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**The Power of Beliefs**

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**Abstract**

My commitment to combining normative concerns with empirical social science led, perhaps a bit counterintuitively, to early adoption of rational choice political economy. However, it was a modified form of rational choice that takes into account ethical and societal concerns. This was the approach I applied to considerations of compliance and consent with government, what makes a trustworthy government, the formation of legitimating beliefs, and finally the construction of an expanded and inclusive community of fate as a building block for a new moral political economy.

## BEGINNINGS

I was raised in the shadow of the Holocaust, polio, nuclear bombs, and McCarthyism. My mother, who died as the Trump presidency began, claimed the McCarthy era was the most terrifying time of her life. She bequeathed to me a drive to prevent its reprise.

In those same early years, my mother took my sister and me on civil rights marches; we dressed up to signal the support of middle-class white people. And then we dressed down to tramp Civil War battlefields with my father, a World War II veteran and history buff who traveled the South for business. I learned early on that governments and laws often fail to serve all of their populations equally. I also learned how polarized the United States is; there are deep-seated disagreements, often involving very different notions of who our enemies are and who constitutes our nation. My mother lived in the immediate and worked hard to improve it. My father considered the broad sweep of history. Both passed to me their passion for understanding society in order to change it.

I became a student activist. In high school, as a tutor in the Baltimore ghetto for the Northern Student Movement, I went with my middle school tutees to the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and was inspired by Martin Luther King, Jr. That fall I joined the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the following fall helped start a Bryn Mawr College branch (with, among others, Drew Gilpin Faust, who was to become the first woman president of Harvard University).

I became a representative to the national council and, at 17, in December 1964, I attended my first council meeting. It was a wintry weekend in New York City in a dreary loft filled with hairy young people, folding chairs, and sleeping bags. I was one of the few women taking a seat; the others were making coffee and hanging on the periphery. But we all listened intently as I.F. Stone, the famous muckraking journalist, crafted with words and maps a picture of the Vietnam War. Instantaneously, SDS changed from a student group focused on fighting structural poverty to a militant organization trying to stop a war. I learned from Stone that content matters a lot, but so does how you express it. I resolved to improve my communication skills.

We organized a march on Washington for the following April and held an SDS meeting soon after. I was asked to chair a plenary session and had the experience other women of that era report: As I stood up to call the meeting to order, the men booed me. My epiphany, repeatedly reinforced, was that I had a long personal as well as societal battle ahead. Not only would I have to keep fighting the war and fighting for civil and economic rights for all, I would also have to keep proving that women have voices and the right to use them.

When I told my parents about Vietnam, they said I should trust the president (albeit months later affirming I was right not to). Their response confused me, and I determined to understand what makes a government (and its leadership) trustworthy and legitimate, under what conditions people will believe its description of the world and willingly comply with its demands, and how trust and legitimacy can be regained when lost. These are questions I continue to explore. How could one not, given the events of the last few years?

## EDUCATION

I was an activist, yes, but also a dedicated student, a *Yeshiva bücher*, as my family would say. In college I experimented with psychology but disliked its focus on individual psyches. I dabbled in anthropology, archaeology, philosophy, art history, and African studies, even spending a summer in rural Uganda with Operation Crossroads Africa.

The teaching and support of both Alice Frey Emerson and Paul Brass (who was at Bryn Mawr my freshman year and later became my colleague at the University of Washington) almost won me over to political science, but it was Peter Bachrach who sealed the deal. Peter was a charismatic

professor, a distant cousin of Loeb or maybe Leopold, a polio survivor who walked on canes and lived in a large rambling house full of kids and with a pool table in the basement. I learned about the multiple dimensions of power in a class he taught with his coauthor Morton Baratz (Bachrach & Baratz 1962, 1963). He sent me to learn political theory from J. Roland Pennock, editor of *Nomos*, in an intense Swarthmore College seminar where one of my classmates was David Laitin, now my colleague.<sup>1</sup>

I became Peter's research assistant, proofing his first book (Bachrach 1967), managing a study on poverty in Baltimore, and coauthoring with him my first published essay (Bachrach et al. 1970). Peter was key to other lessons as well. With John Whittaker, a Black porter (aka janitor) at Bryn Mawr, he tried (unsuccessfully) to teach me how to be a pool hustler during several of their nightly games. And how can I forget sitting with Peter in a wood-paneled Bryn Mawr anteroom awaiting the outcome of a union vote we'd engineered. Much as we believed unions were what the maids and porters needed, John let us know it was not what they wanted. They feared losing their jobs, a threat made by the otherwise extremely liberal president of the college. With my parents I had learned about beliefs, sometimes mistaken beliefs, grounded in trust. From the maids and porters, I encountered well-justified beliefs, founded on reasonable distrust, that stood in the way of change.

My first year in graduate school was eventful. I began in a PhD program on urban and regional planning at the Harvard Graduate School of Design; I was trying to have it both ways, to be a scholar but also to have a direct impact on society. A program developed by faculty member Chester Hartman gave me an opportunity to intern at the South End Tenants' Council (SETC), initially helping to organize rent strikes. I was guided by a piece in *Transaction* by Michael Lipsky, who would later become my teacher, collaborator, and dear friend.

The major fight of the SETC was against urban renewal. The South End community of poor and working-class Blacks were constantly moving apartments, given the poor condition of the housing and its cost. This seemed to prove to Boston's planners that there was no real community there at all. I helped demonstrate otherwise by documenting how the kids stayed in the same classrooms, despite changing residences within the neighborhood.

