

Introduction: The Politics of Public Justification

By Uriel Abulof and Markus Kornprobst

Abstract: Introducing the special issue, this introduction sketches a broad frame for studying public justification. Addressing the relevance of studying this phenomenon, we contend that justificatory processes are very much at the core today's politics. Defining the concept inclusively, we highlight the relevance of communicative agency and, at the same time, the salience of communicative contexts that enable this agency. Casting our net widely, we show how public justification is related to other, more thoroughly studied concepts, such as legitimacy, authority and power. Encouraging students of public justification to add to our understanding of justificatory processes, we highlight multiple fruitful methodological avenues for studying the concept.

Keywords: communication, context, legitimacy, power, public justification, reasoning.

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Introduction

Why? This question drives scientific inquiry, not least in the social sciences: why war, revolution, racism and inequality? Asking and debating about ‘why?’, however, is not the prerogative of scholars; social actors, endowed with thought, reflection and speech, do it too (Archer, 2012). While we all dance to the beat of genes, emotions, identities and habituated norms, we occasionally stop to ask ‘why?’ The social sciences have been long preoccupied with the ostensibly objective ‘why’ while sidelining the social, intersubjective ‘why?’ This special issue focuses on the latter, analyzing the social actors’ search for justification in their public, political, sphere.

Justifications, broadly understood, are answers to why-questions given and debated by social actors. In order to ensure that our task remains doable, we focus on public justifications. While we do not submit that private encounters addressing why-questions do not matter, we choose to put public encounters addressing these questions under scrutiny. Given the ongoing telecommunications revolution, and new political practices associated with it, these public encounters become increasingly pertinent in our evolving political orders.

This introduction is organized into four sections. First, we underline why it is important to address the social why-question. Human beings are the only justificatory animals. Thus, it is not sufficient to assume justification away. The *onus* is on the researcher to understand how this justification happens and what political repercussions failures and successes of justifications have. Second, we conceptualise public justifications as reason giving and contesting in public communicative encounters that are made possible and impossible by social context, and (re-)produce policies and even political orders. Third, we propose several research avenues for studying how social actors come to justify and how they ought to do so. We encourage multidisciplinary and multi-perspectival research that crisscrosses established scholarly categories. Finally, we provide an overview of the

contributions to this special issue. They demonstrate empirically that human beings are justificatory animals, trace the processes through which justification affect political outcomes, and develop normative arguments for how they ought to do so.

Human Beings as Justificatory Animals

This collection of papers proceeds from a clearly articulated ontological micro-foundation. Human beings have evolved into justificatory animals. Practices of justification have come to be deeply woven into the political orders we inhabit (*nomization*).

Humans are the only *why*-asking animals. This capacity and proclivity did not emerge at the dawn of humanity. It has evolved gradually. This uniquely human software required certain ‘hardware,’ such as our advanced prefrontal cortex. It also required language—not as a mere form of communication, which most animals possess—but the ability, even the instinct, to use a finite set of elements (such as words) and rules (grammar and syntax) to create infinite combinations, each of which is comprehensible (Pinker, 1994). Only humans can communicate across mediums about intangibles. People are storytellers, contriving narratives to express and ease their anxieties and uncertainties, to justify themselves and their actions—to themselves and to others—probing alternative courses of being and doing (Bruner, 1986; 1990; Gottschall, 2012; Henriques, 2011, p. 18). Importantly, justification can transpire *a priori* as well as *a posteriori*; we may give reasons both before and after, and indeed throughout, our practical conduct.

As human civilization has evolved, so has our factual, practical and moral *Why*—our justificatory capacity—and its political impact on an increasingly universal scale. Karl Jaspers (1953) famously designated the period from 800 to 200 BC as the Axial Age, when ‘the *specifically human in man*’ blossomed. Poets, prophets and sages in China (e.g. Confucius), India (Buddha), Persia (Zarathustra), Israel (Isaiah), and Greece (Plato) embarked on religious

and philosophical quests that changed the course of humanity, indeed shaped it. They have critically observed their societies, and prescribed changes.

The Axial separation of the *is* from the *ought*—the real from the ideal—was transformative. Bellah (2011) ascribes it to socio-economic shifts that engendered simultaneous legitimacy crises of urbanized societies—and motivated their individualistic renouncers, and defenders. However, these ‘Axial agents’ generated the very idea of ‘legitimation crisis’ on a universal scale: they contested the given, calling into question the very existence of institutions and practices that were previously seen as self-evident.

