



# Concepts and practices of political sociology

Tuukka Ylä-Anttila



# What is political sociology?

- Not *necessarily political* in the sense of having normative *goals*
    - Not all political sociology has emancipatory motivations – a lot of it does
    - So why not “sociology of politics” then? See next slides...
  - It’s sociology **about** “politics”
    - But what’s politics anyways?
    - “I propose to distinguish between ‘the political’ and ‘politics’. By ‘the political’, I refer to the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in all human society ... ‘Politics’, on the other hand, refers to ... practices, discourses and institutions that seek to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual” (Mouffe 1999: 754)
      - multiple political positions always exist and need to be fit together, whether through deliberation, debate, voting, power struggle...
      - politics is organization of *the political*



eduskunta



poliittinen



hameensosialidemokraatit



kansainvälinen politiikka



poliittiset



valtio



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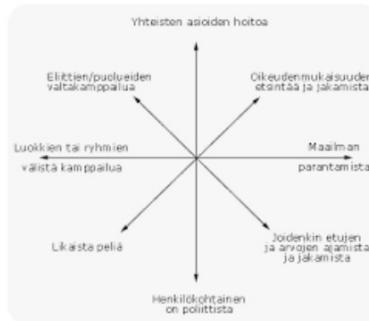
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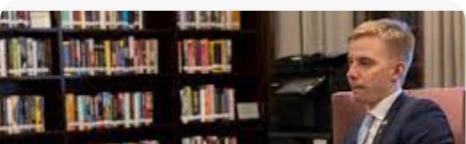
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Valtio-opin johdantokurssi

Valtio-opin johdantokurssi





government



art



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india



drawing



party



social media



symbol



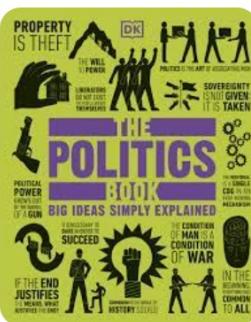
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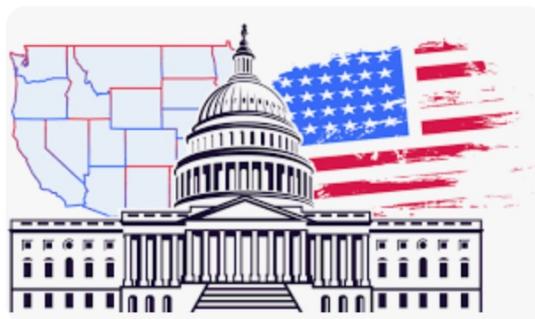
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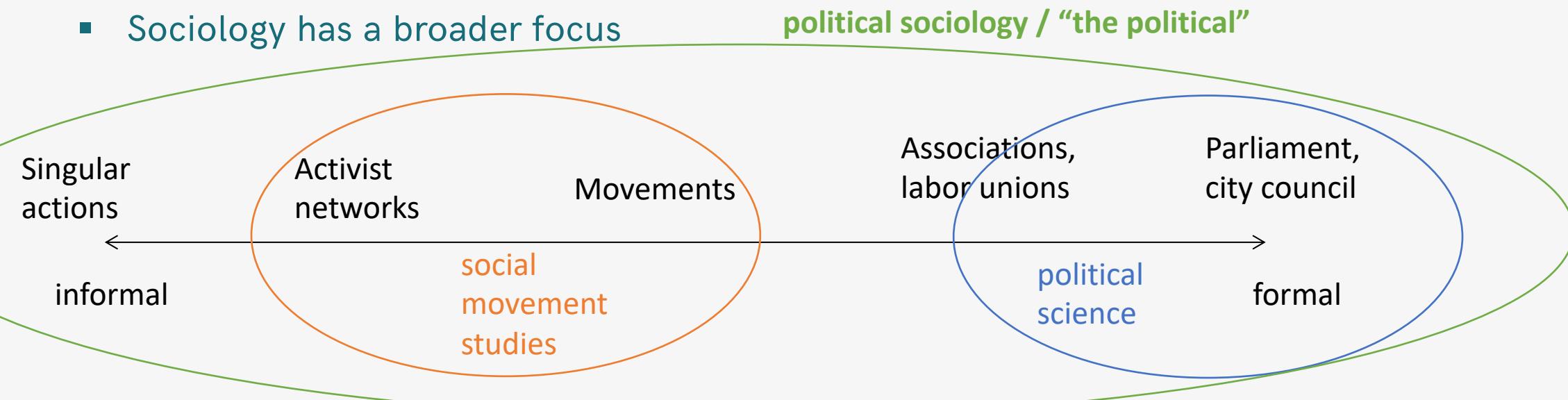
The Hans India  
Politics is the art of possibility