I was studying hard while also interning and then participating in the Harvard Strike, the shut-down of the university in spring 1969 to protest the War in Vietnam. I came to two realizations. The first was that I belonged in political science and so transferred. The second was that I was exhausted and wanted an adventure far from the ugly American politics of 1969. A woman friend and I responded to an index card on a bulletin board to join a French research project in pre-Saharan Morocco. We rented a Renault *deux chevaux* in Paris and headed south to Spain and the Alhambra, before taking the ferry and journeying through exotic Fez and Marrakech and over the Rif mountains to a paradise of extraordinarily beautiful mud fortresses (qsars) dotting the oases of date palms. Some of the qsars were virtually deserted as men left to seek work; others were vibrant with women, children, old people, and goats. Our job was to figure out which villages should be spared when a new dam changed the course of the river.

I witnessed a culture different than any I had ever known. I experienced heat that caused my skin to broil (literally). I discovered the realities of race and class in what at first seemed a homogeneous group. But perhaps the most revealing moment was among a large crowd in Rabat watching the

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<sup>1</sup>At the end of the five-hour seminar, David and I would go have dinner with his best friend, Peter Katzenstein. When we each won the Skytte Prize, one right after the other, I tweeted about our get-togethers more than 50 years ago. Michael Ross responded, "What were they serving? And is there any left?" Jeremy Weinstein, another Stanford colleague, subsequently interviewed the three of us (<https://immigrationlab.org/2021/08/11/swarthmore-meets-skytte/>).

American moon landing on TVs in shop windows. There I heard (in French), “Those Americans, so clever with newsreels! You’d almost think they really had landed on the moon.” This was the first time, but hardly the last, when I would come face to face with demonstrably false beliefs. Differences of opinion, wrong-headed views, all of that I had encountered. But people denying what was before their eyes was a totally new experience.

I returned to Harvard, ready to become a political scientist. I toyed with comparative politics and political theory throughout graduate school, but my commitment at that time was to urban politics. And that led me to three teachers who would deeply influence my thinking. One was Michael Lipsky, who had already affected me and had just joined the MIT faculty. I took his seminar, and we decided to write up the SETC as an example of “Community Organization as a Political Resource” (Lipsky & Levi 1972), an extension of Lipsky’s (1969) seminal work that helped initiate the resource mobilization approach in political science and sociology. The second teacher was the urban historian Robert Fogelson, also at MIT, who taught me the do’s and don’ts of good practices in his discipline.

But Edward Banfield, the contentious conservative scholar, also had a huge influence. He taught a joint seminar with James Q. Wilson, who was to become my official thesis advisor after Banfield briefly departed Harvard for the University of Pennsylvania. Daniel Patrick Moynihan was a regular guest speaker, as were others who used social science as a basis for policy advocacy. It was to Banfield that I presented my first draft of the SETC study and from Banfield that I received the withering but constructive criticism that, once I accepted his suggestions, immensely improved my analytic capacity and writing.

I learned some economics as an undergrad and graduate student, but it was Banfield who set me on the path of political economy. He was a mentor, but it was not always an easy relationship. He wondered out loud why he should invest his time in an attractive woman, who would probably leave to get married (Frances Fox Piven, an earlier student of his at Chicago, reported a similar conversation). When I critiqued *The Unheavenly City* (Banfield 1970) in *Boston Magazine*, he berated me loudly and publicly in the halls of the Harvard Government Department. I withheld my tears until Martin Shefter, then an assistant professor, pulled me into his nearby office and told me it was okay to cry after such a verbal lashing. Marty later joined my dissertation committee.

But Banfield also took me under his wing. He called me soon after our encounter in the halls to invite me to lunch at Locke-Ober, a famous upscale Boston restaurant, to participate with him in a press conference about his book. He had to organize a room change at the restaurant, since women were not yet allowed in the public dining rooms, but he did that and then introduced me as his most important critic, following up with a short walk after lunch so I could meet his editor at Little, Brown. I was also a frequent guest at Banfield’s homes in the city and in the country.

It was his variant of Chicago School economics that intrigued me. Although its major proponents inferred from its models a politics and political reality that seemed far from what I knew or deemed the world should be, Banfield, a true *political* economist, brought to the model an understanding of structural power, class, and psychology. I forged ahead, remaining uneasy but, at the same time, confident I was acquiring useful tools.

Simultaneously, I was immersing myself in arguments and evidence for systemic change. I found a role model in Fran Piven and in her work with Richard Cloward [Piven & Cloward 1977, 1993 (1971)], and our friendship grew when she came to Boston University. I became involved with the Union for Radical Political Economics, where I got to know Sam Bowles, Herb Gintis (another left-wing fan of Banfield), David Gordon, Arthur MacEwan, Michael Reich, Tom Weisskopf, and other first-rate economists who were then at Harvard and MIT but soon spread out around the

country. I participated in a Boston–New York network of planners and students of urban politics we dubbed the Urban Underground; I believe it's where I first got to know Ira Katznelson.

In my last years of graduate school, I was invited to join the editorial board of *Politics & Society*, which Ira edited and which had started but two years earlier as an alternative to the *American Political Science Review*. Its mission was to achieve sufficient status, which it soon did, so that articles published in its pages counted for tenure. Its intellectual impact on me was immense. The board met monthly to discuss submissions, and, according to the New Left norms of the day, all five of us had to reach consensus before authorizing publication. Luckily, we could agree on some things, such as early pieces by Theda Skocpol and Erik Olin Wright, both of whom later joined an enlarged board. It was years before we changed the unanimity rule to at least three strong positive endorsements.

I succeeded Ira as general editor, sharing the responsibilities with Amy Bridges. Not an easy task to routinize the charisma of Ira Katznelson, but that was what we had to do! I was active as a member of the board until sometime in the first decade of this century, when Ira and I both became emeritus editors.

