate what is unusual, different or specific about a situation. To be sure, we might disagree with Berlin's insistence that every historical situation is unique, that no two events or circumstances are sufficiently alike in terms of how they came to be vis-à-vis some political outcome we wish to understand. To believe so is to question the

his own ruin..." (p. 14); "...experience has shown that only rulers and republics that possess their own armies are very successful, whereas mercenary armies never achieve anything, and cause only harm..." (p. 44); "... it is perfectly possible to be feared without incurring hatred. And this can always be achieved if [a prince] refrains from laying hands on the property of his citizens and subjects, and on their womenfolk." (p. 59); "... a shrewd man will always follow the methods of remarkable men, and imitate those who have been outstanding, so that, even if he does not succeed in matching their ability, at least he will get within sniffing distance of it." (p. 19); "There is an infallible way for a ruler to weigh up a minister. If you realize that he is thinking more about his own affairs than about yours, and that all his actions are designed to further his own interests, he will never make a good minister, and you can never trust him." (p. 80). Ultimately, however, Machiavelli concluded that "... we are successful when our ways are suited to the times and circumstances, and unsuccessful when they are not . . . one does not find men so prudent that they are capable of being sufficiently flexible" (pp. 85-86).

⁴⁷ See V.I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, translated and edited with an introduction by Robert Service (New York: Penguin Classics, 1992).

⁴⁸ See V.I. Lenin, *Revolutions at the Gates: a selection of writings from February to October 1917*, edited and with an introduction and afterword by Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2004).

⁴⁹ See Isaiah Berlin, "The hedgehog and the fox," in *The Proper Study of Mankind: an anthology of essays*, edited by Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer, with a foreword by Noel Annan and an introduction by Roger Hausheer (London: Pimlico, 1998), pp. 436-498. For a revealing psychological study that largely vindicates Berlin's thesis, see Philip E. Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment: how good is it? how can we know?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

possibility of a social science, however conceived. Yet it seems reasonable to claim that to act intelligently in politics requires that we know how to maximize our chances of success. Such an aptitude “resists simplification into deductive principles”.⁵⁰

Second, good political judgment is practical. Again, this is a widely professed trait. A skilled political actor has an understanding of ‘what will work’: to see a political situation “in terms of what you or others can or will do to them, and what they can or will do to others or to you”.⁵¹ The practical aspect of judging well has been formulated in various ways. Aristotle defines it as *phronesis*: practical wisdom, or prudence. It is a form of reasoning oriented towards conduct, which “has its sphere in particular circumstances”.⁵² James Scott calls it *mētis*: a form of “cunning” that reflects “a wide array of practical skills and acquired intelligence in responding to a continually changing natural and human environment”.⁵³ Raymond Geuss describes political actors as *bricoleurs*: agents that use a variety of tools, conceptual and practical, to make their way in the world.⁵⁴ Granted, these various formulations suggest important differences. Yet they all point to the practical common sense that politics demands. What unites them, in short, is their pragmatism.

Some might contend that defining good political judgment as practical is tautological – it is a form of practical reason. Yet the rationale for emphasizing this dimension is that many of our political choices are decidedly impractical. The average politician frequently sees the world, like many individuals, through their own personal generalizations;⁵⁵ military generals are often criticized for fighting the last war; famous economic theoreticians

⁵⁰ Scott, *Seeing like a State*, p. 316.

⁵¹ Berlin, “Political judgment,” p. 46.

⁵² The *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 6, II41b8-27.

⁵³ Scott, *Seeing like a State*, p. 313.

⁵⁴ Raymond Geuss, *History and Illusion in Politics*, p. 160.

⁵⁵ Runciman, *The Politics of Good Intentions*, pp. 82 and 90.

frequently fail to forecast well.⁵⁶ The reasons may be many: the influence of grand theoretical models, elusive moral visions, outdated historical analogies. Whatever their cause, however, they ignore the real possibilities of the present.

We can grasp the distinctiveness of judgment-as-practicality by contrasting it with other forms of knowledge. On the one hand, it is different from *episteme*, scientific knowledge that is universal, theoretical and abstract.⁵⁷ Good political judgment may be guided or shaped by such knowledge. Indeed it would be hard to ascertain what is specific or peculiar about a state of affairs or set of circumstances without a sense of what is general or normal.⁵⁸ But the context-independent character of *episteme*, its claim to knowledge that is invariant to time and space, means it cannot determine how we should act. It can merely shape it, for better or worse, depending on our precise circumstances. Theoretical fixation is as hazardous to our capacity for good political judgment as mindless empiricism. Nor is epistemic knowledge focused on practicality. Hence our tendency to criticize an unworkable suggestion by saying that it is ‘an academic point’ – it is unhelpful, it is irrelevant, it is beside the point.⁵⁹

On the other hand, judgment differs from *techne*, which refers to the skills of craftsmanship. As it implies, *techne* involves the application of applying techniques, technology and technical knowledge in the production of various concrete goods. Unlike

⁵⁶ Reportedly, the late Paul Samuelson, widely hailed as a masterful economic theorist for devising concepts like ‘revealed preference’, the Stolper-Samuelson model, and many other foundational neoclassical ideas, was wildly erratic in predicting the course of the US economy. Arguably, he was aware of the practical limits of his theoretical prowess, having once said: ‘We are like highly trained athletes who never run a race’. *Financial Times*, 14 December 2009.

⁵⁷ Aristotle describes scientific knowledge as ‘eternal’, ‘teachable’ (by induction or deduction) and ‘demonstrable’. See *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 6, II39b18-36. Arendt claimed more generally that thinking “deals with the invisibles in all experience and always tends to generalize”, while judgment dealt with particulars and was “much closer to the world of appearances”. See her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, p. 3.

⁵⁸ I thank Richard Bernstein for stressing this point to me.

⁵⁹ As Aristotle noted long ago, “That is why some people who do not possess theoretical knowledge are more effective in action (especially if they are experienced) than others who do possess it”. *The Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 213, Book 6, II41b8-27.

epistemic knowledge, it has a practical orientation in two senses. Like political judgment, it is purposive. It is also a form of knowledge that is acquired, embodied and developed through performance and repetition. A practical skill is difficult to teach, and impossible to perfect, in the abstract. According to Arendt, the faculty of judgment is a mental capacity that cannot be taught, because it “has nothing in common with logical operations” that characterize theoretical reflection.⁶⁰ As Aristotle said: ‘We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit’. Or more colloquially: ‘practice makes perfect’.⁶¹ Thus it is unsurprising that many believe experience, while not sufficient, is crucial for the development of good political judgment.⁶² What distinguishes the latter from *techné*, however, is that it demands far greater contextual awareness. “Knowing when and how to apply rules of thumb in a concrete situation”, claims Scott, “is the essence of *mētis*”⁶³ – and good political judgment in general, we might add. More importantly, to judge politically requires us to address ethical or moral questions, even if we seek to differentiate the former from the latter when making political decisions. To practice *techné* does not.

Third, good political judgment requires a form of understanding that is synthetic, a fusion of all the information relevant to the task at hand. According to Berlin, it “requires a capacity for taking in the total pattern of a human situation, of the way in which things hang together”.⁶⁴ Put differently, to judge well requires acting with ‘all things considered’: the

⁶⁰ *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, p. 3.

⁶¹ Scott, *Seeing like a State*, p. 316.

⁶² The question of experience is often put to young candidates or relative newcomers to a profession. For most observers, it is essential. For some, it even trumps other factors (Aristotle seems to endorse this view in Book 10 of *The Nicomachean Ethics*). Yet to valorize experience in itself, without examining its relationship to other factors that enable good judgment, is contestable too. Both John McCain and Hilary Clinton had more political experience than Barack Obama, yet many would agree that the latter exercised better strategic acumen in the Democratic Party primaries and US presidential election in 2008. As Obama put it, his rivals’ political experiences led to unfortunate political decisions in many arenas. Whether Obama has exercised good political judgment since becoming president is another question.