# How does political sociology differ from...

- Political science?
  - Sociology defines politics more broadly
- Political philosophy?
  - Sociology is empirical
- “Sociology of politics”?
  - This implies that politics is a fixed field
- Social movement studies?
  - Sociology has a broader focus





# Politics, sociologically understood

- A working definition:
  - *social activity in which societal futures are imagined and pursued*
    - *social*: you can't do it on your own
    - *activity*: something that you do rather than something that just is
    - *societal*: not just for yourself
    - *futures*: you want something to change
    - *imagined*: ideas of how things should change
    - *pursued*: trying to make change happen
- Includes what politicians do, but also, and more importantly:
  - arguing for/against things publicly, demonstrations, movements, activism, normative political theorizing, *imagining futures*, etc.
  - ***the political!***
- Related concepts: citizenship, participation, democracy



# Who gets to define politics?

- Could we let those who do politics define it?
  - "Follow the actors" (Latour 2005: 12)
- If someone defines their actions as politics, why would we say it's not?
- Other side: beware of defining non-political action as political
  - Many activists don't see themselves as political but sociologists want to define them as such (Baiocchi et al. 2014)
    - Danger of a broad definition: everything is political
      - The concept loses its utility (to delineate something)
      - Still, we can study *the political dimensions of action*



# Politicization

- Politicization:
  - “opening of something as political, as ‘playable’” (Palonen 2003: 171)
- Not everything is political, but everything can be made political
  - by arguing what **should** be
- Example:
  - “Personal preferences are subject to individual discretion and are not socially regulated. For example, one family’s preference to vacation at the beach instead of the mountains is a matter of taste. Others’ preferences about the same object are not right or wrong; they are simply different.” (Skitka 2010: 268)
  - But what if I argue that vacationing at the beach is wrong because maintaining beaches destroys natural diversity and people drive or even fly to the beach, which worsens climate change? Suddenly, it’s **political** (there’s a conflict about what **should** be done)



# Politicization, a closer look

- “opening of something as political, as ‘playable’” (Palonen 2003: 171)
- Politicization as justification: in conflict, there is an ***imperative to justify*** (Boltanski & Thévenot 1999)
  - Justification is *raising the level of generality*: from a particular conflict to a public level; the act of arguing that this event is an instance of a broader conflict of principles (justifications)
  - Example: a dispute between two co-authors, “you get to do all the exciting stuff as I just have to fix the bibliography!”
    - Implicit: exciting/boring stuff should be shared **equally** (value of equality)
      - 6 “orders of worth”: “civic, domestic, inspiration, fame, industrial, market”
        - These are cultural habits which people **use to justify**
        - Other ways of categorizing moral rulebooks (Ylä-Anttila 2023)
        - And: familiarity/individualism (Eranti 2018, Ylä-Anttila 2017)

# The Civic Imagination

MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN AMERICAN POLITICAL LIFE

Gianpaolo Baiocchi

Elizabeth A. Bennett / Alissa Cordner

Peter Taylor Klein / Stephanie Savell



ROUTLEDGE

- Through fieldwork in various activist groups, the authors theorize 3 “civic imaginations”, “dialects of civic life” through which people understand their action:
  - **Redistributing power and privilege**
    - Activists see problems as explained by broader cultural structures of inequality
  - **Building community solidarity**
    - Activists create feelings of togetherness
      - Kallio Block Party?  
(Jokela 2024)
  - **Solving problems**
    - Activists see problems as solvable through proposing new ideas
      - Conflict-averse, less power-oriented
- Note: actors and movements are not eternally stuck in one imagination, but movements do form habitual practices; they have their own **culture**

# European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology



## Unlikely mobilisations: how ordinary Russian people become involved in collective action

Karine Clément\* 

*Department of Problems of Interdisciplinary Synthesis in the Field of Social Sciences and Humanities, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences, St Petersburg State University, Andrew Gagarin Center for Civil Society and Human Rights, Office 515, 58-60 Galernaya St, St Petersburg 190000, Russia*