I also continued to be active in politics throughout my graduate student years. The antiwar demonstrations became more intense and the risks higher for participants. Tear gas became commonplace, and I even experienced a police beating at the end of a long day of sitting down in front of the Boston federal building on May Day, 1971. Nor was antiwar protest the only action in town. Women were militantly demanding rights and recognition, and there was the emergence of new forms of organizing, from consciousness-raising groups to a major unionizing drive among female clerical and white-collar workers, aptly named 9 to 5 (925). The Harvard teaching fellows held a brief and only partially successful work stoppage in 1972, and I was one of the union's representatives negotiating with economist John Dunlop, then Dean of the College and later US Secretary of Labor.

My interest in labor organization and city politics combined in my dissertation and first book (Levi 1977). The black eye I had received from the men in blue led to a focus on police unions. I was particularly curious about the seeming contradiction of police, famous as strike breakers, themselves engaging in labor actions. I read archives and histories, did in-depth interviews that I preserved on tape (I wonder if they remain usable. . .), and walked the beats as I explored organizing efforts in Detroit, New York, and Atlanta. I even met and talked with the legendary James Hoffa. The scariest moment came after my ability to hold my Scotch (a skill my father had taught me) was tested in a Detroit ghetto bar with a black SWAT team infamous for having killed several other law enforcement officers in a botched drug raid (or was it a fight over territory?). They illegally took me out on patrol, baiting me all the while about my politics and Harvard education. I was fearless then.

Their contradictions provided a lesson about the ways individuals can embody complex motivations and aspirations. They were violent and aggressive, showing off to me their power to stop people on the street and harass and threaten them. But their leader also shared with me that he had been at the Poor People's demonstration in Washington, DC—as, he guessed correctly, had I.

## THE SEATTLE YEARS

I arrived at the University of Washington in the fall of 1974, as a practitioner of urban politics using models derived from economics and a proto form of what came to be known as rational choice. For me, however, urban politics was not a variant of area studies focused on US cities but a deeply comparative venture. As Elinor Ostrom (2010a,b) noted in her autobiographical essay and interview for the *Annual Review of Political Science*, this was a subdiscipline to which many of

us were initially attracted but which became less interesting over time. Lin and I, among others, moved into more cross-national comparative research.

A lunch—and new friendship—put me on the path I continue to follow. I was a very young and very new assistant professor at the University of Washington when I got a call from the chair of the Economics Department. Douglass North, who went on to win the Nobel Prize in Economics for his contributions to economic history, wanted to meet me. He had heard from economist Sam Bowles that I was a Marxist, and he said he needed to relearn that perspective for work he was undertaking. We ended up teaching together for years and influencing each other's thinking. North looked at the *longue durée* of history and its waves of development and prosperity. He emphasized the role of the state, transaction costs, and a seminal, if simplified, notion of ideology. But he poopooed—although he listened to—my arguments for the inclusion of power and norms of fairness.

A group of us in political science and political sociology began to emphasize the importance of both the state and the analytic use of economic models. The first with whom I connected around this endeavor were Robert Bates, Brian Barry, Michael Hechter, and Adam Przeworski.<sup>2</sup> Of course, political scientists and political sociologists had long considered government, but until then they had retained the pluralist idea of a level playing field with government the referee of conflict among key players, none of which was government itself. But government was an active participant in the competition to determine societal outcomes, and the state became the name of that missing player. Indeed, an effective state was understood as a necessary condition for achieving the normative goals of a society. This emphasis on the state distinguished us from the new classical economics and the Chicago School traditions that partially inspired us. The emphasis on economic models distinguished us from others studying the state.

I needed more. I sat in on a seminar on transaction costs that Doug was teaching with Steven Cheung and had long conversations with Yoram Barzel, another member of the Economics Department. It was heady stuff, a whole new way to think about the trade-offs individuals and societies make. Drawing on work of Ronald Coase, it undermined an assumption of contemporary economics, that there are zero costs of doing business and of engaging in productive interactions. Of equal import was my exposure to game theory, particularly by Michael Taylor, whom I met on my first sabbatical (spent at Essex University in 1981–1982). Michael later became my colleague at the University of Washington, where sociologist Karen Cook and I audited his graduate seminar.

Until that time, rational choice theory in political science was applied largely to voting in elections and in legislatures. My friends and I applied the model to a wide range of actions and behaviors in a wide variety of historical, institutional, and cultural contexts. For political economic institutionalists, individual choice is constrained and facilitated by the formal (and informal) structures and rules of the game. By assuming that action resulted from cost/benefit calculations and strategic interactions of individuals delimited by institutions, we could begin to explain when people obeyed the law, organized, and coordinated—and when they didn't.

Despite the success of the paradigm, I remained unsatisfied. I wanted to explain things it remained ill-suited to explain: voluntary compliance and cooperation rooted in ethics, trust, and ideas about justice and fairness. I wanted it to take on power relationships. I had learned how important beliefs are, how they can be false, how they can be held passionately, and how they can change, and I wanted to understand their mechanics. And I wanted to engage in rigorous analytic

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<sup>2</sup>Among their works in this new tradition, let me note a few: Bates 1981, 2005 (1991), 1997; Barry 1970, 1995; Przeworski 1985, 1991; Przeworski & Sprague 1986; Przeworski & Wallerstein 1982, 1988; Hechter 1987; Bates & Lien 1985.

research while also considering problems that were, at their heart, normative and in which actors had complex motives informed by some combination of material interests, social context, ethics, and emotions.