The Axial Age cast an existential spell. *Logos* appended *mythos* to deliver *nomos* out of *chaos*; refutable reflection conjoined fictitious narration to breed a socially meaningful order in a meaningless universe. The *nomos* turned out to be a constant work-in-progress: we construct, construe, and contest our social order to shield us against *anomy*, socio-moral vacuity. As Berger (1967, pp. 23-22) suggested, ‘Every socially constructed *nomos* must face the constant possibility of its collapse, into *anomy*... every *nomos* is an area of meaning carved out of a vast mass of meaninglessness,’ and thus ‘the most important function of society is *nomization*,’ evincing the ‘human craving for meaning that appears to have the force of instinct.’

Crucially, the Axial agents conveyed their reasoning to others, justifying their claims. *Nomization* is communicative; ultimately, ‘*nomos* is constructed and sustained in conversation with significant others’ (Berger, 1967, p. 21). *Nomization* involves both reification and ‘*aportiation*,’ as some agents attempt to turn the social order into a given, while others challenge it (fostering *aporia*, cognitive puzzlement) through deliberation. Invariably, we inhabit a world of multiple *nomoi*, or *nomospheres*, a world where cooperating and competing cultures subscribe to different social orders to provide meaning and moral guidance to their life, not least in the political domain.

Since the Axial Age, legitimation has permeated the construction and maintenance of socio-political orders within and across state borders (Fukuyama, 2011; 2014; Harle, 1998). *What is*, and *why* it *ought* to, became invariably entangled. Power, practice and passion were not enough; persuasion too became part of politics. Reasons have been publicly given to convince people that certain orders are just, or at least justifiable. Importantly, however, public justification—the articulated, communicative, reasoning of politics—need not be principled. Unlike legitimation, which many see as pertaining to social order alone (see Hurrelmann in this issue), public justification can also be pragmatic, reasoning the practicalities of politics. Granted, principled and pragmatic arguments often intertwine, even coalesce, but typically still figure differently. Overall, legitimation can, but need not, involve justification. If you order, ‘Obey!’ and I reply ‘Ok,’ you have effectively legitimated your power (attaining a Weberian ‘authority’), but if I ask ‘why?’ and you answer, for example, ‘Because I was elected,’ justification commences.

Public justification ascended in modernity. ‘Winning hearts and minds’ has become a new battle cry, as elites and publics alike fight to make their case in a world of expanding ideational contestation. ‘Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold,’ wrote Yeats in the wake of World War I; nearly a century later similar signs are all around. Where some see ‘the deeper logic of liberal order’ still intact (Ikenberry, 2011), others behold entropy and chaos (Schweller, 2014), a transition ‘from a would-be concert of nations to a cacophony of competing voices’ (Bremmer & Roubini, 2011). Either way, the triumphant chants heralding ‘the end of history’ (Fukuyama, 2006) have been hushed—in both the West and the Rest—by acute challenges to, and doubts about, liberal, secular, capitalist democracy. The battle over ideas, subscribing to the justificatory imperative, is still with us. This divergence invites us to go beyond *political moralism*, ‘the priority of the moral over the political,’ to *political realism*, revealing the myriad ways publics have tried to meet ‘the basic legitimation demand’ (Williams, 2005, pp. 2-3) of political life.

The troubled attempts to meet this demand resonate acutely in recent years. Consider the Arab Spring, a surprising season, not least for regional experts, who did not envision a quiescent public turning against the ingrained status quo (Gause, 2011). Likewise, the unprecedented mass demonstrations in Israel, 2011, calling for ‘social justice,’ and in India, 2012, demanding ‘gender equality,’ went against the grain of the former’s ‘cult of security’ and the latter’s ‘entrenched patriarchy.’ Notably, in all three cases, protestors reasoned why authorities and policies should transform. We may readily doubt their proclaimed justification and criticize their suboptimal outcomes. Still, Weber’s (1978 [1922]) *Verstehen*, once refined (Feest, 2010), persuasively suggests that sociological explanation should include an understanding of the social actors’ own intersubjective reasoning, urging us to consider the activists’ articulated public justification as a *complementary* account for their emergent calls. Public justification, as a form of intersubjective reasoning, thus become a key piece in the explanatory puzzle of our socio-political universe.

Justification in the Scholarly Literature

What does the literature say about the social why-question? What clues does it provide for how actors reflect upon reasons with others? This section discusses how different perspectives in Political Theory, Comparative Politics and International Relations circumvent or address this question.