*(Received 21 September 2015; accepted 20 January 2016)*

This paper analyses the dynamics of grassroots mobilisation in contemporary Russia. Based on data from ethnographic studies conducted in two life spheres – the home and the workplace – the analysis shows how ordinary Russian people who have no particular propensity towards activism may adopt a new way of feeling, thinking and acting. The mobilisation process is highly problematic in an apolitical society such as Russia. Building on interactionism and pragmatic sociology, the study stresses the importance of ‘testing moments’ in one’s immediate environment that trigger collective action via day-to-day, emotional conversations. Many intertwined dynamics underlie the mobilisation process, including the appropriation of common places, the making of communities, the rise of collective empowerment and the dynamics of experiencing activism. Drawing on Goffman’s frame analysis, the process of individual involvement in collective action is conceptualised as a reframing process. Overall, the process of becoming an activist is shown to be remarkably pragmatic and experiential, unfolding through practices and interactions that are often small-scale.

**Keywords:** grassroots mobilisation; frame analysis; pragmatic sociology; collective empowerment

# European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology



## Populist knowledge: 'Post-truth' repertoires of contesting epistemic authorities

Tuukka Ylä-Anttila

University of Tampere, Finland

### ABSTRACT

'Post-truth politics', particularly as manifested in 'fake news' spread by countermedia, is claimed to be endemic to contemporary populism. I argue that the relationship between knowledge and populism needs a more nuanced analysis. Many have noted that populism valorises 'common sense' over expertise. But another populist strategy is counterknowledge, proposing politically charged alternative knowledge authorities in the stead of established ones. I analyse countermedia in Finland, where they have played a part in the rise of right-wing populism, using a combination of computational and interpretive methods. In my data, right-wing populists advocate counterknowledge; they profess belief in truth achievable by inquiry, not by mainstream experts but alternative ones. This is a different knowledge orientation from the valorisation of 'common sense', and there is reason to believe it is somewhat specific to contemporary right-wing anti-immigration populism. Populism's epistemologies are multifaceted but often absolutist, as is populism's relationship to power and democracy.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 24 May 2017; Accepted 18 November 2017

**KEYWORDS** Countermedia; Finland; gender; knowledge; populism; topic modelling

# European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology



## Politicization and publicization: the fragile effects of deliberation in working-class districts

Marion Carrel<sup>a,b\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>CeRIES, Lille 3 University, Lille, France; <sup>b</sup>Centre for Research on Social Movements (IMM-Ehess), Paris, France

(Received 29 January 2014; accepted 9 January 2016)

A deep understanding of the use of deliberative processes requires a political ethnography able to detect their consequences for the participants and for the public sphere. This article analyses a participatory process organised in France by an activist-professional facilitator with a small group of bureaucrats and marginalized individuals, designed to promote mutual understanding and raise public issues. This ethnography shows that deliberation in small groups, rather than merely producing consensus and reproducing inequalities in accessing forms of public expression as is sometimes alleged, may generate at least preliminary politicization and the publicization of social issues in working-class districts. These rather fragile effects raise the question of the continuity of collective action and institutional transformations generated by deliberative processes.

**Keywords:** deliberation; politicization; publicization; conflict; counter-power

# European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology



## 'We do not want to assimilate!': Rethinking the role of group boundaries in peace initiatives between Muslims and Jews in Israel and in the West Bank

Nissim Mizrachi and Erica Weiss

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel

### ABSTRACT

This article considers the cultural meaning of religious and community boundaries when attempting to mediate the Jewish-Palestinian conflict. Here we compare two sites, one religious, the other secular, of peace-building encounters between Palestinians and Jews in Israel and in the West Bank. Through extensive ethnographic work, the study draws attention to the divergent meanings of community boundaries in liberal and non-liberal cosmologies. Whereas secular liberals view religious boundaries as barriers to the autonomous individual's free choice, itself considered necessary for co-existence, for these Jewish and Muslim religious groups, those same boundaries safeguard a peaceful and respectful shared space. Our ethnographic insights call for a broader discussion of the meaning and use of social and symbolic boundaries beyond the liberal vision for social and moral order. Such a discussion is theoretically timely and politically pressing in view of the challenge of living together with difference in the global reality of deep diversity.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 24 April 2019; Accepted 4 February 2020

**KEYWORDS** Social boundaries; diversity; peace; liberalism; religion; dialogue



We now know what political sociology is!  
**Break time!**

(this took about 45min maybe?)