⁶³ Scott, *Seeing like a State*, p. 316.

⁶⁴ Berlin, “Political judgment,” p. 50.

facts, opportunities and constraints that constitute a set of circumstances; the range of claims, values and interests that different actors wish to advance; and the ramifications of pursuing different strategies, tactics and decisions. This willingness and capacity to synthesize, to see the woods from the trees, is a form of generalization. Yet generalizations take various forms: universal theoretical claims, averages, and compositions.⁶⁵ In contrast to the deductive, systematic and internally consistent knowledge of hedgehogs, which tends towards universality, the kind of synthesis necessary for good political judgment is compositional. It requires an appreciation of the facts of a case that make it distinctive, which may be relevant for understanding its dynamics, but that might not add up in a coherent overarching manner.⁶⁶ It is a form of knowledge that faces the contradictions of the world squarely.

This differentiates it from much scientific inquiry. As political scientists, we frequently examine the impact of a particular idea, interest or institution in isolation of other ideas, interests and institutions, in order to see its full logic. Hence the question: ‘what is the impact of X, *ceteris paribus*?’ This assumption or disclaimer, of ‘other things being equal’, is common in many academic inquiries. Yet *ceteris* is often not *paribus*, as Gerring notes. Knowing when it is not requires a grasp of the particularities of the case in question in relation to a wider sample and population of cases.⁶⁷

Fourth, good political judgment evinces strategic acumen. As said previously, to assess the opportunities and constraints of a given situation requires a consideration of the intentions, capacities and actions of other social actors in conditions marked by uncertainty.

⁶⁵ For further discussion, see Kaviraj, “Marxism in translation,” op. cit.

⁶⁶ Scott makes a similar claim when describing synoptic knowledge as ‘simplified’: a form of knowledge that is standardized and parsimonious and ignores contextual details that might be relevant for understanding how something functions. See *Seeing like a State*, pp. 80-81.

⁶⁷ John Gerring, “What is a case study and what is it good for?” *American Political Science Review* 98, 2 (May 2004): 341-354.

These conditions include brute factual uncertainty about states of affairs; higher-order uncertainty about the necessity and cost of resolving such factual uncertainty; indecision over what to do given the possibility of multiple plausible outcomes; doubts caused by asymmetric information between the main agents; and inadequate causal understanding of how the political world operates.⁶⁸ Thus, even though we often imply that ‘miscalculating’ is synonymous with ‘misjudging’, to judge is not to calculate, strictly speaking.

Indeed, instrumental rationality exhibits several crucial differences from a realist notion of political judgment. Political calculation implies that we can assign risk in statistical terms to different strategies choices.⁶⁹ This is a basic assumption in many rational choice theories, which assume a stable political environment in which the main protagonists of politics are utility-maximizing actors, who possess rationally formed beliefs, desires and preferences, as well as a complete understanding of the consequences of different courses of action.⁷⁰ Yet these assumptions fail to hold in many political circumstances. Indeed, skeptics would argue they rarely obtain in arduous physical circumstances and complex social environments (where the interaction of many variable factors is hard to forecast accurately),⁷¹ or over extended time horizons (given the limited ability of political actors to

⁶⁸ See Jon Elster, “Rational choice history,” *American Political Science Review* 94, 3 (September 2000): 685-95.

⁶⁹ Scott, *Seeing like a State*, p. 327.

⁷⁰ According to Elster, rational action presumes an “optimizing relationship” between desires, beliefs and preferences: “The action should be the best way of satisfying the agent’s desires, given his beliefs. Moreover, we must demand that these desires and beliefs themselves be rational. At the very least, they must be internally consistent. With respect to beliefs we must also impose a more substantive requirement of rationality: they should be optimally related to the evidence available to the agent. In forming their beliefs, the agents should consider all and only the relevant evidence, with no element being unduly weighted. As a logical extension of this requirement, we also demand that the collection of evidence itself be subject to the canons of rationality. The efficacy of action may be destroyed both by gathering too little evidence and by gathering too much. The optimal amount of evidence is partly determined by our desires. (In the case of more important decisions it is rational to collect more evidence.) Partly it is determined by our prior beliefs about the likely cost, quality and relevance of various types of evidence.” Jon Elster, “The possibility of rational politics,” in David Held (ed.), *Political Theory Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 117.

⁷¹ Scott, *Seeing like a State*, p. 327.

engage in fully rational long-term strategic reasoning).⁷² Precise risk calculation is exceedingly difficult in such circumstances.

Moreover, even if it were possible in principle to assign statistical values to different causal factors in a manner that reflected their true underlying propensities,⁷³ the need to act in the moment in politics often makes this unrealistic. The vast majority of political agents do not have the luxury to collect, sift and assimilate a vast amount of relevant information in real time. This is especially true during moments of great historical stress: financial crises, environmental disasters, social revolutions. Hence the significance, necessity and difficulty of exercising good political judgment during such moments.

Yet there is a more fundamental sense in which political judgment differs from instrumental rationality. Scholars who employ models of rationality to explain politics vary in their conceptions of reason. These range from models of complete rationality regarding desires, beliefs and information to more bounded conceptions that assume that social actors have incomplete information and limited computational abilities, leading them to employ heuristics that ‘satisfice’ rather than maximize their choices. Yet all these approaches presume that rational human action requires universally consistent behavior: that an actor would choose A over B, B over C, and A over C in all circumstances.⁷⁴ The premise that rationality demands transitive preferences, however, is at odds with the view that good political judgment might require us to act inconsistently. It depends on the context.⁷⁵ And

⁷² See Elster, “Rational choice history,” op. cit.

⁷³ A recent attempt to do so is Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, *The Predictioneer’s Game: using the logic of brazen self-interest to see and shape the future* (New York: Random House, 2009). Nonetheless, the accuracy of his political forecasts seems to turn on the quality of information given to him by his informants through in-depth interviews, as opposed to deductive suppositions.

⁷⁴ See the entry for “Rationality,” in Robert Audi (general editor), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, Second Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 773.

⁷⁵ I thank Lopa Banerjee for pushing me to elucidate this point. For a more general analysis of the conditions under which full rationality is likely to obtain, see Daniel Kahneman, “Nobel lecture: maps of bounded rationality: psychology for behavioral economics,” *American Economic Review*, 93: 1449-1475.

this in turn raises the issue of outcomes. Rational choice theorists primarily seek to explain the decision of a typical social actor in light of their beliefs, desires and constraints in the short-run. These decisions may lead to sub-optimal results in the long run, however, due to “errors, unintended consequences, cumulative but relatively invisible effects, indirect effects, and environmental reverberations”.⁷⁶ In other words, what seems rational today may lead to an irrational outcome in the medium to long run. Rational choice theorists are fully aware of this problem; in particular, the need to distinguish the foreseen, foreseeable and unforeseeable. A focus on the political judgments of real historical actors does, in contrast.

Finally, as Berlin notes, good political judgment calls for a degree of detachment from our predilections, passions and prejudices.⁷⁷ As discussed earlier, exercising astute judgment in politics does not require us to abandon our moral convictions or social values, our material interests or ideological hopes. Nor does it presume that we are unencumbered human agents, devoid of emotions. However, to judge well politically is to not allow these factors to distort our capacity to see a situation clearly, especially when it seems unfavorable to us. To act prejudicially, after all, is to pre-judge: to proceed on the basis of pre-existing beliefs.⁷⁸ The ability to “maintain a distance from things and events” – which Weber defines as judgment per se – is critical for a vocation in politics.⁷⁹ So is the “art of self-overhearing”:

⁷⁶ Charles Tilly and Robert E. Goodin, “It depends,” in idem (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 17.

