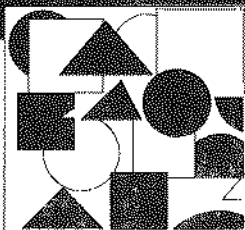


# Revue Internationale de Psychologie Sociale



## Psychologie sociale de la vie politique

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Ideal and real  
in the representation  
of politics

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**Abstract: Ideal and real in the representation of politics.**

Our researches aimed to investigate the representation of politics, first of all by studying its semantic field, and then by focusing attention on the features of the concept of « politics ». An initial study investigated the representation field of politics, pointing out the variety of its contents and their organisation in complex meaning structures. The spontaneous discourse of the subjects studied showed a tendency to set politics against the politician, seen as two facets of the same phenomenon: the ideal and the real. A further study aimed to investigate how the two concepts of « politics » and « politician » were perceived and to establish how the features that characterised them were organised hierarchically. The reference standards used by the subjects in defining the two concepts suggested a contrast between ideality of politics and reality of the politician, confirming our previous research. Both studies also showed that a socio-cultural variable such as active militancy can influence the representation of politics.

**Key words:** Social representation. Concept. Politics. Politician. Militancy.

**Résumé: Idéal et réel dans la représentation de la politique.**

Nos recherches se sont proposé d'étudier la représentation de la politique, en explorant d'abord le champ sémantique relatif et, par la suite, en focalisant l'attention sur les traits caractéristiques du concept de « politique ». Une première recherche a exploré le champ de représentation de la politique mettant en évidence la multiplicité des contenus qui le composent et leur organisation par noyaux complexes de signification. Dans les verbalisations spontanées des sujets interviewés on a, en outre, souvent relevé la présence d'une stratégie d'argumentation qui oppose la politique à l'homme politique, la première entendue comme dimension idéale, le second comme dimension réelle du même phénomène. Une seconde recherche s'est proposé l'objectif de chercher à pénétrer la perception des deux concepts de « politique » et de « homme politique » en déterminant, avec des techniques appropriées, l'ordre hiérarchique des traits qui les caractérisent. On a pu ainsi mettre en évidence que les standards de référence utilisés par les sujets dans la définition des deux concepts reproposaient l'opposition entre idéalité de la politique et réalité de l'homme politique déjà apparue dans le précédent travail. Les deux recherches ont montré en outre qu'une variable socioculturelle comme la militance active influence la représentation de la politique.

**Mots-clés:** Représentation sociale. Concept. Politique. Homme politique. Militance.

## Introduction

Common discourse on politics is important and specific in its own right, which distinguishes it from the theories of political philosophy and those of political science. Political philosophy considers the «should be» of politics, that is, the ideal and theoretical models which it should be inspired by. Two different positions appear to be dominant in its models of ideal society and of ideal state: the first tends to identify politics with ethics, the second with law. Political science, on the other hand, considers the «being» of politics, in the concreteness of its manifestations, independent of any moral or prescriptive evaluations. This perspective, which goes back to Machiavelli and Hobbes, is founded on a clear-cut distinction between public and private morals, «reason of State» and the ethics of individual responsibility. The difference between philosophy and political science can also be seen in their methodological approaches: the latter rejects the theoretical speculations of the former and seeks the regularities of politics in the study of history and in the naturalistic observation of behaviour.

Common discourse on politics, that is, everyday conversation and spontaneous interactions characterized by liveliness and immediacy, suffered from neglect in political science studies for many years (Sartori, 1979). As long as the European continental approach prevailed, all interest was focused on institutions, on legal power, on the state's sovereignty or on the ideologies at the root of the different political regimes. When, however, the Anglo-Saxon approach started to gain ground in the last century, research tended to favour the study of politics as a social process, as an interactive system among people, groups and classes, and no

longer only as an institutionalised system of authority. This approach has, to a certain extent, overshadowed the ideal aspect, that is, the realisation of politics as « good society », in favour of the realistic aspect, whose aim is to found a political science which systematically observes and describes the conflicts of ideas and interests involved in gaining and maintaining power, as well as the various forms of cooperation, coalition and consensus underlying the interplay between rulers and the ruled (Easton, 1965). Although interest in the institutional aspects still remains, there is at the same time a growing interest in the « actors » in the political arena, be they single individuals, groups or movements. Public opinion is beginning to be systematically investigated as a fundamental component of political life. Interest in common discourse is to be seen in this light, even if it has still not been fully explored in all its aspects.

Public opinion is a sort of « invisible participation » (Pasquino, 1986), which plays an important role. Although it is mainly an expression of subjects not actively involved in politics, it shows an interest in politics and, in given conditions, may become active participation. Interest and political participation are conditioned by the structure of the community and by the relationship that citizens have with the political class and institutions. In ancient society, of which a typical example is the *polis*, knowledge and political behaviour were mostly influenced by the direct interpersonal relationship with the leaders. In the much larger and complex modern society, with its network of groups, classes and movements, knowledge and political behaviour no longer derive from direct relationship between the citizen on the one hand and institutions and politicians on the other, but are prepared and guided by shared representations based on common discourse.

Common discourse on politics may be usefully investigated from the point of view of social psychology, especially if referred to some recent models of research in the field. The approach of psychology to political matters has tended for a long time to be behaviouristic: it has studied sectorial topics and isolated behaviour such as voting choices and attitudes towards single politicians. As from the 1970's the application of cognitive psychology to society, and more specifically developments in « political cognition », has sparked off growing interest in the way political knowledge is acquired and organised in everyday life. These studies provide a considerable amount of data on the selection and processing of contents transmitted by political information sources, and on the mental schemata subjects construct of political themes. It is thus possible to draw up a significant picture of the contents and the cognitive processes which underline ordinary discourse on politics. Research should not, however, be restricted

to the individual, but must systematically take into account the interactive nature of discourse within society.