Coming to the University of Washington and my first decade (of four) there transformed my research, albeit not the questions that motivated my work. But that transformation was not an easy one. Not only did I have to acquire new skills, I had to thicken my thickened skin even more. Modified as my version of rational choice was with concerns about equity and fairness and partially inspired by Marxism, my application of rational choice to multiple countries and time periods earned me the antipathy of colleagues and students. Senior faculty, all male (given who had tenure in that era) harangued me in the halls (shades of Banfield) for the violence I was doing to their discipline and to their hallowed conceptions of comparative politics. Undergraduates found the idea of free riders anathema and couldn't seem to grasp the logic. Graduate students believed I must be a conservative (which I definitely was not) and shunned me in a 1980s version of cancel culture.

But then things changed. The cohort of practitioners grew in numbers and eminence, graduate students were attracted and trained, important journals and book series developed. Doug North earned the Nobel Prize. So, too, did political scientist Elinor Ostrom, for comparative political economic research on the governance of the commons.

I found my own voice and audience in the years that followed.

My work shifted markedly immediately preceding tenure. I changed from an urban to a comparative and historical political economist, and I began to focus on big problems that I believed were tractable with new tools I (and social science generally) had acquired. As my own work developed, so did social science itself, making it possible to use methods and data not available to the generations before me and thus making it possible to ask and even partially answer questions that once seemed beyond our reach.

I also learned how deeply I value and enjoy collaborative research. I love the give and take, but more importantly I welcome the combination of approaches, methods, and skills that facilitate a deeper, broader, and far better exploration of the puzzles we are addressing. In my early post-tenure work, collaboration took the form of adopting and transforming what I learned from others, a practice I continue. However, in later work, collaboration took the form of actual research partnerships and coauthoring.

## COMPLIANCE AND CONSENT

The role of the state in economic history was the first such problem I tackled as a comparative and historical political economist. My approach was influenced, of course, by my conversations with Doug North in our jointly taught seminar. I began to understand how to conceptualize and study the state by exploring history in a way that was quite distinctive from the neo-Marxist historians, such as Perry Anderson, I had read so avidly. In *Of Rule and Revenue* (Levi 1988), I focused on the reasons for the variations in revenue extraction over time and place. My case studies were selected from different modes of production ranging from the ancient to the modern capitalist, more precisely from Ancient Rome to contemporary Australia. I thought I would find that the main driver of rulers' policies would have to do with efficiency and transaction costs. I learned instead that, as important as economic transaction costs were, political transaction costs were far more important. They have to do with the bargaining power of those being asked to pay and the process of winning acquiescence.

Let me give you an example of bargaining problems: When Philip the Fair, King of France from 1285 to 1314, did not go to war but kept the revenues he had demanded from the barons in support of war, he had a very hard time with subsequent asks. He had to offer more and make



his promises credible. Bargaining can also take the form of resistance when rulers tried to impose extractions rather than win compliance to them.<sup>3</sup> Tax collectors in the Roman Empire had to fear for their lives when they worked in colonized areas; so did French tax collectors when they went to villages that did not fully accept the monarch's right to demand extractions. And a number of US provost marshals, those who were registering young men for the army during the Civil War, were murdered in the process.

As the citizenry gained more say, the problems for rulers became even more complex. When the first income tax was introduced in Britain in 1799, it required government to extend its negotiations about revenue extractions to a broader population. To gain acceptance of the income tax, parliamentary leaders not only had to promise a return from the taxes to the society, they also had to convince the public that the taxes collected would actually go to the government and not the pockets of the tax collectors. And—foreshadowing the debates today over social media—they had to provide assurances of protection of privacy. This last resulted in a public burning of all the tax records, as required by Parliament—although the bureaucrats did, it turns out, keep secret copies in the basement of the tax authority.

I discovered that where revenue extraction was most productive, it relied less on coercion than on activating a sense of duty or ethical obligation resulting in a form of conditional cooperation. I learned this concept from Michael Taylor [1987 (1976)] and used it and some simple game theory to extend the basic idea to the kind of puzzles I was researching. Given that there is no way to monitor sufficiently the entire population, successful revenue extraction depends on achieving quasi-voluntary compliance: a willingness to comply but with coercion in the background. To achieve quasi-voluntary compliance requires confidence in the following propositions:

1. The government has both a commitment to and a capacity to deliver on its part of the fiscal contract with its citizens and subjects.
2. The government's system of extraction is fair according to the standards of the day.
3. The government can credibly commit to locating and punishing free riders.

The point of this last is to encourage those of us who think it is ethically right to pay taxes to do so. Unless we feel certain that we will not be suckers, complying with extractions when almost no one else is, our protective self-interest will trump our ethical and society-oriented preferences. Thus, the capacity of government to identify and punish defectors is a critical aspect of what constitutes a trustworthy government.

I couldn't totally prove the importance of the voluntary component of compliance in my book on revenue collection, in part because I had information primarily about government choices and in part because there are so many incentives to hide income and wealth. So I had to look for a citizen behavior whose variation I could observe. That led me, in *Consent, Dissent, and Patriotism* (Levi 1997), to consider responses to government demands for volunteering for military service and compliance with conscription. I investigated this issue in six states over 200 years—Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and France. Among my cases was a study of the very different attitudes of Anglophone and Francophone Canadians toward the world wars. In Ontario, young men were willing to make great sacrifices and risk their lives in the war effort. In Quebec, they were not. The primary difference lay in their attitudes toward the federal government. For the Anglophones, the state was relatively trustworthy; it kept up its part of the social contract with citizens and was reasonably fair by the standards of the day. The Francophones

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<sup>3</sup>This is consistent with the argument about “weapons of the weak” that Scott (1985) was making at about the same time. Indeed, one of the first talks I gave on *Of Rule and Revenue* was at Yale at his invitation.

had a very different view. They believed the Canadian government was continually breaking the agreements embodied in the terms of confederation: to treat all citizens equally and to provide real bilingual schools in Anglophone Canada. Most important at that moment was the requirement that going to war—let alone considering conscription—could occur only when Canada was directly under attack. These two distinctive ways of viewing the state resulted in very different behaviors in the two provinces:

- Significant volunteering for military service and then support for conscription in Ontario.
- Very little volunteering and significant resistance to the draft in Quebec.