⁷⁷ Berlin, “Political judgment,” p. 40.

⁷⁸ One might criticize this claim by following Gadamer: “It is not so much our judgments as it is our prejudices that constitute our being. . . . Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified or erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world”. As Bernstein explains, Gadamer shared the common hermeneutic view that human actors are inherently situated within a given historical tradition, whose meanings cannot be evaluated from a neutral point of view. It follows that true political understanding requires a constant fusion of horizons, which according to Gadamer would expose our ‘blind’ prejudices against more ‘enabling’ ones. See Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, pp. 126-131. Nevertheless, as Gadamer seems to contend, nothing guarantees that we will interpret the meanings of another social actor correctly. The problem of judgment remains.

⁷⁹ Weber, “The profession and vocation of politics”.

a metacognitive skill that allows us to decide how to decide amongst competing possibilities.⁸⁰ Good political judgment requires a capacity for dispassion.

To summarize: good political judgment is a form of knowledge, reasoning and understanding. Its chief intellectual qualities include a deep appreciation for context and detail; a practical disposition that focuses on what will work; a strategic orientation that enables an actor to grasp the dynamic possibilities of a world that resists strict calculation; a capacity for synthetic causal understanding that does not, however, deduce or subsume particular facts under general principles; and a dispassionate temperament that enables us to resist our various illusions.⁸¹

3. The scope of political judgment

When does political judgment matter? On one hand, we might contend that it always does. Uncertainty is inherent in politics. The degree of uncertainty that we attribute to politics in general, and encounter in particular situations, leads to varying positions about the scope for judgment. Some take a radical view. Berlin claimed that political action required a ‘sense of reality’ that depended upon intuition, required a form of understanding that was inimical to general theoretical explanation and revealed the singularity of each historical moment.⁸² Dunn argues that we can never fully comprehend our intentions, let

⁸⁰ Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment*, p. 23.

⁸¹ Scott integrates many of these attributes into the definition of *mētis*, which he discusses as knowledge that is “local”, “situated”, “practical” and “contextual”. However, “situated” and “contextual” seem to be synonymous. Furthermore, the value of “local” customary knowledge, which Scott contrasts favorably against scientific knowledge influenced by high modernist ideology, is not a pre-requisite for good political judgment, which requires assessing exactly which forms of knowledge are relevant to the task at hand. Simply put, astute high-level politicians possess the own version of *mētis*. See *Seeing like a State*, pp. 317-320.

⁸² See Ryan Patrick Hanley, “Political science and political understanding: Isaiah Berlin on the nature of political inquiry,” *American Political Science Review*, 98, 2 (May 2004): 327-339. That said, Berlin himself famously advanced a general normative argument about the superiority of liberalism understood as deep ethical pluralism. For two interesting yet divergent evaluations, compare Perry Anderson, “The pluralism of Isaiah Berlin,” in idem, *A Zone of Engagement* (London: Verso, 1992), pp. 230-250, with Steven Lukes, “The

alone understand what our interests truly entail or how to realize them consistently, because human judgment is inherently partial. Moreover, even if the scientific study of politics may occasionally provide great insight into the past and provide salutary lessons on how not to act, it cannot tell us what to do. Politics is thus an inherently hazardous pursuit.⁸³ Others sympathize with this view yet are less pessimistic. Hawthorn argues that most of us demonstrate a capacity – if not always – to formulate coherent intentions based on our perceived interests in particular circumstances. Yet we may still reasonably disagree on the means for achieving them, and frequently adopt strategies and tactics that prevent their fulfillment. Deciding what we should do, how and when are questions that resist permanently settled answers in political life.⁸⁴

On the other hand, those who offer a long subterranean view or deeply structural accounts of historical change severely discount the role of political agency, let alone judgment. The Annales school of history, particularly the work of Fernand Braudel, is an example.⁸⁵ The emphasis given by its proponents to the long durée, particularly the force of geography, climate, and demography in determining social history, saw little significance in the play of institutions or actions of different political actors. The causal impact of these super-structural factors was minimal, if not absent, in determining patterns of history. The attempt by the evolutionary biologist Jared Diamond to explain the collapse of societies reveals a similar deterministic impulse.⁸⁶ Comparative historical sociologists – in the tradition of Barrington Moore, Charles Tilly and Theda Skocpol – have shown how the

unfashionable fox,” in *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin*, edited by Ronald Dworkin, Mark Lilla and Robert B. Silvers (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), pp. 43-58.

⁸³ See Dunn, *The Cunning of Unreason*, op. cit.

⁸⁴ Geoffrey Hawthorn, “How to ask for good government,” *IDS Bulletin*, 24, 1 (1993): 24-30. Hawthorn’s assessment of our causal understanding, even our comprehension of states of affairs, turns considerably darker in “Pericles’ unreason” (op. cit.), however.

⁸⁵ For an overview, see Stuart Clark, “The Annales historians,” in Quentin Skinner (ed.), *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 177-198.

⁸⁶ Jared Diamond, *Collapse: how societies choose to fail or succeed* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

deep-seated contradictions within a particular order lead to violent massive upheaval. Their answers diverge: the intensity of conflict between social classes, irresolvable fiscal crises, imperial misadventures. Yet Skocpol's observation of the nature of revolution captures the thrust of their explanatory approach: "Revolutions are not made: they come".⁸⁷ It is hard to see where political judgment arises in such accounts.

Lastly, we could argue that political judgment matters in varying degrees in political life. It depends on the context – a pragmatic view that reflects the character of good judgment itself. At one extreme, it seems least relevant in highly stable polities where interests are transparent and known; where rules and institutions are established, accepted and steer political action; where alternative possibilities are restricted. Thus we often portray such polities as 'systems' – everything seems routine.⁸⁸ The politics of Japan and India in the 1950s, under the respective dominance of the Liberal Democratic Party and Indian National Congress, come to mind as examples.⁸⁹

Conversely, exceptional political judgment counts most during events of great historical upheaval, such as war, revolution and massive economic crises. Larger structural forces may well explain the likelihood of such events. The question of when to strike a regime and what to do after it falls, however, makes the exercise of judgment decisive. This is because the plasticity of society is most intense during a revolution. The identities, interests and institutions that previously constituted its normal politics experience severe

⁸⁷ Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: a comparative analysis of France, Russia and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987 [1979]), p. 17.

⁸⁸ That said, it might be in such tightly controlled environments that political judgment really matters, especially for those whose positions are relatively weaker and wish to undermine established political routines and structures of power. I owe this point to Arjun Appadurai.

⁸⁹ As is now well known, however, the contradictions of the 'Congress system' – which sought to pursue planned industrialization with limited agrarian reform and establish a modern representative democracy committed to federalism and secularism – led to its demise by the late 1960s. Its Nehruvian leadership underestimated the need for massive agrarian reforms as well as challenges to its political authority as democratic elections allowed previously marginalized groups to mobilize for power in the countryside. These early misjudgments, in other words, sowed the seeds of dissolution.

pressure, if not collapse. This is clearly the view of those with a particularly fine-grained understanding of critical revolutionary episodes, such as Lenin, a theorist and agent of revolution himself. On the one hand, his succinct assessment of the conditions for revolution complements Skocpol's verdict: "Only when the lower classes do not want the old way, and when the upper classes cannot carry on in the old way, only then can revolution triumph."⁹⁰ Indeed, Lenin expended much effort in one of his most important political statements, *State and Revolution*, to demonstrate the inevitability of revolution in Russia by citing the deterministic theoretical premises of Marx and Engels.⁹¹ Yet his observations of revolution as they unfolded in Russia between the February and October revolutions in 1917 reveal a starkly contrasting view: a profoundly deep appreciation of human agency in determining the future. In revolutionary circumstances, commitment, belief and daring are crucial political virtues: "Audacity, audacity, always audacity", as Danton insisted; or "One commits oneself, and then one sees", as Lenin reinterpreted his maxim.⁹² Politics in the midst of revolution really appears to be 'just one damned thing after another'.⁹³ Human agency gains immense significance. It is precisely in such arduous circumstances that, tragically, good political judgment is most difficult to exercise.