Approaches that rely heavily on materialist explanations do not address the ‘why’ question. What drives the explanation is not the reasoning of actors but material forces. These forces determine what actors end up doing. In 1979, two path-breaking and frequently cited books on world politics were published. Kenneth Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics* introduced Structural Realism. It focused on the distribution of military capabilities as the determinant of state interaction (Waltz, 1979). Immanuel Wallerstein’s *The Capitalist World Economy* is the foundational work of world systems theory. It identified the distribution of

economic capabilities as the determinant of interaction between blocs of states (Wallerstein, 1979). A number of influential works in Comparative Politics draw heavily from materialist structure to explain outcomes as well. Research on revolutions conducted in this vein, for instance, has profoundly shaped this field of study. This includes the path-breaking research conducted by Barrington Moore (1966) and Theda Skocpol (1979).

Structuralist explanations came under increasing pressure from the mid-1980s onwards. They were charged for being too one-sided in addressing the structure-agency problem. They provided fascinating insights into structure but very little into agency. To some extent, the pendulum then swung the other way. Rational choice portrays itself as a thoroughly agential approach to human reasoning. How this reasoning proceeds is a function of scholarly assumption rather than scholarly inquiry. Being more or less constrained by material forces, actors maximize their expected utility. They do this kind of reasoning by themselves. What they want (rank-ordered preferences) in a particular encounter is unaffected by the reasoning of others. Rational choice scholars readily admit that these assumptions simplify the actual reasoning process considerably. But they hold that these assumptions amount to analytically useful simplifications of a complex world (Keohane, 1988, p. 379; Levi, 1997; Martin, 2007).¹

Criticisms of rational choice abound. Many critics submit that these assumptions are simplistic and distort reality (Abulof, 2015a). Given the purpose at hand, DiMaggio and Powell's criticism of rational choice is particularly pertinent. They observe that some organisations survive in the midst of material pressures to maximize gain even if they are ineffective. Their answer to this puzzle is legitimacy. Organisations may be ineffective. But they survive even in a competitive economic environment if they are considered legitimate (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). This sociological line of argumentation goes back at least to Weber's thought on legitimacy (*Legitimitätsgeltung*). Authority (*Herrschaft*) is a form of legitimated power. Weber distinguishes three kinds of legitimacy: charismatic, traditional and

legal. Charismatic authority is rooted in the aura of the governor, traditional authority in customary differentiations between governors and governed, and legal authority in bureaucratic and legal proceedings of modernity (Weber, 2008, §16). For Weber (1992, p. 8), these modes of legitimation are all about reasons. He writes about ‘reasons of legitimation’ (*Legitimationsgründe*). But these reasons are not out in the open. They are ‘inner justifications’ (*innere Rechtfertigungen*).

Taken together, Weber’s conceptualisation of legitimacy opens up some room for understanding how actors answer a crucial ‘why’ question. They have reasons for subscribing to a particular mode of authority. These reasons form the very foundations of a polity. Subsequent research echoes Weber in a number of ways. Most of all, it underlines the connections between legitimacy, authority and order (Bukovansky, 2002; Clark, 2005; Hurrellmann et al., 2007; Steffek, 2007). At the same time, it also goes beyond Weber. Two elaborations are particularly noteworthy. First, some authors provide more details on the kinds of reasons that underpin authority. Hurd (2007), for instance, writes about favourable outcomes, fairness and correct procedure. Typologies such as these broaden our understanding of legitimating reasons. Weber often seems to focus on what Hurd labels correct procedure. But the other types of reasons should not be neglected. Favourable outcomes, for instance, matter, too (Rogowski, 1974; Gelpi, 2003; Lake, 2009). Second, authors putting the process through which legitimation occurs under scrutiny identify implicit and explicit dimensions of this process. Scott (1995) was among the first authors who alluded to the latter. This prompted researchers to pay closer attention to how actors communicate about legitimacy (Banchoff & Smith, 1999; Beetham & Lord, 2014).

These two amendments of Weber are important for any kind of research on reasons. The reasons upon which actors reflect range from what is, broadly speaking, beneficial to what is appropriate. Actors debate about some of these reasons. By communicating with one another, actors contest and decontest these ideas. Research on social movements and

advocacy networks provides important insights into these communicative processes. Here, the debate about reasons is no longer always linked to how reasons legitimate an order. Debates may be related to discussions of polity and policy. In the communicative process, there are senders and receivers. The former advocate ideas and provide reasons for this advocacy. This package of advocated ideas and reasons for the advocacy is often conceptualised as frame. Established reasons provide the frame for the advocated idea (Snow et al., 1986; Gamson, 1992; Williams & Kubal, 1999).