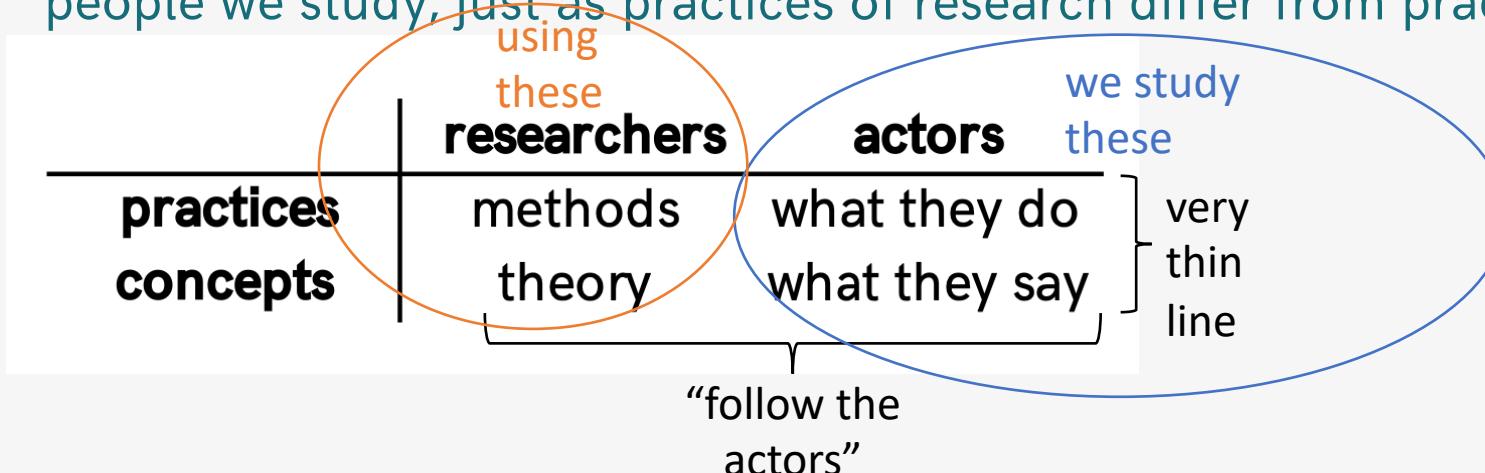
# *Concepts and practices of political sociology*