In between these extreme scenarios lie more common spaces where political judgment can make a real difference. It is during moments of change, critical historical conjunctures, when the identities, interests and institutions of a society become more unsettled. These are times when "the universal loses grip over the particular".⁹⁴ Sometimes it is because a new factor, or set of factors, intervenes exogenously to change a prior

⁹⁰ See John Dunn, "Understanding revolution", unpublished manuscript.

⁹¹ Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, op. cit.

⁹² Dunn, "Understanding revolution," op. cit.

⁹³ The original quote, by Elbert Hubbard, is "Life is just one damned thing after another".

⁹⁴ Maurizio Passerin D'Entreves, "Arendt's theory of judgment," in Dana Villa (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 248.

historical equilibrium. Or it may occur endogenously, as a result of inherent underlying contradictions, undermining its stability of an institution, government, or regime. Either way, such interstitial phases create greater space for political agency.⁹⁵ Examples of such turning points include severe economic crisis⁹⁶ and the liberalization of authoritarian political regimes.⁹⁷ Alas, whether one can take advantage of such occasions remains an open question. Transformative moments expose the quality of our political judgments with particular acuity – often mercilessly.

4. *The nexus between judgment and explanation in politics*

What are the implications of taking political judgment seriously – as a concept, virtue and feature of politics – for the modes of inquiry that contemporary political science pursues? Conversely, how do the ways in which we seek to explain politics affect the quality of our political judgment? It is hard to answer these questions definitively. This is partly due to the variety of approaches that characterize the study of politics today, many of which combine distinct methods to develop multi-faceted explanations. But it is also because my definition of political judgment, and what good political judgment requires, might be contested. Alternative definitions of the terms, value and scope of judgment will suggest different answers for how we ought to study politics, or what we can gain from different

⁹⁵ As the current White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel remarked: “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste . . . it is an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before.” See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1yeA_kH1ILow.

⁹⁶ According to Przeworski, “. . . any analysis based upon rational calculations of expected benefits is of limited value in moments of crisis. Conflicts are inherently laden with uncertainty, and this uncertainty is difficult to evaluate, not only for us but for the protagonists of our story as well”. See *Capitalism and Social Democracy*, p. 197.

⁹⁷ “Liberalization – an opening that results in the broadening of the social base of a regime without changing its structure – is not a feasible project unless everyone has full and accurate knowledge about everybody else’s preferences and the probability of successful repression. Some misperceptions lead liberalization to transition; others, to repression.” Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: political and economic reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 66.

approaches. Hence my answer is provisional, focusing on the logic and ontology of the principal methodological approaches that inform contemporary political science: varieties of large-N statistical analyses, small-N comparative research and micro-level case studies. Nevertheless, I believe that understanding political judgment in realist terms raises a number of significant intellectual questions for how we variously study politics and what we might gain from such endeavors.

The most striking feature of contemporary political science is that it has neglected the role of judgment in politics. Arguably, this state of affairs has much to do with the influence of positivism in its various guises. Positivists demonstrate little interest in the importance, scope and exercise of political judgment. This is unsurprising. According to positivism, the purpose of political science is to formulate generalizable theoretical explanations of various empirical phenomena.

This is clearest amongst those who seek to discover ‘covering laws’, law-like propositions of political behavior, in the empiricist philosophical tradition that emerged from the idea of ‘constant conjunctions’ by David Hume and developed in the work of Carl Hempel. For philosophical empiricists, political explanations require theories that consist of statements of law, where the laws are causal, necessary and true.⁹⁸ Suffice to say, the deductive-nomological model of explanation encounters several well-known difficulties. Most fundamentally, there are few significant laws in politics due to the self-reflexivity of real political actors. Moreover, covering law explanations face difficulties on their own terms. They cannot distinguish valid from spurious regularities, account for probability or explain the laws that putatively explain the phenomena in question.⁹⁹ Finally, they fail to probe the object of study – the ‘what’ of scientific analysis – as well as questions of process – the

⁹⁸ Hawthorn, *Plausible Worlds*, pp. 19-25.

⁹⁹ George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, pp. 132-135.

‘how’. Hence a covering law explanation has little to say about political judgment, let alone its skillful exercise, which requires a focus on context and practicality. Indeed, the latter is antithetical to the deductive-nomological worldview.

Of course, we do not have to embrace the latter to believe in a ‘science of politics’ modeled on the natural sciences. Indeed many proponents of the latter – most recently led by the influential methodological prescriptions of Gary King, Robert Keohane and Sidney Verba¹⁰⁰ – break with the philosophical empiricists by claiming that our explanations must demonstrate causal inference. This entails: (1) uncovering the purported underlying properties of the social world in a context-independent fashion: the ideas, interests and institutions, very broadly conceived, that shape its political dynamics. The aim is to identify stable causal mechanisms that explain specific outcomes – ‘universals’ or ‘generals’ that explain ‘particulars’ – even if such mechanisms work in probabilistic terms. Indeed, the very idea of a mechanism suggests an instrument or process that works in a consistent manner over time to generate the same outcome. (2) A significant feature of such explanations is the threefold assumption that uniform causal laws underlie events (causal homogeneity); that causes and outcomes are independent of one another (independence of observations); and that putative causal factors are independent of each other as well as the events they explain (conditional independence). Put differently, positivist accounts construe the events that comprise the phenomena being studied as independent and equivalent: respectively, no event is the cause or effect of earlier or later decisions, and every event has an equivalent causal effect.¹⁰¹ Hence the demand that our political explanations should aim for conceptual parsimony, internal consistency and maximum leverage, and avoid problems of endogeneity,

¹⁰⁰ See Gary King, Robert O. Keohane and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: scientific inference in qualitative research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹⁰¹ See Andrew Abbott, “From causes to events,” in *Time Matters* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 186.

selection bias and measurement error. The aim of science is to generalize. (3) Consequently, despite the acknowledgement that convincing explanations require sound descriptions of the real world, the intellectual hierarchy that underlies this approach to politics is clear.

Nomothetic theoretical explanations that cover a large number of cases (large N) are superior to mid-level comparative accounts (small N) which, in turn, are preferable to the idiographic knowledge generated by in-depth case studies.

What is the value of general political explanations for our political judgment? The desire to see whether politics exhibits certain patterns, and to explain the patterns we detect, is both necessary and important. For many scholars, this is self-evident, an aspiration that helps to define the science of politics itself. Yet even those who oppose the view that political science should aim to discover political regularities would admit that our ability to discern what is dissimilar, contingent or unique in a specific context, and to assess its causal significance, requires a grasp of what is normally the case. To exercise good political judgment, to assess what might be possible, requires a grasp of the probabilities that shape real politics.