The importance given to the socio-cultural context in constructing knowledge is crucial in this regard, particularly when analysing political conceptions, prone as they are to change with historical and cultural developments. Even the definition of politics tends to change over time. As Bobbio (1983) has pointed out, in the ancient world the term "politics" had a broad meaning: that is, it included all that "relates to the city, and therefore to the citizen, to what is civic, public and also sociable and social" (p. 728). The term then came mainly to denote the activities connected with state organisation and the exercise of power. Moreover, the scope, importance and meaning of politics change at various moments in history and in different regimes, at times broadening to completely overlap with the social sphere, at other times being restricted to the management of a few specific functions (e.g. the « minimum State » of the liberals).

Contextual variables should not be underestimated when interpreting political knowledge, opinions and behaviour, since they are clearly dependent upon specific situations and the government systems of individual countries (Granberg & Holmberg, 1988; Tetlock, 1989; Innes, 1990). It has been pointed out, for example, that certain attitudes or beliefs cannot be judged as extreme or deviant in absolute terms, but should be referred to the specific political context in which they are expressed (Sidanius, 1988; Sidanius & Lau, 1989). In a more general sense, taking account of context also means considering the influence which schemata pertaining to ideologies and general conceptions of reality may have on common discourse on politics.

Such a broader « social » approach also accepts the position held by subjects in relation to politics in terms of their active participation in political life as a determining factor in the construction of political knowledge. Not only does the role played by subjects within the political system vary according to the different degree of participation, but also their emotional and intellectual involvement in politics: As it increases, potential participation becomes collective, that is, mediated by groups, parties and movements. It is therefore likely that the way in which political knowledge is acquired and processed will change accordingly. The interaction between participation and political knowledge is a complex phenomenon whose cause and effect relations are not easy to define.

The present paper briefly discusses two of our researches on the social construction of knowledge. They set out to explore the representation of politics, with reference first of all to the semantic field and subsequently to the features that characterise the concept

of « politics ». Such research could provide an initial framework for the study of more specific political notions, and for an understanding of the ways in which single political problems are dealt with.

## The representation field of politics

The importance of studying common discourse on politics is heightened in times of crisis, as we are currently facing, when the gap between citizens and the political class becomes wider. In moments like these, knowing what public opinion thinks may help to explain the reasons for the gap and to identify a vision of politics that no longer coincides with the one of the representatives elected by the citizens. The theory of social representations (see Farr & Moscovici, 1984) provides an useful framework for the analysis of common discourse in all its richness and liveliness. As a branch of studies on social knowledge, it explores the spontaneous and shared knowledge inherent in everyday social interaction; while acknowledging the distinction between philosophical/scientific language and everyday language it also points out how the latter employs features of the former, often by means of transformation or simplification.

We investigated the social representation of politics in its semantic aspects (Quadrio, Catellani & Sala, 1988): that is, the different meanings given spontaneously by subjects to the term politics, and the organisation of such meanings in more complex structures. Subjects were selected according to the assumption that different degrees of political participation could influence representation. The first group was composed of politicians who held public or party posts and who could be placed at the top of the participation scale elaborated by Milbrath (1965). The second group included ordinary party militants with no official appointments. The other two groups included subjects not involved in active political life: one group declared itself definitely interested in political problems, while the other declared itself to be totally indifferent to them.

The answers obtained to an open question asking subjects to define politics were codified in content categories and subsequently analysed to verify the prevalent meanings and possible differences among the groups regarding representation. The results of the statistic analysis showed significant differences among the groups in the frequency of single categories and, even more interesting, in the way the single categories were connected in broader meaning structures. A complete description of the coding



criteria used and the results related to all the groups included in the sample are reported in Quadrio et al. (1988). The present paper will briefly discuss the dendrograms obtained by means of a hierarchical cluster analysis from data regarding the group of politicians and the group of interested subjects. This will provide an overview of the prevalent meanings and their organisation in a group whose political interest involves active participation, and in another whose interest is still at a potential stage. All the categories that emerged were considered including those with a low mention frequency, to safeguard the overall picture of representation. The most cited categories have been written in bold type, however, to make the interpretation of the cluster easier.

The dendrogram of the politicians (see Figure 1) presented four main thematic clusters. One first area included categories which consider politics in its theoretical aspects, that is: "ideology", "democracy", "necessity of politics", "comparison" and "mediation". The "ideal-real contrast" category is also included almost as if to stress the achievement limits of the ideal aspects of politics. These limits are further suggested by "party gain" and "negative development" categories which were, however, rarely cited. This is how one of the interviewees referred to some of the contents in this area:

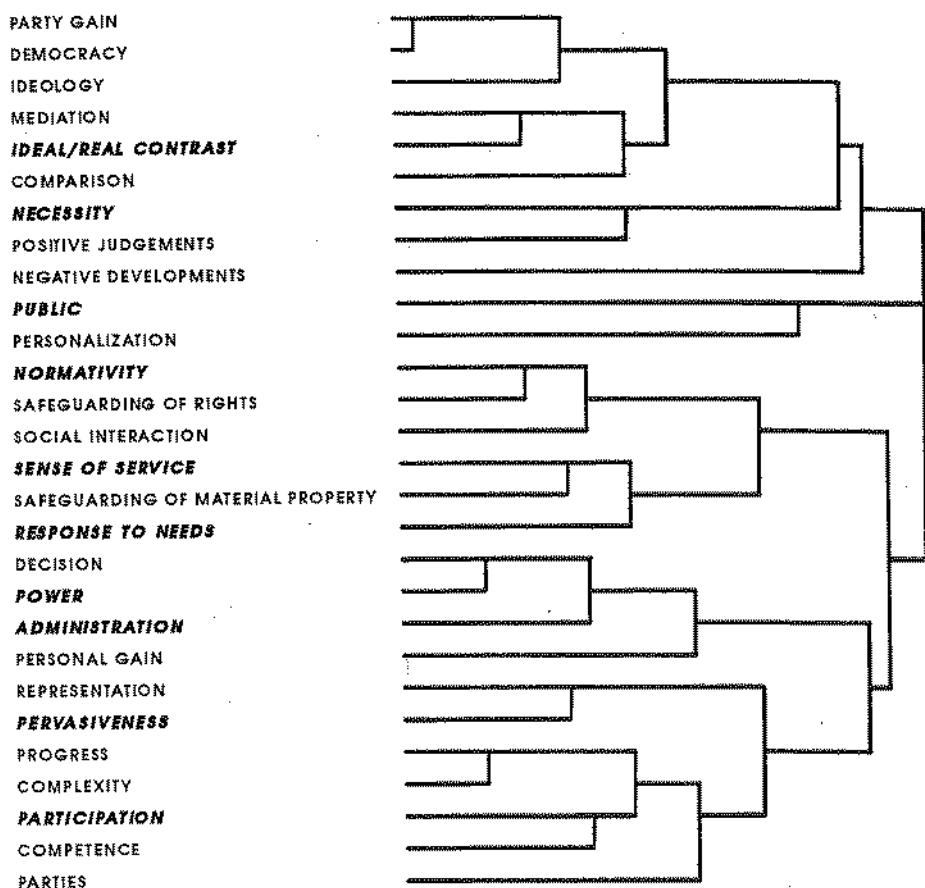
... Politics is certainly dialectic, and therefore a confrontation which then contributes to establishing a policy, in any case democratic confrontation... Often enough it is also a compromise, when there are two equally important policies, which at a certain point have to be reconciled... therefore a compromise in this sense which is taken as pure politics is certainly no less positive. While if for politics we consider... sharing-out, carve-ups, it is negative (subj. n° 23).

The second area considered those aspects of politics that are related to its function and social usefulness. Categories such as "normativity" (referred to the legislative function of politics), "sense of service", "response to needs", "safeguarding of rights" and "safeguarding of material property" all belong to this area. An example of reference to these contents is the following:

Politics means managing to provide an answer for the day-to-day needs of the community... the safeguarding of ideal and material needs... Politics as a service... even in making the laws that we feel are right (subj. n° 8).

The other two thematic clusters also contain somewhat opposing contents: the first includes such categories as: "administration", "power", "decision", whereas the second refers to problems such as delegation and participation. An example of the first kind of cluster is the following:

Figure 1 : Dendrogram referred to the group of politicians\* (From Quadrio et al., 1988, 15).



\* The most quoted categories are reported in bold type.

If I were to define politics I would think of it as... well, that specific aspect of society which rules society... which in a way determines all the rest, all the course of life... because it's the politicians who decide how many billions have to be given let's say to scientific research, and how many to produce weapons or for nuclear plants etc. So they are really difficult choices to make and basically gratify those who make them... having some power to administer perhaps... (subj. n° 21).

An example of the second kind is :

... I really would say that (politics) is ... delegating the government of society and the development of society to somebody. It is obvious that as time goes on politics becomes extremely more complex and extremely more delicate. On the one hand, because nowadays people take more part in the political life of their country, not only by voting but also through public opinion — referendums represent one of these aspects I think — but also because people today believe they are more representative in the social context ... (subj. n° 21).

The thematic clusters of the interested subjects (see Figure 2) were quite different from those of the politicians. One area expressed a completely negative picture of politics, with categories such as "party gain", "ideal/real contrast", and "negative judgments".

As a person interviewed recalled :

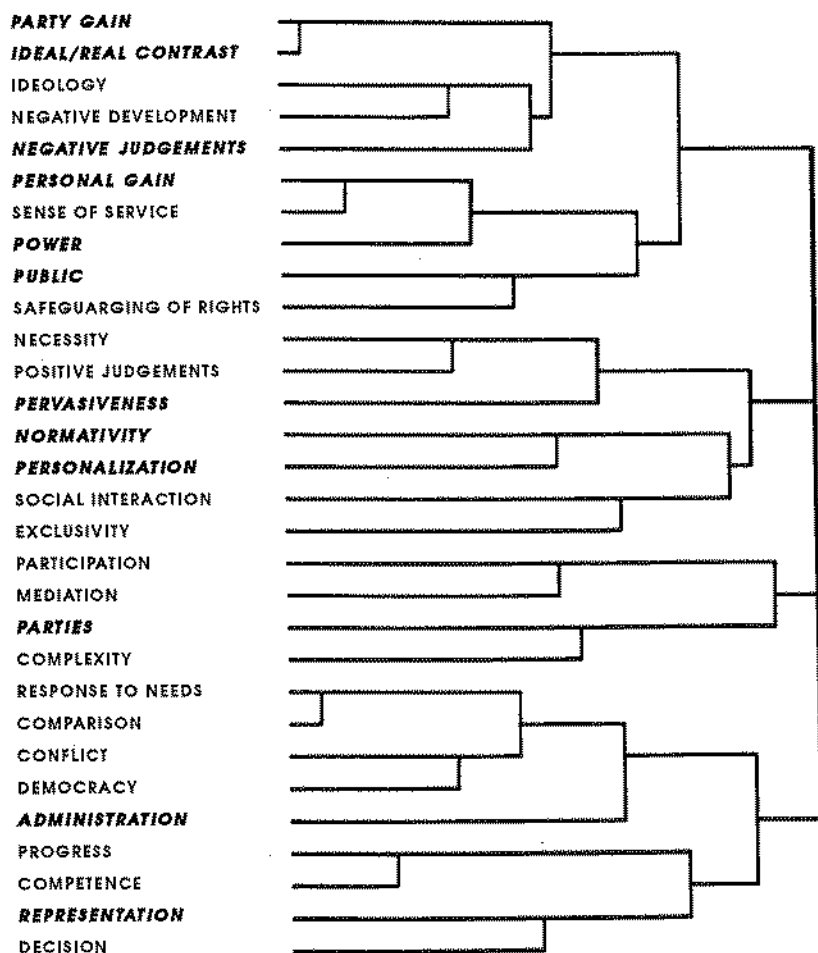
... Politics is also where ideological alliances in the crucial sense of the word "ideological" are formed, which means false conscience, deformation of real interests. And moreover today politics is also largely careerism, personal interest. There is also a process which turns what should be management of public interests into group-benefit. I think that, although this has always existed, it has gained ground in our political system ... the carve-ups, the so called partyism, so that in order to have a career at certain levels you have to be a member of a party or have party backing ... (subj. n° 73).