Here's the rub. It is very difficult to observe what people really believe or feel about their governments. So how do we go about getting at the willingness to comply in instances where behavior is not easy to decipher? While I did a pretty good job of figuring that out in the military service cases, it was not an easy task. It required a process of inference based on deep knowledge of the history, ideologies, and revealed preferences of populations—in other words, a deep understanding of context.

Moreover, it required a model that would enable me to assess whether my interpretation of complex historical events was plausibly correct and not a just-so story. What guided me in my research in both of these early books—and to this day—were versions of rational choice and game theory (albeit pretty off-the-shelf game theory, given my toolbox). However, this was rational choice modified by my recognition that people have norms, ethics, emotions, and communities that influence their decisions. They are not motivated only by economic interest; indeed, they sometimes act against their self-interest.

As it turns out, my methodological instincts were shared with a group of people who came together at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS) in 1993–1994. We were a group of economists, political economists, and economic historians all deeply influenced by Douglass North, who was to win the Nobel Prize that year, and all interested in comparative and historical understanding of the state and of social order: Bob Bates, Avner Greif, Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, Barry Weingast, and myself. My book on conscription was slowed down and much improved by my conversations with my collaborators, but we also produced a joint book, *Analytic Narratives* (Bates et al. 1998), that outlined our shared methodological approach. Using game theory gave us a means to develop counterfactuals, that is, an alternative possible history. But its most important contribution was to give us a means to identify testable implications that would allow us to arbitrate among competing explanations.

## TRUST, TRUSTWORTHY GOVERNMENT, AND LEGITIMACY

The next immediate step in my life-long research program was to develop a fuller understanding of what constitutes trust in general and trustworthy government in particular. Luckily, my then colleague at the University of Washington and current colleague at Stanford, sociologist Karen Cook, and I joined forces with political theorist Russell Hardin to run a project on just these issues for the Russell Sage Foundation (RSF), culminating in our coauthored *Cooperation Without Trust?* (Cook et al. 2005).

One common approach to getting at questions of trust—one with which we all had serious problems—is surveys. Surveys don't fully capture attitudes, particularly when it comes to government trustworthiness. The questions, unless in the hands of someone like my coauthor Laura Stoker (Levi & Stoker 2000) or my great friend Bo Rothstein (2011), seldom distinguish between favorable affect and perceptions of trustworthiness. Nor can they inform long-term historical analysis. Key questions do not even go back into the 1950s, when serious political surveys began, let

alone the early 1800s, when serious democratic politics commenced. And until very recently, they told us nothing about the variation in the perceived trustworthiness of different government agencies but only about government itself. Two examples make that distinction concrete: While lack of confidence in the police is high among Black Americans in the United States, confidence in the police is high among other American groups and high more generally in other countries. People almost everywhere these days lack confidence in politicians but have high confidence in the courts.

A further complication is the fact that many, probably most, people don't act on their own convictions, because they fear punishment, because they are certain they will be ignored or demeaned, or because they are not sure what their neighbors really think or will do. Consequently, few of us reveal our own preferences until we feel safe to do so. This transports me back to Peter Bachrach and his theory of nondecision making. Fear of reprisals or recognition that any effort is wasted effort prevents certain groups from even trying to lobby or vote or mobilize. He, of course, was particularly concerned about Black Americans, but his insights transport to multiple settings and peoples.

Complicating the picture even more is the fact that our beliefs about what government has a right to do, let alone *is* doing, are influenced by information that may or may not reflect the realities of what is happening in the world and who is the source of the problem. I'm not just talking about social media here. I'm talking about the interactions we have with our peers, in our schools and religious organizations, and what newspapers we read and TV programs we watch. And those interactions are affected by our experiences. This was the Anglophone–Francophone story in Canada, well before the onslaught of social media.

The RSF project involved multiple workshops and a book series that culminated in our *Cooperation Without Trust?* Almost all of what I learned reinforced my intuition and earlier observation that government trustworthiness accounts for considerable variance in why and when citizens (and subjects more generally) comply with the extractive demands of governments.

What really enabled me to take on the role of trustworthy government and its implications for citizen behavior was becoming Harry Bridges Chair (1996–2000) at the University of Washington at the prodding of David Olson, my great friend, a coauthor (Levi & Olson 2000; Levi et al. 2004, 2009a), and the first Bridges Chair. I was able to combine my interest in theory, methods, and history with in-depth encounters with working men and women who were struggling to achieve the American dream while also, in many cases, staying alert to social injustice in the society and within their unions. I learned how membership in an organization can change beliefs about what is happening in the world and about one's personal efficacy to change it. Learning about them and from them deepened my understanding of power. It also made me think about a question I had been avoiding: What makes a government or its leaders legitimate from the perspective of their constituents?

For a long time, I discounted the role of legitimacy even though I was asked to speak about it by other scholars and by groups within the policy world, particularly at the World Bank. I was unsure of what conceptually distinguished the term, and perhaps more importantly, I was unsure about how to recognize it empirically. So I began to delve into the sources of legitimating beliefs, first in work with Audrey Sacks on sub-Saharan Africa (Levi et al. 2009b; Levi & Sacks 2009, 2012; Sacks & Levi 2010) and then in other projects. The past few years have taught me the significance of legitimating beliefs as the underpinning of what makes our democracies work (Levi 2019). It has always been obvious that the peoples of occupied states, e.g., the Palestinians and the Northern Irish, could not and would not perceive the state as legitimate. However, what we've been seeing in Black Lives Matter and in some of the populist and nationalist movements throughout the capitalist democracies reflects strongly held beliefs that governments, or at least significant agencies of government, are acting in illegitimate ways.