As many critics argue, however, the methodological strictures put forward by King, Keohane and Verba make a number of contestable ontological assumptions.¹⁰² These may be inimical to good political judgment. The premise that we must treat causality as universal, and events and conditions as independent, ignores the possibility that differing causal structures may exist in the world (causal heterogeneity); that events may condition each other (diffusion effects); and that outcomes may effect their putative causes over time (reciprocal causation). Moreover, while the search for probabilistic political patterns is tremendously

¹⁰² See David Collier, Jason Seawright and Gerardo L. Munck, "The quest for standards: King, Keohane and Verba's *Designing Social Inquiry*," in Henry E. Brady and David Collier (eds.), *Rethinking Social Inquiry: diverse tools, shared standards* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Ltd., 2004), pp. 3-51.

important, our desire to know whether a particular outcome is likely to occur in a specific case compels us to understand what might distinguish the latter, not the pattern. A commitment to political generalization is much less concerned with such matters, even if we have an interest in acquiring such knowledge. Indeed, the injunction that scholars should increase the number of observations across cases in order to establish valid causal inference inevitably leads towards more general explanations.¹⁰³

In recent years a number of scholars have advocated mixed-method research in order to maximize the advantages of small-N comparative research and large-N statistical analysis. Does such research promise greater insight into the political world, and thus the possibility of better political judgment? Specific conceptions vary. But what mixed research designs share, beyond the belief that we need to employ different methods to maximize our grasp of political reality, is a belief in causal homogeneity. David Laitin prescribes a “tripartite method” as the gold standard of comparative political inquiry: formal theory to provide a coherent analytical model, case study narrative to elucidate causal processes and statistical analysis to test causal effects.¹⁰⁴ In principle, his approach affords each component equal methodological weight. Yet to work it assumes that universal causal relations hold for every case. A similar ontological belief informs the “nested research design” advocated by Evan Lieberman.¹⁰⁵ Unlike Laitin, Lieberman remains agnostic about the value of formal theory. Moreover, he persuasively claims that his methodological approach, by maximizing the respective advantages of small and large-N research, is superior to the scientific model

¹⁰³ Charles C. Ragin, “Turning the tables: how case-oriented research challenges variable-oriented research,” in Brady and Collier, *Rethinking Social Inquiry*, op. cit., pp. 135-138; Tilly and Goodin, “It depends,” p. 6.

¹⁰⁴ David Laitin, “Comparative politics: the state of the subdiscipline,” in Ira Katznelson and Helen Milner (eds.), *Political Science: the state of the discipline* (New York: Norton, 2002), pp. 630-659. Laitin’s methodological insistence on a unified political science is curious given the character of much of his distinguished empirical work. For example, compare his scholarship on the politics of ethnicity in Sub-Saharan Africa with his recent methodological writings.

¹⁰⁵ Evan S. Lieberman, “Nested analysis as a mixed-method strategy for comparative research,” *American Political Science Review* 99, 3 (August 2005): 435-452.

prescribed by King, Keohane and Verba, which seeks to subsume qualitative research under the logic of inquiry that informs regression analysis. Nonetheless, his approach also seems to assume causal homogeneity. Scholars pursuing nested research conduct small-N analysis to confirm whether their original theoretical hypothesis is correct, or to develop a new theoretical model if the results of their large-N analysis are unsatisfactory. In either case, the purpose is to discover a universal theoretical model that explains the cases under study. A final example of how causal homogeneity informs mixed research designs is the recent methodological approach of John Gerring.¹⁰⁶ Gerring comprehensively analyzes the distinctiveness and contributions of intensive case-study research in political science. He argues that small-N analyses are necessary to elucidate causal mechanisms, while large-N studies allow us to test causal effects. There is an explicit nomothetic impulse in his discussion, however, since he concludes that case studies are better for demonstrating descriptive inference rather than causal inference. In doing so, Gerring downplays the kind of knowledge produced by intensive case studies, the validity of within-case analysis for establishing causal inference, and the implications of causal heterogeneity for how we understand the relationship between the thick understanding produced by intensive case studies and the insights of large-N analyses based on thin concepts.

In other words, whether or not universal causal regularities inform the political world invites closer scrutiny. Even those who believe political science should aim to develop theories that explain as many cases as possible, such as the ambition of Coppedge to “thicken” the thin concepts and theories that characterize large-N quantitative research, concede that

We political scientists know on some level that a true and complete explanation of the things that fascinate us would be impossibly complex, but we willfully ignore this disturbing fact and

¹⁰⁶ See “What is a case study and what is it good for?” *op. cit.*

persist in our research. We are a community of eccentrics who share the delusion that politics is simpler than it appears. Although I would be as delighted as any other political scientist to discover simple, elegant and powerful explanations, I think the common sense of the layperson is correct. We must presume that politics is extremely complex, and the burden of proof rests on those of us who claim that it is not.¹⁰⁷

Hence it is not surprising that political explanations informed by the ontological assumptions of quantitative scientific inference neglect the role of judgment in politics. On the one hand, they ignore it altogether because it is too variable, idiosyncratic or difficult to study, all of which make it hard to develop general theoretical propositions. Some might counter by saying that we should construe political judgment as a causal mechanism to make it amenable to the type of analysis prescribed by nomothetic political science. But good political judgment, as argued above, does not work in a systematic uniform manner: its practitioners deploy it contextually, which is to say variably, as circumstances demand. Thus it is not a function of general rule following. In contrast, factors described as causal mechanisms (e.g. the material self-interest of social actors, search for power *simpliciter* or desire for social recognition by marginalized cultural groups), normally are.¹⁰⁸ Nor can political judgment automatically be generalized to other contexts. What politically works in one setting may not in another. The only way to tell is by acquiring a mastery of each context. Conducting such analysis is a different intellectual enterprise, however, than searching for variables that exert the same causal impact across the world.

Indeed, to the extent that nomothetic political explanations address political judgment at all, most explain when, why and how it *fails*. The vast majority of studies in

¹⁰⁷ Michael Coppedge, "Thickening thin concepts and theories: combing large N and small in comparative politics," *Comparative Politics* 31, 4 (July 1999), p. 467.

¹⁰⁸ Tilly defines mechanisms as "a delimited class of events that change relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations". That said, he argues that while mechanisms have "uniform, immediate effects" in the short-term, "their aggregate, cumulative and longer-term effects vary considerably depending on initial conditions and in combination with other mechanisms". It is precisely the variability of these initial conditions and longer-term effects that political actors must consider if they are to act well. See Charles Tilly, "Mechanisms in political processes," *American Review of Political Science*, 4, 2001: 21-41.

contemporary political science do so inadvertently by examining the role of some causal factor, or set of factors, to account for an outcome that is unsuccessful or sub-optimal according to some criteria. Reading these accounts we might infer that specific causal factors impeded the exercise of good political judgment or a desired political outcome. Yet what comprises either of these is implicit in such explanations. Moreover, few will be studies that allow us to trace decisive turning points or the cumulative impact of concrete political decision-making processes in a fine-grained manner. Thus most nomothetic political inquiries address the question of judgment implicitly, by default and according to assumptions about how the world operates that may be mistaken.

There are exceptions, of course, studies that simultaneously address the failure of good political judgment by design and advance a general political explanation. James Scott's *Seeing like a State*, which seeks to explain the failure of grand social experiments in the twentieth century, is a powerful recent example. In brief, Scott demonstrates how high modernist ideology, a desire for simplification and legibility, and the presence of authoritarian states and weak civil societies suppressed the reservoirs of local practical knowledge necessary for many societies to function well. The result in each case, ranging from collectivization in Russia in the 1930s to the *ujamaa* experiment in Tanzania in the 1970s, was a large-scale social disaster. It is an intriguing explanation. On the one hand, Scott puts forward a clear general argument of wide scope. Yet he also challenges many orthodox methodological prescriptions by selecting on the dependent variable, by demonstrating the self-reflexivity of human agents and, most provocatively, by suggesting that the practice of contemporary political science reflects the logic and uniformity of high modernist ideology. This last critique is ironic given that Scott puts forward a sweeping explanation that identifies four necessary and sufficient conditions for large-scale man-made

disasters to occur. Nevertheless, what distinguishes the argument is the emphasis given to *mētis*, the practical intelligence and acquired skills that ordinary human beings naturally cultivate in order to make their way in the world. The failure of grand social experiments influenced by high modernist ideology reveals the limits of reality.¹⁰⁹

Indeed, a major reason why Scott can make this argument is that the scope of *Seeing like a State* is closer to small-N comparative research, notwithstanding its wide historical optic. What role does political judgment play in such analyses and what can these forms of inquiry contribute to our political understanding in return? Rich comparative analyses of a few cases often teach us a great deal, imparting the kind of contextual, practical and synthetic knowledge necessary for good political judgment. Whether such analyses can illuminate the strategic nature of political action in a convincing manner, however, depends on the level of analysis of a particular account.