In the second area the fact that the category of "power" was associated to the categories of "personal gain" and "sense of service" seems to be of particular importance. The association creates a different supracategorical meaning to the one expressed by the politicians, for whom "power" was associated to the "decision" and "administration" categories. Thus, whereas politicians saw power as a public function, the interested subjects saw it as a tool for the personal achievement of politicians in contrast with a sense of service.

Politics is many things : politics is the big man who, because of power interests, does certain things ... has certain objectives to reach, which are bad for others ; but politics is also the contrary, people who have community ideals, who want to help others, to do what's good for others without thinking too much about their own interests (subj. n° 64).

The third area included categories which acknowledged the "necessity" and "pervasiveness" of politics. The "normativity" category also appeared : it was often mentioned by this group and was connected to the "personalisation" category. In the subjects' statements this connection was explained by the concern that the legislative function might be conditioned by the politicians' perso-

Figure 2: Dendrogram referred to the group of interested subjects\* (From Quadrio et al., 1988, 18).



\* The most quoted categories are reported in bold type.

nal view. The fourth area concerned "participation", which was mainly manifested through political parties. The last area, including the "administration" category, showed a clear-cut difference from the politicians: it is not the authoritative and decision-making aspects of administration that were stressed, but those pertaining to "democracy" and "confrontation among parties".

... Thus politics should in fact pick out the various tendencies and needs ... of citizens, bring them together and carry them forward within a general policy while laying down the general structures ... Politics is ... the driving force behind a certain kind of existence and way of feeling within the framework of the state ... (subj. n° 72).

Connected to this was a group of categories which offered an ideal and propositional model of politics, in which "decision" was connected to "representativity" and "progress" to "competence".

... I think that politics has a meaning, in the sense of being able to have people who can take care of the needs of the population, the citizens ... the scope of politicians, I think ... should not be restricted to decision-making, but should include discussions not only among politicians, but also among experts ... they should shift slightly towards a dynamic, progressive conception of life, not tied to decisions that may be taken out of habits or narrowmindedness. I also believe in regular updating for all politicians ... (subj. n° 67).

The other two groups, whose results are not reported in full, were also characterised by peculiar thematic clusters. The group of the indifferents revealed three characteristics: they forcefully criticised the political system through frequent references to politicians' personal gain, they saw administration as a complex subject that has to be delegated to politicians and, along the same lines, they referred to decision-making as being the prerogative of a few competent people.

The militants were found to have the most complex and ambiguous representation: although they placed great importance on participation and the role of political parties in society's progress, the meaning they attributed to "power" was collocated between those observed for the politicians and the interested subjects; they were also sceptical about a public administration not giving way to compromise. This uncertainty in the militants' representation was confirmed by the results of a discriminant analysis which showed this group as being the least homogeneous, with some subjects closer to the group of politicians and others closer to those who do not actively take part in politics.

In addition to the observations regarding the single groups, some general remarks may be made on the representation of politics as it emerged from the research. Common discourse on politics was not merely restricted to contingent or sectorial aspects, but also included many of the topics that have traditionally fallen within the realm of political science. Nevertheless, practically no references were made in our sample to ideological contrasts or international conflicts. References to internal conflicts among political parties were also rare, while critical comments frequently came up regarding the tendency of parties to make power-sharing agreements. Politics was, in fact, described more in terms of administration, sometimes improper, than a place where ideologies are confronted and put into effect.

A constant feature in the subjects' answers was the contrast between ideal and real, often explicitly stated when they moved from the abstract definition of politics to considering the behaviour of politicians. It seems that representation cannot get away from this continual comparison between the « being » and the « should be » of politics.

## The concepts of « politics » and of « politician »

Once the meanings and images which spontaneously emerged in the representation of politics were recorded, further research was carried out to identify the central and peripheral features of the perception of « politics », intended as a conceptual category (Catellani, 1990). This implies a shift in analysis from the way the meanings are understood and communicated to the way in which they are ordered and organised in a concept through a process of abstraction.

Recent research on the perception of categories has given rise to theoretical models that substantially modify the prototype model, according to which the graded structure of the concept is characterised by stability (Rosch, 1978). The feature of flexibility is instead highlighted on the ground that graded structure is influenced by various factors including such features of the concept as its abstract or concrete nature and the socio-cultural background of the subjects who perceive the concept (Barsalou, 1987).

Hampton's studies (1979, 1981), among the first to deal with differences between abstract and concrete concepts, have shown that the former are characterised by less clear-cut relations among features than the latter. Subsequent research suggested that the reference standard for abstract concepts should not be Rosch's prototype but the ideal (Chaplin, John & Goldberg, 1988). The general hypothesis that for certain concepts the reference standard might be represented by the ideal was first put forward by Barsalou (1985) regarding the so-called « ad hoc concepts », which do not have an already existing lexical correspondent and are created for specific purposes. In the case of these concepts the ideal is constituted by the qualities that the exemplars *should* have, in order to correspond better to the aims of the category they belong to.