Related clusters of research include narrative theory and various rhetorical approaches. The former analyses how communicators make their case by telling stories to audiences. An advocated idea is embedded in a familiar story (McGee & Nelson, 1985; Fisher, 1987; Bruner, 2002; Ringmar, 2006). There are many variations of rhetorical approaches (Bjola & Kornprobst, 2011). Many of these are, in principle, compatible with narration and framing. The key claim of rhetoric is that actors assemble compelling messages by embedding an advocated idea in what is already familiar. In ancient Greek rhetoric, these commonplaces are referred to as *topoi* (Aristotle, 1995). Roman writers translate them literally as *loci* (Cicero, 2003; Quintilian, 1953). Some rhetorical research is more agency-oriented. Authors underline the political efficacy of the interlocutor (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969; Frank, 2004; Crosswhite, 2010). Other writers put more emphasis on contextual factors constituting agency. These contexts usually constitute political efficacy unevenly. There are actors that are relegated to the status of receivers and there are those who are privileged as senders. This context is sometimes conceptualised as field, for instance as discursive field (Ellingson, 1995; Hajer, 2003; Fiss & Hirsch, 2005), argumentation field (Bird, 1961; Toulmin, 2003, p. viii; Willard, 1983: 136) or rhetorical field (Kornprobst & Senn, 2016).²

Political Theory has generated a number of important normative approaches to argumentation. They deal with the question of how communication ought to be conducted. Pragmadiagnostics, for instance, is about universal rules for how actors ought to assemble

arguments and how they ought to exchange arguments. The former is about how to make valid inferences from premises and the latter about the exchange of messages in argumentative encounters (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 1999; 2000). Deliberative approaches left more of a mark on the study of politics. Habermas's often cited ideal speech situation dares to think of the counterfactual that communicators let the better argument to come to the fore in encounters in which everyone has equal access (Habermas, 1991, p. 132). This counterfactual has frequently been criticised as too idealistic. This criticism has given rise to deliberative arguments that allow for more social context, including context that qualifies the equal access (Benhabib, 1994; Wellmer, 1999; Blaug, 2000). These differences notwithstanding, the key argument widely shared among deliberation scholars is that today's politics – domestic and international – revolves around exchanges of public reasons. Indeed, this is even fully acknowledged by political theorists that have kept their distance from deliberative approaches (Rawls, 1999, p. 137).

For all the differences across approaches dealing with reason giving and contesting, most of them share two features in common. On the one hand, they frequently employ the term 'justification' in order to describe how actors discuss reasons. Justification, in this context, is to be understood broadly. It is not just about justice but about discussing reasons more generally.³ On the other hand, however, they refrain from defining the term. Justification is merely a frequently used term. It is not a concept that is addressed in detail. Habermas's definition and typology of the concept (pragmatic, ethical and moral) is an exception. So is his detailed discussion of the salience of justification in our times. Habermas argues that legitimate orders in our days are no longer just grounded in the kind of rational bureaucratic procedures that Weber writes about but in reflexive justification. Thus, justification becomes ubiquitous in politics (Habermas, 1991, p. 117).

No one has argued this ubiquity of justification more forcefully than Boltanski and Thévenaut. Public justification is an 'imperative' in today's politics, as the protagonists of the

so-called new pragmatism put it (Boltanski & Thévenaut, 2000, p. 209). Their account of justification puts a strong emphasis on plurality. The actors are situated in the midst of ‘a plurality of cognitive and evaluative formats’ (Thévenaut, 2007, p. 411). Communication failures are always possible in this heterogeneous constellation. But so is persuasion and compromise (Boltanski & Thévenaut, 2000). Critics of the new pragmatism tend to focus on the six orders of worth that the authors outline in their often-cited 2006 book entitled *On Justification*. Some critics submit that these orders (inspired, domestic, fame, civic, market, and industrial) over-conceptualise the social context that actors put to use to orient themselves. The formats that actors rely upon cannot easily be squeezed into orders of worth (Honneth, 2010; Blok, 2013). Other critics charge that the authors under-conceptualize the context because they remain rather silent on power. Access to communication, constituted by the context, is usually very unequal (Bénatouïl, 1999; Wagner, 1999).

What the critics do not do, however, is dismiss Boltanski and Thévenaut’s observation that gave rise to their theorising in the first place. Today’s politics revolves around public justification. This puts the onus on students of politics to make sense of the phenomenon. The following two sections sketch some conceptual work for an inclusive study of justification and politics that invites contributions from multiple perspectives. First, we define public justification. Then we propose how to study it.

Conceptualising Public Justification

This section conceptualizes public justification inclusively, leaving room for philosophical, (social-)psychological, and sociological interpretations of the concept. It outlines four features of public justification: giving reasons, public communication, social context, and the productivity of justificatory encounters.