For example, comparative historical sociology is a powerful methodological approach that examines the dynamics of politics in their totality, highlighting the possibilities and limits of the world. But the high altitude level of analysis that typifies this approach, and the tenor of its conventional accounts, frequently plays down the range of choices available to agents and the effect of their decisions upon the very structures invoked to explain their conduct in the first place. In other words, such explanatory frameworks can suggest a linear causal dynamic that ignores possible feedback effects. The debate over structure and agency in the study of revolutions is a case in point.¹¹⁰ Not all do, of course. Scholars that delve

¹⁰⁹ By focusing on the power of discourse to shape reality, Scott discounts the deep immanent realism of his account, a bias that informs many anthropological critiques of development (such as the work of Partha Chatterjee, Arturo Escobar and James Ferguson). I discuss this issue in a working paper titled, “The necessity of ‘reality’ in theories of post-development”.

¹¹⁰ For example, see the debate between William H. Sewell, “Three temporalities: toward an eventful sociology,” in Terrence J. McDonald (ed.), *The Historic Turn in the Human Science* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 245-80, and Theda Skocpol, *Social Revolutions in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

into the past might uncover path dependent processes that lock in particular futures.¹¹¹ Moreover, by focusing on long-run causal processes – which encompass causes that cumulate over time, threshold effects and complex causal chains – we might better explain contemporary political outcomes. Fine-grained analyses of the present, as Pierson warns, court the danger of myopia.¹¹² But macro-structural political explanations may still overlook how the interaction of large-scale social, economic and political forces can themselves generate uncertainty on the ground, which expands the room for and consequences of purposive human action.¹¹³ It is hard to see where political judgment arises, if at all.

In contrast to macro-level explanations, “systematic process tracing” acknowledges that we inhabit a world characterized by “multiple conjunctural causation” and “complex interaction effects”.¹¹⁴ According to its chief advocate, Peter Hall, it is a form of mid-level comparative inquiry seeks causal generalizations by testing falsifiable theories through fine-grained analyses of how events unfold in the political world. It is difficult in practice to conduct intensive analysis of decision-making processes within a wider comparative frame. Such complex explanations place immense demands in terms of time, effort and skill. Given its underlying ontological premises, however, systematic process analyses would help us judge the possibilities of politics better.

¹¹¹ Paul Pierson, “Increasing returns, path dependence, and the study of politics,” *American Political Science Review* 94, 2 (June 2000): 251-267.

¹¹² See Paul Pierson, “Big, slow-moving, and ... invisible: macrosocial processes in the study of comparative politics,” in Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences*, op. cit., pp. 177-207. Tilly and Goodin issue a similar warning about simple ‘explanatory stories’ that seek to explain particular outcomes and attribute moral responsibility in terms of the intentions of a set of individuals in a particular time and place: “On the whole, however, they represent causal processes very badly: they radically reify and simplify the relevant actors, actions, causes and effects while disregarding indirect effects, environmental effects, incremental effects, errors, unanticipated consequences, and simultaneous causation”. See “It depends,” p. 19.

¹¹³ See Ira Katznelson, “Periodization and preferences: reflections on purposive action in comparative historical social science,” in Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences*, pp. 270-305.

¹¹⁴ Peter Hall, “Aligning ontology and methodology in comparative politics,” in James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer (eds.), *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 373-404.

Finally, how should we evaluate intensive case studies vis-à-vis the question of political judgment, as well as their capacity to improve our political understanding? It is reasonable to assume that, compared to large-N statistical analyses and small-N comparative research, micro-level analyses enjoy a natural affinity with the view that we should take political judgment seriously. Cases encourage us to focus on actors, plot stories and trace the chronology of events. Moreover, the argument that good political judgment demands contextual awareness, synthetic understanding and practical rationality favors intensive political analysis. Yet case-oriented modes of political explanation also vary in terms of their ontological assumptions, methodological preferences and scholarly aims. As a result, their respective affinities with understanding political judgment along realist lines vary as well.

Every political inquiry that examines the judgments of actors to explain political outcomes shares a common feature: the ambition to construct fine-grained analyses of strategic political action. Micro-level analyses

enable us to go from the larger to the smaller: from molecules to atoms, from societies to individuals. Secondly, and more fundamentally, they reduce the time lag between the explanans and explanandum. A mechanism provides a continuous and contiguous chain of causal or intentional links.¹¹⁵

As the earlier discussion suggested, however, good political judgment is not equivalent to instrumental rationality. Indeed, ‘rational choice histories’ are quite different from realist narratives of political judgment. On the one hand, both share a commitment to explaining political outcomes by elucidating causal processes; in particular, the strategic choices individuals make under various constraints and their consequences. On the other, a desire for parsimony and universalism typifies rational choice explanations, which contrasts with the deeply contextual nature of good political judgment:

¹¹⁵ George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, p. 141.

[What] makes a tale compelling is that the causal mechanisms it identifies are plausible. The credibility of these mechanisms is enhanced significantly by demonstrating their generalizability to other contexts. In the best of all possible worlds, this means applying the explanatory model to other, out of sample, cases. There is the occasional scholar who takes this maxim seriously enough to apply it. . . [But] if mechanisms identified in the case studies are valid, they should hold up elsewhere.¹¹⁶

While many rational choice theorists are aware of the trade-offs involved in pursuing their approach, they happily concede that “rationalists are almost always willing to sacrifice nuance for generalizability, detail for logic, a forfeiture most other comparativists would decline”.¹¹⁷ The belief in causal homogeneity, a supposition that political realists have to evaluate rather than assume, remains an article of faith for rational choice theorists. In addition, while theorists of rationality stress the role of choice in explaining political outcomes, in practice many rational choice analyses demonstrate the inevitability of certain political decisions, which paradoxically removes the notion of possibility from the realm of choice itself.

A powerful example that exemplifies these tensions is *Capitalism and Social Democracy* by Adam Przeworski. The book asks a significant question: why did socialism, despite the growing electoral popularity of socialist political parties, fail to emerge in western Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century? Przeworski seeks to explain this outcome by focusing on the decisions taken by socialist parties under the constraints of capitalist democracy. Significantly, he begins his account by highlighting the importance of strategic political judgment, of the importance of making the right choices:

[The] very probability of committing mistakes presupposes simultaneously a political project, some choice among strategies, and objective conditions that are independent with regard to a particular movement. If the strategy of a party is uniquely determined, then the notion of ‘mistakes’ is meaningless: the party can only pursue the inevitable. . . . [The] notion of mistakes is also rendered meaningless within the context of a radically voluntaristic understanding of

¹¹⁶ Margaret Levi, “A model, a method and a map: rational choice in comparative and historical analysis,” in Mark Irving Lichbach and Alan S. Zuckerman, *Comparative Politics: rationality, culture and structure* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 34.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. p. 21.

historical possibilities . . . [but] if everything is always possible, then only motives explain the course of history. For an error is a relation between projects and conditions; mistakes are possible if and only if some strategies are ineffective in advancing the realization of a given project under existing conditions while other strategies would have advanced it under the same conditions.¹¹⁸

In particular, socialists in west European democracies faced a succession of choices at critical historical moments: whether or not to participate in electoral politics; whether to pursue a class-specific or supra-class electoral strategy; and whether to support pragmatic reform or strike for revolution.