The importance of socio-cultural background to perception of the concept has so far been rather neglected in American studies on categorial knowledge. It has, however, been underlined in European studies on « social cognition », which consider the con-

cepts not as isolated cognitive phenomena, but as elements within the broader framework of the representation of reality.

The perception of «politics», as an *abstract social category*, was compared to the perception of «politician», as a *concrete social category*, in two groups of subjects: militants and non militants. The socio-cultural variable of militancy was included on the basis of our previous study, which had shown that contrasting definitions of politics coexisted in this group. The aim of the study, fully discussed by Catellani (1990), was to investigate whether the variables "experience of militance" and "degree of abstractness of the category" had any influence on some structural properties of the categories examined: namely, *stability versus flexibility in the graded structure* of the category, the *number of features* perceived as central, and the *reference standard* used to define the categories.

Subjects were asked to evaluate on a Likert-type scale a series of definitions of «politics», chosen among those which emerged in the spontaneous discourse of the previous research, and a series of attributes of the «politician», identified in a preliminary study.

Results showed that the two groups of subjects, militants and non militants, significantly differed in the perception of both categories as to which features were central and which peripheral (Hotelling test of MANOVA:  $p < .001$ ). This revealed that the graded structure of such categories is characterised by a certain degree of flexibility. The two groups agreed in defining «politics» first of all as committing oneself for the community (item 3) and acting to improve society (9), whereas they disagreed on the importance given to other features, such as the need for politics (17), the ideological component (22), and its function of fulfilling citizens' needs (23), considered more central by the militants (see Table 1). The two groups agreed in considering the «politician» as primarily ambitious (17), interested in power (28), cunning (4) and social climber (15), whereas they assigned different importance to other features: involvement (19) and realism (13) were stressed particularly by the militants, while corruption (11) was stressed instead by the non militants (see Table 2).

Apart from the hierarchy of centrality/peripherality of features, the two groups also differed significantly in their use of high scores in the scale and so in the number of features considered important in defining the category. Two opposite tendencies emerged when the two groups evaluated the abstract and concrete categories. In the former category, that is, «politics», ten items were given a mean score of over 5.5 by the militants, as compared to two by the non militants (see Table 1).

In the latter category, that is, the «politician», on the other hand, the non militants used a greater number of high scores as

**Table 1 : Rank order, difference between ranks, means and significance of the differences between means in the answers of militants and non militants to the definitions of « politics » (From Catellani, 1990, 634).**

Definitions Politics is ...	Rank order		d	Means		F sign.
	Mil.	Non mil.		Mil.	Non mil.	
3. committing oneself for the community	1	1	0	6.46	5.86	<.01
9. acting to improve society	2	2	0	6.39	5.75	<.05
17. a necessary component of life	3	9	6	5.86	4.98	<.001
22. expression of ideas	4	8	4	5.86	5.21	<.001
23. fulfilling citizens' needs	5	10	5	5.83	4.92	<.001
15. present in all social aspects	6	6	0	5.78	5.32	<.05
19. taking decisions on community problems	7	3	-4	5.76	5.46	n.s.
24. putting oneself at the service of the others	8	11	3	5.75	4.78	<.001
11. confrontation among parties	9	6	-4	5.59	5.33	n.s.
1. administration of the public sphere	10	4	-6	5.51	5.40	n.s.
21. present in all aspects of human activity	11	14	3	5.45	4.45	<.001
5. search for agreement among different positions	12	7	-5	5.08	5.22	n.s.
12. safeguarding the rules of living in society	13	13	0	5.06	4.69	n.s.
10. expression of a delegation from the citizens	14	12	-2	4.61	4.73	n.s.
6. making laws	15	17	2	4.40	4.08	n.s.
18. expression of the relation between majority and minority	16	18	2	3.89	4.00	n.s.
20. conflict among parties	17	15	-2	3.89	4.31	n.s.
13. exercise of power	18	16	-2	3.82	4.11	n.s.
16. an activity exercised by individuals grouped in parties	19	19	0	3.62	3.83	n.s.
7. gaining of power	20	21	1	2.98	3.13	n.s.
14. a compromise at all levels	21	20	-1	2.93	3.60	<.05
8. carving-up of profits and posts among parties	22	22	0	2.08	2.67	<.05
4. a field of interest confined to a few people	23	23	0	2.02	2.60	<.01
2. search for personal profit	24	24	0	1.77	2.17	n.s.



compared to the militants (see Table 2). The results of the abstract category might be explained by the fact that militants' better knowledge of the category could make them consider a greater number of features as central to the definition of the category itself (Sande, Goethals, & Radloff, 1988). As regards the concrete

**Table 2 : Rank order, difference between ranks, means and significance of the differences between means in the answers of militants and non militants to the attributions of « politician » (From Catellani, 1990, 635).**