First, public justifications address ‘why’ questions. They are about giving reasons and discussing the reasons given by others. How actors come to so varies greatly. Some are

believers in their messages while others twist and turn their stance to make it palatable to an audience. Actors tend to privilege certain kinds of reasons over others. Religious reasons, for example, may appeal to some actors much more than secular ones. Others may foreground pragmatic reasons as opposed to moral ones and so on. The literature is full of classifications of different kinds of reasons. Habermas's distinction of pragmatic, ethical and moral ones as well as Hurd's on reasons related to outcomes, fairness and correct procedure have been alluded to above already. To mention but a few others, Alker (2011) writes about political, ethical and religious reasons. Boltanski and Thévenaut's orders of worth identify various kinds of powerful reasons. These range from efficiency in the industrial world and the accumulation of wealth in the market world to the common good in the civic world and originality in the inspired world.

Second, justifying is communicating. Public justifications are made in public communicative encounters. In most instances, this involves verbal communication. Public justifications are made in speeches, newspaper articles, blogs, twitter etc. But communication is not necessarily verbal. When West German and East German artists painted against one another in the 1950s, for instance, the style they used justified the one polity and dejustified the other. Abstraction and Realism, respectively, were forms of public communication. What was liberating and democratic to Western painters (Abstraction) was a signifier of exploitation by a capitalist system to those from the East. What amounted to a symbol for overcoming capitalism to Eastern painters (Realism) was a totalitarian mode of expressing oneself to those from the West (Hermand, 1991; Schmied, 1995; Belting, 1999). Political caricatures, too, contain justifications that are not verbalized (Rostbøll, 2009).

Third, public justifications are underpinned by social context. This context matters procedurally and substantially. On a procedural level, social context delineates the opportunities of actors to be heard in particular communicative encounters. In most circumstances, some actors have more authority to speak than others. They are recognized as

interlocutors. Others, by contrast, lack this recognition (Bourdieu, 1991: 109). They find it much more difficult to assert themselves. On a substantive level, the context delineates the intelligibility of messages. Some ideas have assumed a taken-for-granted quality. Interlocutors can put them to use to string justifications together that make sense to them. Equally important, some of these ideas are more widely shared. The audience embraces them, too. This provides opportunities for interlocutors to make their justifications resonate with this audience. These taken-for-granted procedural and substantive ideas make for a complex constellation⁴ of repertoires. There is not just one. Some taken-for-granted ideas are more widely shared. Others are more idiosyncratic. Even widely shared established ideas are multivocal. They are interpreted differently by different actors (Beiner, 1983, p. 132; Ansell, 1997, p. 373).

Fourth, exchanging public justifications generates divergences and convergences on reasons. Debating justifications is always a challenge. The plurality of the social context poses challenges for communication and understanding. Actors often end up speaking past one another. If they anchor their justifications in different sets of taken-for-granted ideas these justifications appear nonsensical or even foolish to the other. But discussing justifications does not always generate divergences. It can also generate convergences. These hardly ever amount to an all-encompassing consensus (D'Agostino, 1996; Gaus, 2003). Usually, justifications resonate with certain segments of the audience but not with the entire audience. Usually, some of the receivers with whom they resonate come to embrace these justifications more than others. But even given such a patchwork of agreements, such convergences make a difference. They support policies and even the re-making of polities. As far as the latter is concerned, public justifications come full circle. They are enabled by a context. But they also have the potential to remake this context (Kornprobst, 2011; 2014).

Studying Public Justification

The study of public justification is multifaceted. Some research on public justification deals with how polities are justified while others deal with policy issues. There are positive and normative research avenues. Pragmatic and moral dimensions invite different kinds of investigations. Actors ranging from public intellectuals to state leaders, from journalists to parliamentarians, and from bloggers to international bureaucrats await analysis.

There is some overlap between research on public justification on the one hand and legitimacy on the other. Legitimacy is, arguably, ‘not merely an important topic, but the central issue in social and political theory’ (Beetham, 1991, p. 41). The importance of political legitimacy, however, is matched by its elusiveness. Political philosophy equates legitimacy with appropriateness and justice (Hegtvedt & Johnson, 2009), encouraging us to observe reality to prescribe and proscribe what we believe it ought, and ought not, to become (e.g. Rawls, 2005).

Conversely, from a sociological perspective, reality itself matters most, and we must empirically examine the ways things are, not how they normatively ought to be. The trouble with turning legitimacy into an object of sociological inquiry is that it brings the normative deep into the empirical. The typical sociological solution lies in equating legitimacy with ‘willing obedience’ (Cromartie, 2003, p. 93), support and compliance (Booth & Seligson, 2009). Legitimacy then becomes a snapshot of the given public endorsement of certain authorities and policies. But in so doing sociology shuns the Axial revolution: legitimacy only makes sense when there is a deep divorce between the *is* and the *ought* (whether moral or practical). When the *is* and the *ought* are equated, the very concept of legitimacy loses meaning.