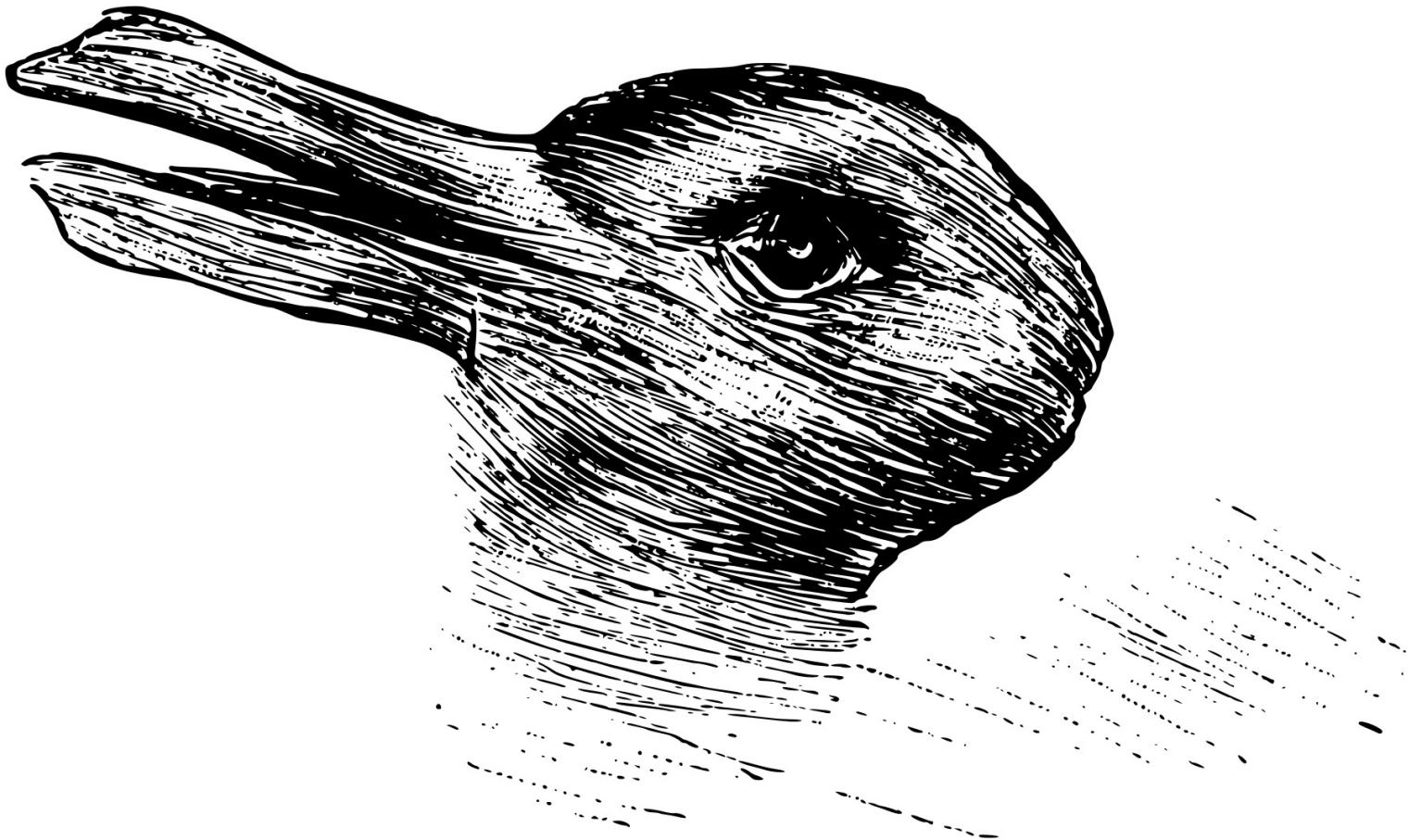


# Concepts, practices, theory, methodology

- Concept: "an abstract idea", "a fundamental building block underlying principles, thoughts and beliefs"
- Theory: "a rational type of abstract thinking" that is built of concepts
- Practice: **2 the customary, habitual, or expected procedure or way of doing of something: product placement is common practice in American movies | [count noun] : modern child-rearing practices.**
- "Practices" is also a concept that political sociology uses (a lot)! Duality here.
- Important: research concepts may be different than concepts used by the people we study, just as practices of research differ from practices of subjects



# Welche Thiere gleichen einander am meisten?



Raninchen und Ente.

- "Which animals are most like each other? The rabbit and the duck." *Fliegende Blätter*, 1892
- Jastrow 1900, Wittgenstein 1953, Kuhn 1962
- Around easter, people tend to see a bunny, but in fall, a duck (Brugger & Brugger 1993)
- What people **think** affects what they **see**
- Perceptions are **theory-laden**: they are not independent of theory
- It's difficult to judge a concept by how well it corresponds to "reality" since reality is different to different people at different times. This is especially true of political and social reality!



# Pragmatism

- Pragmatists think people use concepts, thoughts, theory **in action**
  - This is true for both *the people we study and us researchers*
- *"All models are wrong, but some are useful"* (Box, 1976)
- Scholars should evaluate concepts in terms of their **usefulness**
  - not "how well they correspond to 'reality'"
  - example: what is "populism"?
    - Huge debate in political science (e.g. Aslanidis 2015); is it an ideology, a discourse, a style, a strategy...?
    - Is it just people v elite **or** people v elite & others?
      - Instead of debating "what it is" (because it's different to each of us depending on viewpoint), what's a **useful** definition
      - It's not just us sociologists using the concept, it's the political actors too. How do they use it? What's **populism in action?**



# Pragmatist sociology

- (Sometimes, confusingly, called “pragmatic sociology”)
  - Pragmatism is about ***action*** and ***practice***
  - Pragmatists think repeated action forms ***habits***, habits form ***culture***, and culture guides and enables ***action***
  - Habitual action needs no reflection, but whenever something stops it, we must think what we’re doing: that’s when new practices of action can be formed
    - Imperative to justify (Boltanski & Thévenot 1999)
    - **Politicization** can happen when a break in action pushes actors to ***raise the level of generality***
      - ***From the private to the public***
        - Example: Soldiers’ mothers of Russia (Lebedev 2010)
          - Personal relationships are important in Russian culture but to sustain political action personal concerns have to be translated onto a more public and general level