Attributes	Rank order		d	Means		F sign.
	Mil.	Non mil.		Mil.	Non mil.	
17. ambitious	1	1	0	4.05	4.45	<.001
28. inter. in power	2	2	0	3.99	4.44	<.001
4. cunning	3	4	1	3.77	4.12	<.01
13. social climber	4	3	-1	3.74	4.21	<.001
24. opportunist	5	5	0	3.63	4.07	<.001
5. selfish	6	6	0	3.88	3.89	<.05
12. diplomatic	7	9	2	3.99	3.61	n.s.
9. rich	8	7	-1	3.34	3.73	<.001
19. involved	9	17	8	3.25	2.81	<.001
14. false	10	8	-2	3.18	3.65	<.01
6. intelligent	11	15	4	3.17	2.91	n.s.
20. influential	12	11	-1	3.11	3.54	<.01
16. dishonest	13	12	-1	3.01	3.44	<.05
11. corrupt	14	10	-4	2.99	3.57	<.001
1. educated	15	16	1	2.97	2.85	n.s.
27. practical	16	19	3	2.95	2.63	<.05
13. realistic	17	22	5	2.90	2.56	<.01
3. self-confident	18	13	-5	2.88	3.11	n.s.
22. eloquent	19	14	-5	2.88	3.04	n.s.
2. communicative	20	18	-2	2.86	2.74	n.s.
25. serious	21	23	2	2.85	2.39	<.001
8. ideological	22	21	-1	2.83	2.60	n.s.
23. dynamic	23	20	-3	2.82	2.63	n.s.
18. willing	24	25	1	2.70	2.21	<.001
21. competent	25	26	1	2.64	2.13	<.001
26. coherent	26	27	1	2.46	1.94	<.001
30. charismatic	27	24	-3	2.33	2.22	n.s.
7. honest	28	30	2	2.21	1.69	<.001
29. altruist	29	28	-1	2.11	1.77	<.001
10. attractive	30	29	-1	1.91	1.70	<.05

category, on the other hand, a better and direct acquaintance of the members of the category, the politicians, could coincide for the militants with an increased perception of variability within the category and consequently with lower scores in the judgements of typicality of features (Park & Hastie, 1987).

A further structural property of the two categories was investigated, namely, the reference standard used by the subjects for their definition. The most typical features of the «politics» category seem to indicate that the reference standard is represented more by an ideal than by the central tendency. Although this hypothesis was not directly verified in the present research, it is feasible that the subjects interpreted the expression «Politics is ...», present in all the given definitions, as «Politics should be ...». The items deemed to be fundamental to the definition of «politics» were, in fact, those in which politics was defined as commitment, action to improve society and so on. On the contrary, the items which were more peripheral were those that describe politics in terms of corruption and search for personal profit. A contrary trend was observed in the «politician» category: positive attributes were considered peripheral by both groups. These data seem to indicate that the definitions of «politics» and «politician» were understood by the subjects as definitions of the ideal and the real respectively.

A further aim was to verify the presence of possible meaning groups which corresponded to a more complex level of definition both of «politics» and of the «politician». The results of the factorial analysis carried out on the items of the two scales provided an additional level of comparison between the groups of subjects. The first two factors which emerged from the analysis of the definitions of «politics» given by the militants explain the 38.5 % of the global variance (see Table 3). The first factor may be defined as SOCIAL ACTION. To make politics means acting to improve society, fulfilling citizens' needs, committing oneself for the community, and putting oneself at the service of others. The second factor may be defined as POWER and includes items concerning the exercise and gaining of power and those which define politics as an area confined to a few people or to the parties. The two factors seem to express two different conceptions of politics: one focused on the ends, that is, the objectives to achieve for the good of society; the other focused on the means, that is, on power, instrumental to any political action. The twofold position of the militants observed in the previous research was therefore confirmed.

The ideological standpoint was prominent in orienting the militants towards politics as social action or politics as power. When the answers of the militants belonging to the three main

Table 3: Factorial analysis on the militants' definitions of « politics »\* (From Catellani, 1990, 637).

Definitions  Politics is ...	Factors				
	1 SOCIAL ACTION	2 POWER	3 CONFRONT.	4 PERVASIV.	5 ADMINIS.
9. acting to improve society	.817	-.279			
23. fulfilling citizens' needs	.811				
3. committing oneself to the community	.797				
24. putting oneself at the service of the others	.684	-.277	.322		
22. expression of ideas	.443		.258	.408	
13. exercise of power		.784			
7. gaining of power	-.309	.724			
4. a field of interest confined to a few people		.689			.215
14. a compromise at all levels		.687			
16. an activity exercised by individuals grouped in parties		.527	.304		
11. confrontation among parties			.880		
5. search for agreement among different positions	.341		.711		.213
12. safeguarding the rules of living in society	.256	.329	.590	.281	
15. present in all social aspects				.790	
21. present in all aspects of human activity				.775	
17. a necessary component of life	-.238	-.369		.598	
1. administration of the public sphere					.820
6. making laws		.347			.640
% explained variance	24.0	14.5	10.3	7.1	6.6

\* Only the factor loadings above .20 were transcribed.

parties (DC-Christian Democrat Party, PCI-Italian Communist Party and PSI-Italian Socialist Party) were compared, significant differences (calculated with Student's T test, choosing  $p < .05$  as threshold of significance) were found in the way these three subgroups evaluated the major loading items of the first two factors (see Table 4). There were no significant differences in the items of the

**Table 4 : Mean scores given by christian democrats, communists and socialists to the major items loading the first two factors.**

Definitious  Politics is ...	DC Christian Democrat Party		PCI Italian Communist Party		PSI Italian Socialist Party	
	Mean	St. Dev.	Mean	St. Dev.	Mean	St. Dev.
9. acting to improve society	6.50	5.65	6.87	.77	5.65	1.87
23. fulfilling citizens' needs	6.00	1.29	6.13	1.13	5.15	1.92
3. committing oneself to the community	6.67	.71	6.73	.52	5.70	1.72
24. putting oneself at the ser- vice of the others	6.17	1.05	6.10	1.37	4.80	1.93
22. expression of ideas	5.60	1.25	6.10	.88	5.45	1.19
13. exercise of power	4.13	2.24	2.93	1.95	4.55	2.04
7. gaining of power	2.90	1.94	1.87	1.70	4.05	2.23
4. a field of interest confined to a few people	1.93	1.31	1.57	1.25	2.65	1.98
14. a compromise at all levels	3.10	1.67	2.43	1.38	3.50	1.61
16. an activity exercised by individuals grouped in parties	3.30	1.95	3.27	1.70	4.30	1.98