Instead of imposing the *ought* on the *is* (as in philosophy), or equating the two (as in mainstream sociology), the study of public justification probes the empirical-normative gap and the social actors’ attempts to bridge it. Public justification is thus less concerned with *legitimacy per se*, instead focusing on *legitimation* and delegitimation (Barker, 2001, pp. 7-9).

It examines the communicative process of legitimacy-making (and unmaking) in the public sphere.

Equally important, the scope of research on public justification is greater than the one on legitimacy and even legitimation. The latter focuses heavily on political order. To give but a few examples, Majone (1999) and Englebert (2002) write about the legitimacy of the state, Moravcsik (2002) as well as Beetham and Lord (2014) address the legitimacy of the European Union, and Claude (1966) and Hurd (2008) examine the legitimacy of the United Nations. Research on public justification, by contrast, has a greater breadth. Social actors justify a range of political phenomena. On the one end of the spectrum, they justify a highly specific aspect of a highly specific policy. On the other end of the spectrum, they justify the pillars of political order that enable the production of such policies in the first place. Reason giving and contesting is ubiquitous in the political orders the social actors we study inhabit. While some flows of justification focus more on the big questions of order and others more on the details of a policy, the social actors engaged in justificatory encounters often blur this line. More narrowly confined contestations about how to justify a policy can develop into broader contestations about order, and vice versa.

To study how social actors blur the lines that scholarly categories oftentimes superimpose on their interaction amounts to a difficult task. This task need not, and cannot, be accomplished through one method alone. Humility should guide our search for causality in the human sciences. No approach is perfect and only the joint efforts of scholars from various fields can bring us closer to a fuller understanding of humanity. Studying public justification can draw on behavioral, attitudinal and psychological indicators, such as protests, surveys, interviews, and experiments (Kaase & Newton, 1995). Analyzing, for example, the dynamics of groupthink and conformism sheds light on the forces that induce us to relinquish autonomous judgment, and seek consensus (Bond & Smith, 1996; Janis, 1983). Still, at heart, public justification takes the ‘linguistic turn’ seriously, drawing less on behavior and more on

discourse, tracing the language of justification as it unfolds. Language both mirrors and molds justification. The latter is not caused, but created, and tracing the public reasoning of politics can reveal why and how.

Studying the language of public justification makes for a taxing though exciting endeavor. Social scientists that follow the lead of the natural sciences prefer to quantify observable aspects of national behavior, posit them as dependent / independent variables, and statistically test for a ‘covering law’ that hypothetically guides their correlation. This successful hypothetico-deductive approach has its known limitations, especially in the social sciences. No ‘variable’ is truly independent, and robust correlation can suggest, but never demonstrate, the reasons of agents, particularly since similar actions need not emanate from the same motivations.

Public justification research regards social science causality as intersubjective reasoning. It walks the middle way of ‘explication,’ between objective explanation and subjective interpretation (Larsen, 1997). Specifically, public justification research seeks to explicate the emergence of Weberian ‘social actions’: socially oriented and subjectively meaningful conduct, whether tangible or ideational. Perhaps surprisingly, Karl Popper effectively acknowledged the many merits of this approach in the social sciences where he proposed ‘situational logic/analysis’ to understand an actor’s choice as driven by the interplay of his views and changing circumstances (Martin, 2000, pp. 117-136).

The daunting task of ‘the interpretation of [social] action in terms of its subjective meaning’ in the social actors’ eyes is viable for ‘one need not have been Caesar in order to understand Caesar’ (Weber, 1947, pp. 87-115). We can grasp such ‘social actions’ through both our emotional and rational faculties. The natural language of the social actors is invaluable for explicating their cultural meaning making, for it both reflects and shapes the multifaceted public reasoning behind their conduct (Alexander, 2003). Indeed, ‘analyzing discourse offers access to the space in which collective perceptions are present’ (Wiener,

2008, p. 75). While the perceptions themselves perforce remain hidden, when underpinned by ideas, understood as causal beliefs, they are often sufficiently articulated to be scholarly accessible (Beland & Cox, 2011). Grasping the actors' articulated reasoning allows us to 'accomplish something which is never attainable in the natural sciences, namely the subjective understanding of the action of the component individuals,' which can be then abstracted to the society-level explanation through ideal-types (Weber, 1978 [1922], p. 15).⁵ Importantly, both qualitative and quantitative methods are apt to the task (e.g. critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics), and mixed methods research is often advisable (Abulof, 2015c; 2016).