Przeworski argues that pure instrumental rationality compelled the socialists to participate in electoral politics. On the one hand, it enabled them to mobilize workers politically and introduce progressive legislation to provide immediate relief, and granted the socialists parliamentary status, thereby protecting them from repression, coercion and violence by the state. On the other, since many socialists believed that capitalism would inexorably expand and impoverish the working classes, it was rational to contest democratic elections. According to Marx, the proletariat would eventually constitute an electoral majority in West European democracies, allowing socialist parties to legislate the end of capitalism. Successive pro-worker reforms, in other words, would engender socialist revolution.

Alas, history proved otherwise. The development of capitalism in western Europe saw the emergence of a new middle class based on salaried white-collar employees, along with the extension of various social entitlements, which diminished the size of the proletariat. This unanticipated outcome compelled socialist parties to expand their electoral base beyond the workers, who now had ‘minority status under majority rule’. Yet the pursuit of a multi-class strategy demobilized the proletariat, leaving the socialists with a dilemma that

¹¹⁸ Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy*, pp. 1-2.

defied resolution. Ultimately, the socialists' failure to offer a workable legislative program in response to the Great Depression, combined with the rise of Keynesianism and the growing compromise between capital and labor to protect private property and profit in exchange for stable employment, decent wages and mild economic redistribution, led to the emergence of the capitalist welfare state.

The most striking feature of Przeworski's argument is the specter of inevitability that haunts it.¹¹⁹ Indeed, despite his criticisms of voluntarism and determinism at the start of his analysis, in the end he claims that the socialists had no choice:

Was the alternative possible? Could the movement for socialism remain independent of the existing political institutions? Could it have developed autonomously, in a decentralized, spontaneous, polymorphous manner? Was it feasible for cooperatives, unions and clubs of the 1860s and the 1880s to remain autonomous and to pursue their own goals? . . . When confronted with a hostile and repressive state, no movement can stop short of reaching for political power – even if it has most limited objectives; just to protect itself. Socialists had no choice: they had to struggle for political power because any other movement for socialism would have been stamped out by force and they had to utilize the opportunities offered by participation to improve the immediate conditions of workers because otherwise they would not have gained support among them. They had to struggle for power and they were lucky enough to be able to do it under democratic conditions. Everything else was pretty much a consequence.

In sum, Przeworski begins his analysis by emphasizing the importance of choosing well, of aligning strategies and programs with constraints and reality. Yet by employing a full-blown conception of rational action to explain the socialists' failure to realize their aims, and by arguing that they could not have acted otherwise, he paradoxically claims that their choices were determined. In other words, the socialists' decision to participate in democratic politics was a *rational mistake*. Not to have participated – the historical counterfactual – would simply have been irrational. His conclusion highlights a major general difference between an analytic narrative based on complete instrumental rationality and a realist account of political judgment: in the first, one cannot imagine a social actor behaving

¹¹⁹ I leave aside the question of its historical accuracy.

otherwise, even if their short-term actions frustrate their long-term goals; in the second, they can indeed fail, either due to inferior political judgment or bad luck.

Given the limitations of rational choice history and general causal explanations more generally for elucidating political judgment, we might embrace an alternative micro-level approach, 'phronetic social science'.¹²⁰ Its proponents argue that an Aristotelian notion of *phronesis*, translated as prudence or practical wisdom, constitutes the basis of politics. Consequently, it should orient political enquiry as well. Phronetic social research encourages scholars to elucidate how the beliefs, intentions and actions of the principal actors constitute, and in turn are constituted by, the relations, strategies and practices of power that define a particular situation. Such an approach seeks to explain particular social phenomena by constructing fine-grained narratives at the micro-level that engage with polyphony of voices that comprise its subjects of inquiry. In other words, it is a methodology that prizes deep contextual knowledge. Indeed, its chief proponents contend that a positivist model of political science is misguided due to inherently self-reflecting nature of human beings; the search for universal causal laws that allegedly explain the social world is doomed to fail. In short, by claiming that practical reason drives the world, phronetic social science provides a highly developed case-oriented methodology in contemporary political science for studying political judgment.

Phronetic social research differs from a realist approach towards political judgment, however. First, by employing *phronesis* as its conception of political judgment, it incorporates value judgments into the analysis. According to Flyvbjerg, the study of politics demands it:

¹²⁰ Its most systematic recent expression is Bent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter: why social enquiry fails and how it can succeed again* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

By definition, phronetic researchers focus on values; for example, by taking their point of departure in the classic value-questions: Where are we going? Is it desirable? What should be done? . . . the objective is to balance instrumental rationality with value rationality.¹²¹

This differs significantly from the realist understanding of political judgment elaborated previously, which recognizes the importance of moral purposes and ethical values, yet seeks to define political judgment in a manner that recognizes its distinctiveness. In contrast, phronetic social research gives equal weight to the political and moral dimensions of intentions and consequences. Some may find this approach more faithful to how we live, or more admirable. However, it risks conflating our values, the means we employ to realize them and their consequences. Second, advocates of *phronesis* claim that a belief in putatively universal laws is an inherent feature of a positivist conception of social science. Put differently, they criticize the deductive-nomological approach as well as the scientific model of causal inference for claiming that political inquiry must seek predictive context-independent generalizations.¹²² Yet this ignores the fact that models of probability, as opposed to laws of necessity, can provide the basis for causal explanations, and that a casual explanation does not have to be predictive in order to be valid or persuasive. Indeed, much contemporary political science operates on these less heroic grounds. Third, proponents of phronetic social research make the claim that we cannot accumulate political knowledge because politics is a practical skill. What works in one context might not in another; skills cannot be generalized. As argued previously, realist students of political judgment reach a similar conclusion. However, advocates of *phronesis* tend to assume that *all* political actors are expert practitioners.¹²³ If we portray ordinary human beings in these terms, however, we cannot explain why they misjudge, act poorly or fail to realize their purposes. The truth is

¹²¹ Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter*, p. 140.

¹²² According to Flyvbjerg, a positivist conception of social theory has six features. It must be explicit, universal, abstract, context-independent, rule-bound and predictive. Ibid, pp. 38-39.

¹²³ Thus Flyvbjerg remarks: “. . . most people find themselves at the ‘proficiency’ and ‘expertise’ levels in using the skills necessary to manage their everyday activities and normal social interaction.” Ibid, p. 42.

more prosaic and less inspiring: few political agents are virtuoso performers. Most are proficient. But proficiency in politics – no mean feat – is sometimes not enough.

5. Conclusion

This essay has sought to define political judgment and the characteristics of good political judgment, consider its significance in political life and examine its role in the types of explanation that dominate contemporary political science. Suffice to say, critics might question each stage of the argument, perhaps the whole. They might wish to defend a broader conception of political judgment, suggest different attributes for what makes it good, and draw alternative conclusions about its significance for politics and its appropriate role in explaining the political world. In addition, others might disagree with my characterization of the modes of inquiry and forms of explanation that dominate our field. Indeed, the last decade has seen a profusion of ideas and justifications for heterodox approaches to political science, building on many previous works in the discipline that charted new intellectual paths. Nonetheless, I wish to contend that a realist approach to political judgment has something important to offer. What ramifications follow?

The first is relatively straightforward: the more our explanations discount or ignore the exercise of judgment in generating political outcomes, the more simplistic they are. Critics might argue that that is necessary, inevitable and justifiable: necessary because it would be far too demanding to study political judgment in terms of our time; inevitable because scholarship entails a division of labor in which some conduct relatively intensive studies while others pursue large-scale enquiries; and justifiable either because many forces larger than individual human agency work to shape the political world we inhabit, or because our explanations always entail simplifications. These are valid counter-arguments.