To reiterate: A trustworthy government is one that keeps its promises to deliver goods and services (or has exceptionally good reasons why it fails to). It is a government that is relatively fair in its decision making and enforcement processes and that encourages individuals to act on a sense of duty or ethics by detecting and punishing rule breakers. A legitimate government is one that appeals to widely accepted justifications for its selection, maintenance, and policies. Investigations across history and countries reveal that the more trustworthy the government is, the more likely it is to evoke observation of its laws and acquiescence to its policies. Less clear is the link between perceptions that government is trustworthy and beliefs that it is legitimate, at least in countries claiming or trying to be democratic.

Being trustworthy in practices and outcomes may contribute to perceptions of government legitimacy. However, trustworthiness is, at best, a necessary but not sufficient condition for legitimating beliefs. The trustworthiness of government speaks to its ability to keep order, identify and punish free riders, ensure the trains run on time, provide services, and make and implement policy. Authoritarian governments can be trustworthy in this sense. What makes for trustworthy *democratic* government is its accountability to the population through fair and free elections and a process of decision making that reflects a reasonably representative process and shared ethos.

These attributes of a trustworthy government contribute to legitimacy, but they are more about process than values. Legitimacy is fundamentally about values, that is, consensual standards for the selection of government and the premises of its policies and its actions. When the polity is too polarized or when major government actors violate norms of governance—let alone break its actual rules or engage in corruption—then legitimacy itself is in peril.

And that's the world we are currently in. At the root of the contemporary political crisis is the failure of government to be trustworthy in its delivery of promised services and protection and to be legitimate in relation to the norms and values of much of the populace. Governments are no longer delivering on their promises to provide a path to the middle class. Indeed, far too many people are seeing the end of a stable job and affordable health and retirement benefits. They are experiencing real economic hardship and loss of status—and have well-grounded parental fear that upward mobility and economic progress are coming to an end, that their children will be even worse off than they are. This is not just an American problem; even countries such as Germany and Sweden that have done so much more to provide a safety net are beginning to feel the pressures. The worldwide refugee crisis affects all of us, and so do globalization, climate change, and of course the global pandemic and disruptions caused by COVID-19. Work, workers, and supply chains that employ people and provide goods and services are undergoing major transformations. Education is not preparing people for the world in which we now live. Indeed, in every country, the institutions that worked once need renewal in light of technological, environmental, and social changes.

## CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL SCIENCE

We are living in what Pendleton-Julian & Brown (2018) call a “white water world” where change is constant and new forms of flexible learning and action increasingly necessary. It is a world that demands a new political economic framework, one that serves the interests of the society as a whole, that builds on and produces shared values, and that institutionalizes trustworthy and legitimate government. This is what I mean by a moral political economy, the focus of a major program at CASBS and of a book I recently coauthored with Federica Carugati (Carugati & Levi 2021).

What has given me the chutzpah to suppose I can help formulate the ideas that should inform a new political economic system? Part of the answer is my long life and my hard-earned sense of professional security. If I can't afford to take intellectual risks and be overly ambitious at this point in my career, who can? Part of the answer is the urgency of the period combined with my

commitments to ensuring society serves the well-being of all its members. But a large part of the answer has to do with the state of contemporary social science. It has evolved immensely since I was an undergraduate, and I like to think that my ideas and capacities have developed with that evolution.

My engagement with CASBS and my various transdisciplinary undertakings, including those at international institutions where I taught or did research,<sup>4</sup> have helped me stay alert to the cutting-edge thinking in multiple disciplines and to perspectives I might not otherwise have attended to. But I also needed to stay abreast of my own discipline of political science. Hiring and mentoring—and being mentored by—junior faculty was one way to do this, as were seminars and professional meetings. Scholars in comparative politics and comparative historical political economy have an increasingly varied toolbox and are rigorous in the application of methods—ranging from archival, narrative, ethnographic, and statistical research to innovative uses of game theory, experiments, and causal inference.

Editorial roles, particularly when they involve participating actively with others in shaping a field, are also a major source of new analytic tools and theory. For me, these started with *Politics & Society*, then went on to include the Trust Series for RSF and the *Annual Review of Political Science*. But one of my greatest professional pleasures was as general editor of Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics from 1999 to 2014. In that position, I ran the Seattle Seminar, in which potential authors workshopped a book draft with some of the series editors, other academics, and University of Washington graduate students. Interrogating the arguments, evidence, and methods of these terrific scholars was an even better way to learn than the classes I had set in on as a young faculty member. Some of the books in the series were truly pathbreaking,<sup>5</sup> and the whole enterprise was an inspiration to better and more ambitious scholarship.

Editing the series also gave me a weapon to combat an ongoing problem in the social sciences. With the introduction of every shiny new method, many scholars become less concerned with major puzzles and problems and more focused on questions to which the method is best suited, even if the questions are trivial or the results minor incremental contributions to knowledge. My interest is encouraging an emphasis on significant issues and using the appropriate approach, often multimethod, to achieve findings that enhance both our toolkit and our understanding of politics, society, and economy. There is a lot of work that now meets that standard—and not only in the Cambridge series.<sup>6</sup>

But in addition to methodological and analytic improvements, there was another big change in the profession that advanced the quality of thinking as much as the enhancements in data and

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<sup>4</sup>I have been a visiting scholar and fellow at many places, but three were particularly important to me: the Max Planck Institute in Cologne; El Centro de Estudios Avanzados en Ciencias Sociales del Instituto Juan March; and the Research School for Social Sciences, Australian National University.