SOCIAL ACTION factor between communist and christian democrat militants: both agreed on the importance of a commitment to changing and improving society. The socialist militants felt less of a commitment, especially when compared to the communist militants (significant differences between PSI and PCI for all 5 items; significant differences between PSI and DC for items 3 and 24). The socialists were decisively more inclined than the communists to view politics as instrumental, as was shown by the items of the second factor (significant differences between PSI and PCI for the first 4 items). The christian democrat militants, albeit to a lesser degree, were also thus inclined (no significant differences between DC and PSI in the items of this factor; significant differences between DC and PCI for items 13 and 7). This was probably due not so much to their ideology as to the christian democrat's party consolidated government experience in Italy since the end of the Second World War. The communists stood out from the other two groups also because they gave significantly higher scores to the first two items of factor PERVASIVITY (not shown in Table 4), thus stating the presence of politics in all social aspects and in all areas of human activity. As a whole these results seem to further support

the importance that contextual variables, whether ideological or historic-cultural, may have in the definition of an abstract category such as « politics ».

The results of the factorial analysis on the definitions of « politics » given by the non militants showed that the first two factors are ABUSE OF POWER, which explains the 25.3 % of the global variance, and DELEGATION/CONFRONTATION, which explains the 14.6 % of the global variance (see Table 5). ABUSE OF POWER includes the items which refer to politics as gaining power and other items of a clearly negative kind, such as abuse and degeneration of power, sharing-out of profits and posts among parties, and politics as a compromise. DELEGATION/CONFRONTATION stresses the importance of delegation and of politics as a democratic system and confrontation among parties. The non militants' vision of power, so different from that of the militants, reveals the same two-fold interpretation of the term already observed in the previous research. The non militants' vision of politics that emerged with the second factor was concerned with principles and the mechanism which regulate its function, whereas the vision of politics as action, that is, as a concrete activity which leaves a mark on society, appeared less evident and less structured in this group.

The factorial analysis on the attributes of the « politician » (not fully discussed in the present paper) revealed a first factor common to the two groups: CORRUPTION. The second factor which emerged in the militants was AMBITION, whereas the second for the non militants was EXPERTISE, which refers to the intellectual attributes and to the competence of the politician. The differences between the two groups concerning this second factor seem to indicate that the militants pay a greater attention to the personal qualities needed for success, while the non militants stress the knowledge and competence a politician should have to govern a society.

The final aim was to investigate whether the perception of the « politics » category, which is a fundamental aspect of social life, and the perception of the « politician » category, which derives its meaning and its *raison d'être* from the former, were in any way interdependent. Perception of the « politician » category is certainly influenced by such factors as previous experience or by the more or less conscious reference to certain theories of personality. However, we also hypothesized that a subject's representation of politics exercises a significant influence on his perception of the politician. Table 6 reports the results of the multiple regression analysis. The factorial scores of militants and non militants in the definition of « politics » were taken as independent variables. The same dependent variables were used for both groups in order to

Table 5: Factorial analysis on the militants' definitions of « politics »\* (From Catellani, 1990, 638).

Definitions  Politics is ...	Factors				
	1 POWER ABUSE	2 DELEGAT/ CONFRONT.	3 PERVASIV.	4 ADMINIS.	5 MAJ./ MIN.
7. gaining of power	.846	-.283			
8. carving-up of profits and posts among parties	.804	-.273			
14. a compromise at all levels	.745				
13. exercise of power	.727				.337
2. search for personal profit	.685	-.309			
16. an activity exercised by individuals grouped in parties	.646				
4. a context of interest confined to a few people	.549				-.337
10. expression of a delegation from the citizens		.687	-.286		.373
11. confrontation among parties	-.209	.685			
22. expression of ideas		.680	.239		
5. search for agreement among different positions		.589		.390	
18. present in all social aspects			.820		
21. present in all aspects of human activity			.653	-.219	
17. a necessary component of life	-.236		.627	.276	.489
1. administration of the public sphere					.814
6. making laws		.295	.239	.706	
18. expression of the relation between majority and minority					.850
% explained variance	25.3	14.6	8.8	7.8	6.9

\* Only the factor loadings above .20 were transcribed.

Table 6 : Definitions of « politics » and attributes of « politician » : multiple regression coefficients (From Catellani, 1990, 642).

MILITANTS

Attributes	Definitions				
	SOCIAL ACTION	POWER	CONFRONTATION	PERVASIVENESS	ADMINISTRATION
CORRUPTION	-.09	.04	-.25*	.23*	.00
AMBITION	-.05	.23*	-.08	.08	-.07
EXPERTISE	.01	.13	.00	-.04	.03
IMAGE	-.13	.16	.07	-.20*	.14
REALISM	-.24**	.18	-.17	-.06	-.06

NON MILITANTS

Attributes	Definitions				
	POWER ABUSE	DELEGAT/ CONFRONT.	PERVASIVENESS	MANAGEMENT	MAJ./ MIN.
CORRUPTION	.26**	.07	.07	.08	-.03
AMBITION	.08	-.12	-.05	.13	.14
EXPERTISE	-.12	.25*	-.05	.00	.18
IMAGE	-.13	.03	-.01	.17	.03
REALISM	-.06	-.28**	-.08	.04	.00

significance : t-test

\* $p < .05$

\*\* $p < .01$

compare the results of the regression analyses of the two groups. We therefore selected the attributes of the « politician » with the highest factorial loadings in each group, and we carried out another factorial analysis on these. The resulting factorial scores were used as dependent variables in the regression analysis.