# Let's take stock

- We now know a little about:
  - **Politics**
    - Rather than a pre-defined field, we study **political aspects of action**
      - *...which means people working together for societal change*
  - **Concepts**
    - Tools of a sociologist: delineate parts of the world in a useful way
      - *...but the people we study use concepts too*
  - **Practices**
    - Pragmatism focuses on habitual action, practices
      - *people tend to do things the way they're used to, until interrupted*

***Great! Now for next week's assignment.***



# Democracy

- Voting, sure, but what else?
- Deliberative democracy: the idea that decisions are/should be made after weighing various opinions, positions, arguments in the *public sphere* (Habermas 1962)
  - Demonstrations, social media activism etc. can be thought of as participation in this big democratic debate
    - But do the “best” arguments really win? What about power?
- Agonistic pluralism: politics doesn’t end in a decision, it’s a perpetual conflict (Mouffe 1999)
- Lots more theory on democracy, some of which you’ll encounter in next week’s readings and lecture



# Frame

- One of the most important concepts for political sociology
- Huge literature in which frames are defined in various ways (e.g. Goffman 1974)
- Simple definition: **context**
- "Framing essentially involves selection and salience: To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman 1993: 52)
  - it's telling something in a way that emphasizes certain features and downplays others, putting it into context
  - this "telling" can happen in text, speech, body language, pictures...
  - most often used in communication and media studies
  - rigorously tested empirically to affect action (Kahneman & Tversky 1984)



# Frame

- "frames have at least four locations in the communication process: the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture. **Communicators** make conscious or unconscious framing judgments in deciding what to say, guided by frames [...] that organize their belief systems. The **text** contains frames, which are manifested by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images [...] The frames that guide the **receiver's** thinking and conclusion may or may not reflect the frames in the text and the framing intention of the communicator. The **culture** is the stock of commonly invoked frames" (Entman 1993: 52-53)
- "A frame links two concepts, so that after exposure to this linkage, the intended audience now accepts the concepts' connection" (Nisbet 2009: 17)



# Frame example: Climate change

- Some agreement that it's an environmental problem (which is of course a fact), less agreement on solutions:
  - Can mitigation be compatible with economic growth?
  - Individual choices vs. political decisions?
    - These aren't facts but interpretations
    - How it's framed affects how relevant various solutions feel
      - In Indian media, climate change is more often framed as a global North-South issue in which India has a lot to lose and must protect its interests, whereas in US media, there's more discussion of whether or not climate change is real, and its economic impacts (Ylä-Anttila et al. 2021)



# Populism

- Politics that is based on the fundamental idea that “the people” are good and “the elite” is bad
  - Obvious first question: who are “the people”?
    - Left-populism: typically, the working class
    - Right-populism: typically, the white population
      - Right-populists also often talk of a third group: immigrants
      - “The elite” is supposed to be on the side of “the people” but instead immorally favour immigrants



# Frame example 2: Populism

- Populism isn't a full-fledged ideology like (varieties of) liberalism or socialism
  - What is it?
    - Aslanidis 2015: it's a frame
      - Because claiming 'ideology' or 'strategy' necessitates "to have glimpsed inside the 'populist's head'" (p. 10)
      - It's more about the form than the content of politics, a style that can be attached to many policy arguments
        - It's not a matter of who's a populist and who's not, it's about making populist arguments: ones that diagnose a crisis and posit an ***us*** and ***them***



# Post-truth paper (Ylä-Anttila 2018)

- Example of a recent empirical research article in political sociology
  - 'Post-truth politics': facts don't matter anymore, identities and feelings do?
  - Populism claims to represent 'the people' against 'the corrupt elite'
  - Populism is claimed to be anti-intellectual and valorize 'folk wisdom' and 'common sense' (Saurette & Gunster 2011); *epistemological populism*
    - 'The people have had enough of experts telling them what to do'
    - But is this still the case? Maybe not that simple
  - Counterknowledge: *alternative knowledge which challenges establishment knowledge, replacing knowledge authorities with new ones, providing an opportunity for political mobilization*
  - Epistemological populism and counterknowledge are different strategies to challenge knowledge elites, I claim



# Post-truth paper, 2

- Why don't people simply believe what's true?
  - Broad psychological literature shows that people evaluate knowledge in terms of what their peer group believes. If knowledge challenges your way of life and community, it simply doesn't **feel** believable
    - e.g. lifestyle choices like diet are deeply embedded in your identity, so it's hard to absorb knowledge that would force you to change
      - unsavoury knowledge is labelled ideology, false belief
  - Modern society is built on expert knowledge that individuals can't verify
    - We all have to choose which experts to trust
      - -> high chance of choosing based on identity and peer group
  - Political issues are often based on knowledge that's difficult to verify or can be interpreted in many ways