Studying public justification requires probing both its content and context. Both pose major challenges. As for the content, utterances are not always sincere, just or accurate; they may be disingenuous, false or vile, occasionally the offshoot of manipulation (Bok, 1999; Kuran, 1995). Still, a political utterance typically indicates that the speaker believes that other people can be swayed by it. Moreover, even insincere speech may shape future sincere discourse. We need not assume that speakers and authors are sincere for us to consider their discourse valuable, since their narratives both reflect and shape beliefs and practices (Alexander, 2003; Crawford, 2002; Reyes, 2011; Van Leeuwen, 2008: 105-123). The study of public justification is thus less interested in passing moral judgment on the justificatory efforts, and even less in peeling away layers of consciousness to arrive at an allegedly subconscious, mostly emotional, core; instead, it probes those deliberate, occasionally deliberative, layers—in both open and closed societies (e.g. Abulof, 2015b). It seeks to uncover evolving, and often interrelated, discursive strategies 'adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological or linguistic goal' (Wodak, 2011: 49).

Public justification is rarely monochromatic or static. It typically involves contestation as the public is challenged from within and without to answer why certain arguments provide sufficient justification. Social actors may kick the proverbial can down the road of

justification—and keep on asking, ‘but why?’ after each stroke of reasoning. In tracing the public’s use of language, we should follow the can’s path through various crossroads. We should also find when the agents stop kicking the can: where they rest their reasoning—until the next round. Notably, as discussed above, the actors’ justification may turn to practical or moral reasoning, or both. They may, for example, justify privatization on the ground that the government is wasteful, or that ‘big government’ encroaches on individual liberties, or both.

Space does not allow delving into the specific modes of discourse analysis. A note on the research strategy, however, may be due, as the discourse analysis of public justification may follow the little-known research tradition of ‘abduction,’ rather than the typical induction or deduction. The essence of abduction lies in tracing the lay language of the social actors and then in ‘moving from lay descriptions of social life to technical descriptions of that social life’ by the ‘iterative process of immersion in these social worlds and reflection on what is discovered’ (Blaikie, 2010, pp. 90-91). Abduction aims at optimal correspondence between actual social discourses and their academic conceptualization so that our scholarly ‘constructs of the second degree’ resonate sufficiently with those first-order constructs ‘made by the actors on the social scene’ for the social actors to recognize themselves in the scholarly accounts (Schutz, 1982, p. 59).

Contextualizing claims of justification is paramount for the study of public justification. It requires that we identify key speakers, uncover their communicative strategies, evaluate their impact, and situate all within their changing socio-political universe. What was said is obviously crucial, but where, when, how, why, by who (and to whom) it was said is equally important. In particular, analyzing the politics of public justification requires that we uncover its underpinning power relations, since ‘language indexes power, expresses power, is involved where there is contention over and a challenge to power’ (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, pp. 6, 10). Still, in charting the power matrix enveloping public justification we must realize that while might makes right, the reverse is also true. Power can boost a speaker’s capacity to

persuasively justify; but doing the right thing, and arguing for it, may likewise augment an actor's power (Krebs & Jackson, 2007; Nye, 2004).⁶

Overview of Contributions

The collection of papers is multi-disciplinary and multi-perspectival. Among its contributing authors are political scientists (political theory, comparative politics, international relations), psychologists and sociologists. They focus on particular aspects of justification, for instance moral and pragmatic reasoning, the private-public divide, its overlap with legitimacy and legitimation etc., putting to use various theoretical approaches. Researching public justification requires this plurality. It is a protean phenomenon.

The special issue is organised into four parts. First, Elliot Turiel and Uriel Abulof inquire into moral reasoning. Turiel refutes the so-called 'people are stupid school of psychology,' which regards human reasoning as an epiphenomenon used to rationalize decisions already made by our hardwired intuitions, dictated by evolution, emotion and cultures. Based on time-long investigation into the development of morality among children, adolescents and adults, Turiel concludes that morality matters, not least in politics: 'debate and argumentation commonly within and between groups are often at the root of moral and social transformations.' He distinguishes between three domains: the moral, where justifications are universalizable; the social, where conventions are seen as culture-specific; and the personal, where views are individual 'tastes.' In practice, our decisions involve situational coordination of considerations between and within these domains. Even in non-liberal and patriarchal societies, conformism to conventions and obedience to authority are often subverted by moral reasoning and resistance.