In brief the results showed that there was no positive connection between the SOCIAL ACTION factor and the attributes of the « politician » in the militant group ; the POWER factor, however, was positively connected to the attributes believed by all the subjects to be the most typical ones of the politician, that is, coming under AMBITION. None of the definitions of « politics » of the non militants explained these attributes adequately : ambition and social climbing were not considered by these subjects as functional aspects of political activity. However, for the non militants the conception of politics as ABUSE OF POWER seemed to

give rise to a strong tendency to describe the politician as dishonest and corrupt. The factor of a politician's EXPERTISE was instead connected to politics as DELEGATION/CONFRONTATION. Moral concerns seemed to prevail in these subjects, which was not found in the group of non militants.

## Political participation and representation

To study the semantic field of the social representation of politics, we used a method which allowed us to explore the meanings spontaneously connected to politics. A more stringent procedure, albeit providing a restricted amount of data, was then followed to identify the conceptual basis underlying representation. Our results indicate these two methods can be usefully integrated to arrive at a more in-depth understanding of knowledge contents of a social representation.

The role of the political participation variable was fundamental in constructing the representation. The differences observed among the four groups considered in the first research regard not only the preference given to the single contents, but especially the way in which the various contents are interrelated to form broader structures of meaning. For example, although power is a central content category in the definition of politics in all the groups, it takes on different meanings according to which contents the different groups believe are connected to it. While the politicians have no doubts in admitting the functionality of power as a means of achieving political ends, the militants' attitude is ambivalent. Both the interested subjects and indifferent ones fail to see power as functional to achieving collective political ends and see it only as a tool for the personal gain of politicians.

The influence of the participation variable was confirmed by the second research: the differences found between militant and non militant subjects were not confined to the hierarchy of centrality/peripherality of the features of the category, but extended to other structural properties, such as the number of features considered as central. These results may provide a contribution to the study of the influence that socio-cultural variables exert on the definition of categories, and social categories in particular — a highly debated topic in European research.

The definition of the « politics » category given by the militants in the second research confirmed our previous data that this group has a complex and non-univocal representation: politics is defined in terms of both action and power. Two different coexisting



tendencies may therefore be hypothesized in the militant group : on the one hand, the tendency towards action, which is commonly held as being the driving force of political militance, especially when, as in our case, it is referred to young people ; on the other, the tendency to exercise power. The priority given to action in favour of the social aims of politics, or to power as a way of achieving such aims, seems to be a crucial choice upon which militants do not agree. This ambivalent attitude is probably connected to the very nature of political participation, which entails diverse and interrelated motivations and incentives : ideal motivations and motivations of solidarity, but also motivations based on tangible interests in gaining personal advantages which may derive from positions of political power (Hirschmann, 1982).

The militants' membership of one or other of the political parties influenced their definition of politics. The subjects' answers are difficult to relate to a general conservative or progressive ideological tendency. It seems more likely that they might be influenced by the specific connotations of the different parties within the Italian political system and by their position as a government or opposition party. These data seem to provide further support for the need to include contextual factors in political psychology studies. Such factors appear to be so important as to condition not only behaviour and concrete political choices, as has widely been demonstrated in the literature, but also the general conception of politics itself.

Of the two definitions of politics given by the militants politics seen as power was in keeping with the attributes ascribed by both groups as being typical of the politician and included under the heading of « ambition ». None of the non militants' definitions of politics was consistent with the prevailing and shared image of the politician as ambitious. Their definition of politics as abuse of power was connected to less central attributes of the politician, referable to corruption. The difference between the two groups could be explained by the fact that in the militants' sense power is fully legalised as the driving force of political activity. This is regarded as an activity ruled from the beginning by the principle of « reason of State », and the politician is granted full autonomy as regards ethics. The non militants instead regard power as authority and those who administer it are judged according to the usual canons of ethics (Weber, 1919).

Any discussion on the influence of participation in defining politics must take into account the sense attributed to « participation ». Both our researches considered the participation variable in its most apparent sense of playing a role in politics, over and above the way this role was actually constructed. Our data were thus able to identify the meanings embodied in the various groups'

definition of politics at a specific point in time. They do not, however, except on a purely hypothetical basis, retrace the developmental and interactive processes that led to the elaboration of such meanings. The significant differences in semantic fields that emerged among the groups are only one facet of a study on the social representation of politics. The type of experience underlying the representation is a further important factor since it may clarify the social processes that have produced and continue to modify the representation. Militancy experienced at local party level, where a constant exchange of viewpoints is the norm, is likely, for instance, to produce different knowledge-building processes than a militancy confined to taking part individually in initiatives proposed by party headquarters. A way to study the constituent processes of representation might be to analyse common discourse on politics as regards not only content but also communicative intent, as well as the way interlocutors negotiate meaning and adopt argumentative strategies.

The contrast between the ideal and the real, which was a recurring theme in both our researches, corresponded at least in part to the distinction between « politics » and « politician ». It is difficult to state with certainty what this opposition is due to. One interpretation, concerning general cognitive mechanisms, may hold for any comparison between an abstract social category and a concrete social category connected to it. When an idea takes shape in a person, perception and evaluation change radically. Another interpretation is domain-specific and concerns an aspect which has always been considered typical of politics : the persistence of an ideal tension never completely fulfilled, a component common to all ideologies and also to all the utopias in the history of political thinking. The constant presence of this ideal tension makes the devaluation of reality inevitable, since it is always seen as unfulfilling and restricted. There is normally a balance between ideal tension and acceptance of reality. Nevertheless, when in particular moments of crisis the boundaries are overcome, a clear-cut separation between citizens and political class takes place with a consequent delegitimization of the political parties.

The relation between politics and politician discussed in the present study provides an example of the connection that exists between general knowledge on politics and its realisation in society. Further investigations might examine whether and how the meanings that have emerged in the representation of politics are used in dealing with specific political problems.

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