<sup>5</sup>I'm proud of all the books we produced, but let me highlight the following: those that won the Woodrow Wilson book award for APSA (Thelen 1999, Wilkinson 1999, Beissinger 2001, Kalyvas 2006, Ansell & Samuels 2014, Singh 2017); some we workshopped (Iversen 1999, 2005; Huber & Shipan 2002; Chandra 2004; Wibbels 2005; Treisman 2007; Kitschelt et al. 2010; Mahoney 2010; Stokes et al. 2013; Mares 2015; Díaz Cayeros et al. 2016; Iversen & Soskice 2019; Rodden 2019); and some authored by emerging (now emerged) talents (Wood 2000; Grzymala-Busse 2002, 2007; Luong 2002; Lieberman 2003; Mares 2003, 2006; Díaz Cayeros 2006; Magaloni 2006; Tucker 2006; Weinstein 2006; Wittenberg 2006; Davenport 2007; Rodden 2007; Tsai 2007; Dunning 2008; Ansell 2010; Nalepa 2010; Gingrich 2011; Beramendi 2012; Thachil 2014). I apologize to those I neglected.

<sup>6</sup>Examples include Golden 1997; Boix 1998, 2003; Przeworski et al. 2000; Bates 2001; Stasavage 2003, 2011, 2020; Acemoglu & Robinson 2006; Habyarimana et al. 2009; North et al. 2009; Besley & Persson 2011; Hechter 2013; Fisman & Golden 2017; Thurston 2018; Scheve & Stasavage 2016; Sanchez-Cuenca 2019.

methods: the incorporation of women, people of color, and scholars from all parts of the world into our faculties. When I was junior faculty, women coming up for tenure either waited (often too long, as in my case) to have children or disguised pregnancies until after the tenure vote was completed. There were no parental leaves, and there were few role models of successful senior female scholars. While many more changes are still needed, there has been palpable progress.

As important as increased descriptive diversification is its contribution of new ways to think about problems and its introduction of questions social science had neglected altogether. The recognition that diversity is an important value significantly enriches knowledge and approaches to knowledge. The challenges to older social science traditions may sometimes seem like a threat and the theories and methods uncomfortable. Not all of the innovations succeed. But the effects of the successes are transformative and, more often than not, healthy and progressive.

## A MORAL POLITICAL ECONOMY

These experiences all inform my present scholarship. So now let me turn to what is currently obsessing me: creating a framework for a new moral political economy.

Every political economic framework embeds values and encodes standards for behavior and choices. All are moral political economies. Neoliberalism is no exception. It enshrines the rational individual as decision maker and centerpiece; it then emphasizes rational choices defined narrowly in terms of personal costs and benefits. It is normative about firms, governments, and the economic system itself: Firms should single-mindedly maximize profit, governments are primarily to protect property rights and provide the infrastructure that the market will not, and relatively unfettered capitalism will ultimately benefit all who work and strive. It is also normative about individuals: free riding is expected, and economic failure generally reflects personal, not structural, problems.

The major achievement of neoliberalism—and all prevailing political economic frameworks since Adam Smith’s—is to make normative prescriptions seem like descriptive statements of the natural behavior of people, governments, and organizations. We come to understand the system as given and natural; it can be tweaked but not fundamentally changed. We think that the reason some prosper while others do not is an effect of choices or luck, not of system design.

This belief in the system as natural is mistaken. Economies are the result of moral and political choices, which can be made and remade. Indeed, they have been, as one political economic framework gave way to another. The history of capitalism is the history of the evolution of institutional frameworks and motivating ideas. In the past century, we’ve seen Keynesianism replaced by neoliberalism, which has held sway since the 1980s when Prime Minister Thatcher and President Reagan enshrined it as the doctrinal road map for government, and international aid agencies imposed neoliberal terms on developing countries. This framework is as subject to being superseded as its predecessors were.

Political economies embed values and norms of justice and fairness. We observe that members of a populace not only respond to material changes in their status quo but also—and sometimes in contradistinction to their narrow interests—respond to what they perceive as violations of those norms, wounds to their dignity, and failure to recognize the worth of their cultures. Any political economic framework enshrines reciprocal rights and obligations that link populations, governments, corporations, and all the other various organizations that make up the society. It guides the social relations among the actors, and it defines what constitutes legitimate action. Incorporated in a moral political economy are accepted justifications for the actions and power of government, employers, landholders, and financiers—justifications based on widely shared values and beliefs.

A moral political economy is not just its abstract qualities or its economic reasoning and political justifications. It must speak to people’s concerns and outline a set of values that guide

policy to address those concerns. There is growing empirical evidence—statistical, experimental, qualitative, and interpretive—of what various populations want. While we can presume that everyone seeks a modicum of economic and physical security, we cannot presume other values and relevant trade-offs. In addition to more knowledge of existing preferences, we also need a grounded understanding of the role of context, persuasion, socialization, and other factors that influence values and how they are prioritized. Everyday observation informs us that group identities and norms are a huge influence on perceptions of both preferences and strategies for achieving them. Everyday observations—and recent Facebook and Google exposés—alert us to how actions on those values are manipulable by information.

But equally important for a new moral political economy is the reconceptualization and then institutionalization of political equality.<sup>7</sup> This requires us to rethink democracy, yes, but also the elements of the economic and social structure that inhibit the development of capabilities (Sen 1999, Anderson 2019, Darity & Mullen 2020, Loury 2020) and ways in which civil society and government interact with the market (Carlin & Bowles 2020, Satz 2010).