Nevertheless, they still leave our political explanations incomplete: a full political explanation requires “thick analysis”.¹²⁴ This matters tremendously if we wish to act in the world. A general theory or comparative enquiry into the causes of state failure and possibilities of state-building offers important lessons for understanding contemporary Afghanistan and how to improve its prospects of stability, peace and development. But it will not suffice. In-depth local knowledge is critical, as practitioners know, often with lament. Ignoring the exercise of judgment also runs the risk of making our political explanations mechanistic and over-determined. Explaining politics after the fact, as opposed to analyzing the motives, judgments and decisions of the relevant actors at the moment of action, can often create an “illusion of retrospective determinism”.¹²⁵ Lastly, political explanations that fail to analyze the exercise of judgment are insufficiently *political* because they ignore a crucial feature of politics – the necessity, difficulty and practice of judgment. “Those who aspire to a scientific knowledge of politics”, Aristotle counseled, “need practical experience as well”.¹²⁶ We do not need to accept Aristotle’s metaphysics, nor deny the difficulty of applying this maxim to ourselves, to appreciate the implications of his advice.

This suggests a second implication: the failure to analyze political judgment in our work misconstrues the realities of politics in an important sense, making it difficult for us to cultivate our political judgment. Arguably, it might even harm it. The failure to describe political reality accurately may not concern those, such as Milton Friedman and adherents of his school of ‘positive economics’, who claim that our assumptions about the social world are less important than our capacity to furnish valid theoretical accounts of it. Nor will it trouble scholars for whom parsimony is an intellectual virtue. But validity is not truth. And

¹²⁴ Collier, Seawright and Munck, “The quest for standards,” *op. cit.*

¹²⁵ Timothy Garton Ash, quoting Henri Bergson, in *idem, History of the Present* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), xix.

¹²⁶ *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 10, II81a12-b10.

the truth, what is really going on, obviously matters. Even proponents of a unified political science, such as King, Keohane and Verba, claim that the power of our causal inferences ultimately rests on the soundness of their underlying descriptions. As for parsimony, it is unclear why it is championed. Ultimately, what matters is whether our explanations are convincing, which turns on how close they are to the truth.

It is striking that several of the primary intellectual aspirations of nomothetic political science – the striving for explanations that are theoretical, universal and analytical – are qualities opposite to good political judgment in the realist tradition: its emphasis on practicality, deep contextual understanding and synthesis. Dispassionate reason is the only trait that each approach seemingly espouses. Yet those who wish to develop good political judgment desire such knowledge in order to shape reality. They also realize that they are not completely independent of it; they are consciously interested parties. Practitioners of nomothetic political science are more likely to believe – rhetorically at least – their disinterestedness and independence to be greater.

If the exercise of political judgment matters, however, there is a third ramification: we must analyze it directly in context. This means seeking to explain the opportunities, constraints and uncertainties of politics from the perspective of real political actors, in time, not as spectators after the fact; tracing political action as it transpires through events, processes and episodes; and distinguishing and weighing the foreseen, foreseeable and unforeseeable consequences of different strategies, tactics and decisions. Of course, unless we can directly observe the actors we seek to explain in real time, our political explanations will be historical judgments of a kind. If done well, though, our political explanations will seek to recreate the context of action as realistically as possible, making allowances for the

probable and unforeseeable, and put our own political judgments on the table. These conditions do not apply to conventional historical explanations.¹²⁷

In the end, explaining political judgment suggests that we reconsider the hierarchy of knowledge that privileges general political theories vis-à-vis middle-range comparative research, and especially over in-depth case studies. We need to pursue more scholarly work that is attentive to the similarities and differences between cases and sensitive to the possibility that diverse causal relations may govern the world. As George and Bennett contend, knowledge accumulation and theoretical progress in the social sciences “requires that we make our assumptions as accurate as possible”¹²⁸ and often “takes the form of increasingly narrow and more contingent (but also more valid) generalizations”.¹²⁹ Put differently, instead of assuming that we must ‘control for context’ in our inquiries, we might wish to ‘correct for context’ by “taking systematic account of how different contexts might actually matter to the phenomena under study”.¹³⁰ Keynes understood this incomparably well. For him, economic understanding consisted of a fusion of logic, intuition and knowledge,

a requirement overwhelmingly difficult for those whose gift mainly consists in the power to imagine and pursue to their farthest points the implications and prior conditions of comparatively simple facts which are known with a high degree of precision.¹³¹

A focus on practices of judgment in real world politics resurrects the importance of narratives and histories of the present. Perhaps the most common examples of such inquiry in contemporary political science lie in the field of foreign policy decision-making, local

¹²⁷ I thank Yogendra Yadav for encouraging me to clarify this point.

¹²⁸ George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, p. 142.

¹²⁹ Ibid, p. 131. Tilly and Goodin seem to reach a similar conclusion in “It depends,” p. 6.

¹³⁰ Tilly and Goodin, “It depends,” p. 23.

¹³¹ John Kay, “How economics lost sight of the real world,” *Financial Times*, 22 April 2009.

political analyses and what might be called analytical political biographies.¹³² Many scholars recognize the usefulness of narratives for studying political judgment. Narratives allow us to capture the realities of politics in context, from the point of view of the main protagonists, to a greater extent than other methodological approaches. Perhaps less noticed is that narrative accounts help to cultivate the quality of our political judgment too, by elucidating the stream of events produced by actors, structures and processes within a single causal story.¹³³ Furthermore, although thick description is vital to understanding the texture of reality in a given case, these narratives must be causal in order to serve us well. This perhaps explains why business, legal and medical schools emphasize case studies in their teaching – to enable the development of skilled practitioners who possess a rigorous yet fine-grained command of their domain of work.¹³⁴

The preceding discussion of political judgment, what good political judgment requires and its role in how we explain politics hopefully raises questions that deserve further consideration. The desire to develop nomothetic theoretical explanations continues to dominate mainstream political science. Many political scientists seek to explain how general causal factors generate particular outcomes in the world. The refusal of many of these accounts to examine the exercise of judgment of real political actors, however, limits the

¹³² For an example of the first, see the work of Alexander George. A widely debated example of the second is Bent Flyvbjerg, *Rationality and Power: democracy in practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). An example of the third might be the three volume biography of John Maynard Keynes by Robert Skidelsky.

¹³³ Not all students of judgment use narrative to demonstrate its centrality in politics. Consider some of the classics: Aristotle used illustrative examples to evaluate the goodness or poverty of particular acts or decisions; Arendt focused on exemplary acts; Machiavelli studied the actions of eminent men in the past to draw contemporary lessons. Yet the narrative approach to studying political judgment, which begins with Thucydides, allows us to capture the intricacies of politics with greater fidelity.

¹³⁴ Laitin recognizes the importance of such methods for teaching practical skills. However, he dismisses their relevance for political science, which he characterizes as *episteme*. See his “The perestroika challenge to social science,” *Politics & Society*, 31, 1 (March 2003): 163-184. In contrast, Andrew Abbott contends that case study narratives would enable researchers far greater access to policy intervention than a variable-oriented science of politics. See his essay, “What do cases do? some notes on activity in sociological analysis,” in Charles C. Ragin and Howard S. Becker (eds.), *What is a Case? exploring the foundations of social inquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 53-82.

power of their explanations. It highlights the inadequacy of general causal explanations in the political world. Finally, it suggests their inability to improve our understanding of politics, because good political judgment can neither be determined by general theoretical principles nor generalized to other contexts. If persuasive, a realist conception of political judgment invites us to reconsider the ways in which we explain our political world, and how we might improve our faculty of judgment as well.