Abulof, like Turiel, focuses on the moral aspect of justification, and delineates the blurry line between its personal and public faces. Introducing the idea and practice of 'conscientious politics,' Abulof suggests that morality matters for both the individual and the

collective, not least in the political domain. He suggests that conscientious politics—politics informed by moral deliberations about legitimacy—are often ‘hidden in plain sight,’ and the normative task of bringing them to light depends on revealing the moral dilemmas that underpin actual politics. Abulof pursues this task in theory, charting the contours of individual and public conscience, as well as in practice, showing the moral dilemmas at heart of key moves made by the Israeli public in recent years.

Second, Amitai Etzioni and Achim Hurrellmann look at patterns of justification in domestic and EU politics, respectively. Etzioni challenges the viability of the private-public divide, which has been a key foundation for the public justification of liberal, capitalist, democracy. While private-public divide was never complete to begin with, the wall between the governmental and non-governmental organizations and activities has further eroded in recent years, not least due to the cyber age’s technological advancements. Undermining the imagery of the modern state as managing national security, the erosion of the public/private dichotomy challenges not only the public justification of democracy but the very notion of public justification, as the ‘public’ itself is losing its discrete meaning.

Hurrellmann draws from the EU literature on legitimation to arrive at lessons for the study of global governance more generally. After some conceptual clarifications, the paper presents a critical review of the literature on the EU’s legitimation, focusing on six crucial aspects – the analysis of legitimation change over time, the arenas where legitimation occurs, the role of the state as a reference point in legitimacy assessments, the difference between various objects of legitimation, the interplay of top-down and bottom-up legitimation processes, as well as the relationship between legitimation and polity development. In each of these respects, the paper identifies important insights that can be gained from EU Studies, but also conceptual and methodological weaknesses in the EU-related literature that researchers working on other polities should avoid. The paper closes by formulating a set of general desiderata for empirical legitimation research in International Relations.

Third, Tine Hanrieder as well as Markus Kornprobst and Martin Senn focus squarely on global governance. Hanrieder explores how the role of religion is evaluated in global health institutions, focusing on policy debates in the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank. Drawing on Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot's pragmatist approach to justification, she suggests that religious values are creative and worldly performances. The public value of religion is established through a two-pronged justification process, combining generalizing arguments ('thinning') with particularizing empirical tests ('thickening'). To substantiate the claim that thinning alone does not suffice to create religious values in global public health, she compares the futile attempts of the 1980s to add 'spiritual health' to the WHO's mandate with the more recent creation of a 'faith factor' in public health. While the vague reference to some 'Factor X' inhibited the acceptance of spiritual health in the first case, in the second case 'compassion' became a measurable and recognized religious value.

Kornprobst and Senn inquire into the question of how actors change deeply seated background ideas. In order to answer this question, they draw heavily from rhetorical studies and social theory. The authors conceptualize the deep background as *nomos*, and the more easily accessible background as *doxa*. Then, they proceed to identify three sets of conditions that make nomic change possible. These relate to opportunity, message, and messenger. Nomic change becomes possible when the need for something new has become widely established and a supply of new nomic ideas is easily available (opportunity); new nomic ideas are 'smuggled' into more orthodox and widely resonating arguments (message); and advocates succeed in augmenting their authority to speak (messenger). A plausibility probe of nomic contestation about nuclear governance provides evidence for this framework. This article provides novel insights into the structure-agency problem. It shows how approaches to communication that heavily focus on social context can be fruitfully combined with scholarly perspectives on communication that foreground agency.

Fourth, we conclude with a friendly debate between Liah Greenfeld, and Uriel Abulof and Markus Kornprobst. Greenfeld cautions against ahistorical assumptions of public justifications and emphasizes the contexts of justification. Engaging with these *caveats*, Abulof and Kornprobst develop an agenda for further research. This debate – *in lieu* of a monolithic conclusion written by the editors – highlights again the multidisciplinary and multiperspectival nature of studying public justification.

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¹ More sophisticated – and less parsimonious – conceptualisations of rational choice have been around for a while, for instance evolutionary game theory (Smith 1972). But they continue to be remain marginalised by their simpler variants.

² Bourdieu's field theory borrows heavily from rhetorical theory as well. Concepts such as *nomos* and *doxa* are taken from classic works on rhetoric, especially Aristotle (1995) and Sophistic thought (see Sprague 1972).

³³ In French (*justifier*) and German (*rechtfertigen*), this broader meaning of the term is more established than in the English language.

⁴ We borrow the term 'constellations' from Bernstein (1991), who is interested in how different sets of background ideas crisscross among communities.

⁵ While the assumption of 'rationality' is pivotal in Weber, his conceptualization of rationality clearly goes beyond material calculation to encompass morality ('value-rationality').

⁶ Conducting discourse-tracing may, but need not be driven by the attempt to uncover 'the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context' (Van Dijk 2003: 352).