So how do we go about constructing a new moral political economy? What are the building blocks? Some of my former students and I, in the company of other colleagues and scholars (Berliner et al. 2015a,b; also see Locke 2013), began to investigate the nature of required institutional changes for workers in supply chains. Another former student, Henry Farrell (Farrell & Newman 2019), is among those making progress in thinking through international and domestic regulatory issues necessitated by changes in technology. But I think the keystone is generating what I call an expanded and inclusive community of fate (Levi 2020).

John Ahlquist and I developed an earlier formulation of this concept in *In the Interest of Others* (Ahlquist & Levi 2013), which we coauthored with the able assistance of Amanda Clayton, who also coauthored a chapter. The book reveals the factors that encourage unions, organizations created to serve economic self-interest, to mobilize their members on behalf of distant others who can never reciprocate. We analyzed several labor unions that evoked such actions from their members. What made that possible was a set of governance arrangements that made union leaders highly accountable but also introduced members to events in the world and allowed them to argue about the interpretation, then come to a determination about whether to act by, for example, shutting down the port or refusing to load cargo (e.g., scrap iron to Japan to protest the occupation of Manchuria in the 1930s, guns on Dutch ships going to repress the rebels in Indonesia in the late 1940s, or goods to South Africa in the last decades of Apartheid).

The union members developed an expanded community of fate in which they recognized that their well-being and destinies were entwined with those of others. There but for the grace of God go I! Or in the words of the legendary Knights of Labor and then Industrial Workers of the World, “an injury to one is an injury to all.” This is the slogan adopted by the International Longshore and Warehouse Workers Union, the union that motivated our study.

The unions we investigated produce this expanded community of fate with institutions that socialize and inform workers about the world and appeal to action based on norms of fairness rather than narrow economic interest. One pensioner, who followed John and me out of a meeting we held in Sydney, summed it up: “I loved and respected our union leader, but I never understood his communism. But when I learned we were being asked to load guns on ships to shoot down

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<sup>7</sup>To prepare a perspective paper for *Inequality: The IFS Deaton Review*, Pablo Beramendi, Tim Besley, and I (Beramendi et al. 2022) are working on a new conceptualization of political equality that is grounded in the work on power and influence that started me on the path of political science. It draws on interesting new work on relational equality (e.g., Anderson 1999, Allen 2020, Satz & White 2021), develops metrics for measuring variations in political influence, and identifies leverage points and strategies for correcting imbalances.

the rebels in Indonesia, I said, ‘That’s not fair dinkum.’ I joined with the others in refusing to load the arms.”

These governance institutions are also deeply democratic, and they foster political equality. They give workers the skills, voice, and agency to challenge the information presented to them and then make reasonably informed decisions. Workers have the power both to recommend actions and to veto them. And the actions give them “the pleasure of agency,” as Elisabeth Wood describes in a very different context, the civil war in El Salvador (Wood 2001, pp. 267–68). The emotional pleasure derived from acting in the interests of others becomes motivational. We see these same kinds of factors operating in many other settings, and much of that analysis is inspired by the Nobel laureate and Skytte Prize winner Elinor Ostrom, my good friend, with whom John and I workshopped our book shortly before her passing.

## EXPANDING AN INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY OF FATE

I learned from the maids and porters how people can form beliefs that at first glance (but not second) seem against their interests. The moon landing provided my first real glimpse of people firmly holding beliefs that are patently false. The longshore workers taught me people can change their beliefs. Beliefs about the way the world is and what one can do about it influence not only attitudes toward the legitimacy of relevant authorities but also one’s understanding of possible actions. Given the crisis in trustworthiness and legitimacy of government and given that we need new skills and capacities in this whitewater world, the case for a new moral political economy is clear, it seems to me. And that moral political economy requires an expanded and inclusive community of fate.

All of us have some community of fate, those with whom we perceive our interests as bound and with whom we are willing to act in solidarity. But sometimes that community is exclusionary: emphasizing race, nation, or religion rather than common humanity. To build the kind of expanded and inclusive community of fate on which a moral political economy can be built requires that we figure out two things:

- How to scale (yes, to that extent I’ve bought into Silicon Valley, which we can see from CASBS) the lessons of *In the Interest of Others* (Ahlquist & Levi 2013). Carugati and I have begun to think this through (Carugati & Levi 2021), and with others I have been thinking about how to do this with online groups (Lee et al. 2021).
- How to achieve a community of fate that encompasses all those likely to be affected by climate change or globalization—or any other overarching concern that moves us beyond the bounds of our family, personal connections, and parochial forms of identity.

The values of a moral political economy would be those that cut across divides, rather than deepen them: values such as protection of our common planet, significant reduction of political inequality, racial justice, protection and facilitation of human dignity and flourishing. Failure of government, employers, and other organizations to ensure these kinds of goals, or unfair and unjust implementation of them, would be defined as illegitimate use of power. They would be perceived as violations of the social compact and reasons for protest and withdrawal.

The post–World War II institutions—both domestic and international—are experiencing a crisis in capacity and fitness. Neoliberalism once promised solutions but is no longer delivering, if it ever did. It may still be touted and articulated, yet it is fraying, and with it the economy, political coalitions, and social fabric that were its backbone. Fashioning a new moral political economy will require shifting popular ideas and beliefs about markets and about work, designing a new regulatory apparatus, and fashioning a safety net that unleashes the economic potential of



a technologically driven economy. We have choices over where we will go next, and my energy now is devoted to making those choices both apparent and possible.

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## Errata

An online log of corrections to *Annual Review of Political Science* articles may be found at <http://www.annualreviews.org/errata/polisci>