# Post-truth paper, 3

- Conspiracy theory is a form of counterknowledge: it challenges established authorities by claiming that the *real truth* is hidden but achievable through some alternative means (maybe by joining the cult)
  - Conspiracy theories carry the promise of redemption! We can uncover the truth, fight those who try to cover it up



# 4

- Challenging of knowledge authorities happens in online communications
- How to study them?
  - Deep interpretative qualitative study is limited to small amounts of material. Is the chosen material representative?
  - Data science approaches can look at a lot of data but often just scratch the surface in terms of content
  - Mixed methods: best of both worlds?
    - Either:
      - Get qual results first, then confirm them with quant
      - Or get quant results first, then explain them with qual

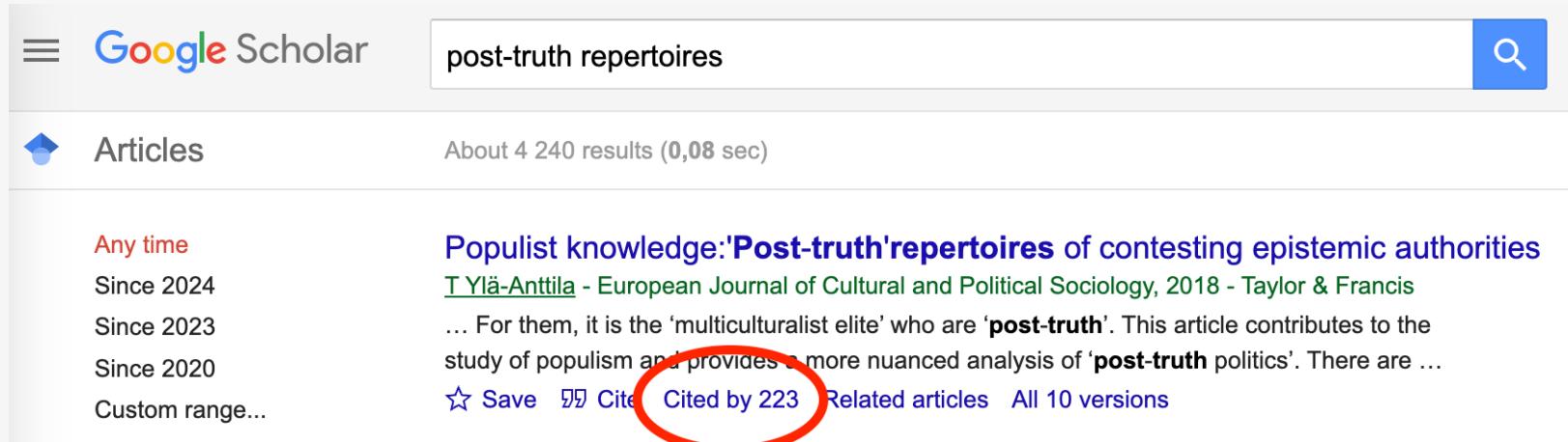


# What I did

- Computationally look for content related to knowledge/authority in big datasets of far-right online content (Hommaforum & MV-lehti)
  - Topic modeling to construct a kind of “content index”
  - Use that to select material for qualitative analysis in a repeatable, transparent, representative way
- Results: anti-immigration right-populist activists don’t really valorize “folk wisdom” that much, instead they claim they have better experts, better knowledge than the “corrupt elite”. Counterknowledge, not epistemological populism.
- (Ylä-Anttila 2018)

# Finding literature

- Reference lists at the end of articles you read are a treasure trove!
  - But they only take you back in time
  - Google Scholar's "cited by" button takes you forward in time; you get to see articles that have cited the first one after it was published



Google Scholar search results for "post-truth repertoires". The search bar shows the query. Below it, a section for "Articles" displays "About 4 240 results (0,08 sec)". On the left, a sidebar shows filtering options: "Any time", "Since 2024", "Since 2023", "Since 2020", and "Custom range...". The main results list includes the article "Populist knowledge: 'Post-truth' repertoires of contesting epistemic authorities" by T. Ylä-Anttila, published in the European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology, 2018, by Taylor & Francis. The "Cited by 223" link is circled in red at the bottom of the article snippet.



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