

Short of Lying

The prevalence of bullshit in political communication

Heinz Brandenburg
Department of Politics and International Relations
University of Aberdeen
E-mail: h.brandenburg@abdn.ac.uk

**Paper prepared for presentation at the European Consortium for Political
Research (ECPR) Joint Sessions of Workshops, Nicosia, 25-30 April 2006.**
**Workshop no. 14: “Truth, Representation and Politics”, directed by Annabel
Herzog and Tuija Parvikko.**

Introduction

In his essay entitled *On Bullshit*, which was first published in 1986 in the *Raritan Review*, and has since been reprinted as a bestselling book¹ by Princeton University Press in 2005, Harry G. Frankfurt, professor of philosophy emeritus at Princeton University, proclaims that ‘one of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit’ (1). Whether they call it bullshit, as do Postman (1969), Frankfurt (2005), Mears (2002) and Cohen (2002), or humbug, as do Orwell (1946), Black (1983) and Bailey (1988), all the key contributors to the debate agree that political communication is one of the main contexts in which the phenomenon occurs. Frankfurt (2005: 22) singles out politics as one of his prime suspects from where to expect continuous emanation of bullshit. He argues that politics is ‘nowadays closely related’ to ‘the realms of advertising and public relations’ and that all three ‘are replete with instances of bullshit so unmitigated that they can serve among the most indisputable and classic paradigms of the concept’. Mears (2002: 9) agrees that politicians use ‘a wide variety of bullshitting techniques’ to criticize opponents, to claim undeserved credit or deny responsibility.

Already in the aftermath of World War II, George Orwell (1946) saw a ‘special connection between politics and the debasement of language’, which, he said, derived largely from the fact that ‘in our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible’. In view of policies such as continued colonialism, the dropping of nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, forced population transfers, attacks on civilian populations during war, and other atrocities, he concluded that a political language had become necessary that ‘has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness’. In essence then, political communication becomes deceptive phraseology that aims to distract from the substance matter that is talked about but better not evoked in any meaningful way:

Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them. (Orwell 1946)

A typical example of the use of euphemisms in political speech is given by Black (1983) who recounts George Bernard Shaw’s complaint made in 1930 about calling a meeting a disarmament conference even though “everyone knows it’s an armament

¹ In his review, Fallis (2006: 383) reports that *On Bullshit* reached the New York Times bestseller list but could only be listed as “On Bull——”.

conference” (116). Black also points out that “ceremonial and political occasions invite humbug” (127).

The anthropologist F.G. Bailey (1988) goes further than Black and to some extent even further than Frankfurt and Orwell, with his argument that humbug is not just a repeatedly occurring phenomenon in politics, but an essential ingredient thereof. He describes leadership as the one form of domination that does not work through reward or force, but insofar as followers of a political leader “are cajoled into devotion by the leader’s pretended concern or admiration for them or for some cause in which they believe, by a pretense of virtue; it is mostly humbuggerly” (169). He also rejects the idea that perceived charisma of leaders, who we have only ever encountered via history books or the media, could have any objective substance. Instead, he proposes that ‘charisma in public life is usually a manufactured quality and is available to those who have power’ (170). And those who have power, he goes on, are primarily in the business of make-belief, of enchanting and diseducating the public, in order to create and maintain political support:

‘Action must terminate thought and therefore the leader’s job is to teach his followers when to stop thinking and asking questions; his job is to diseducate them. For all these reasons, it is pointless to expect an end to the devious “packaging” and other forms of dishonesty that characterize electoral politics.’ (171)

Bailey’s argument is made from an anthropological perspective, contemplating the meaning and exercise of leadership, its reliance on belief and irrationality. That is from where the necessity of humbuggerly arises. This paper takes a different angle, in that its purpose is to give a coherent theoretical account of why bullshit (or humbug) is not just frequent and epidemic in political communication, but has become a structural property, a logical necessity of political communication and politics in general, i.e. the process of governing, in the age of political marketing.

Especially since it uses derogatory and vulgar language like “bullshit”, this may appear on the surface as another restatement of the well-known accusation that politics is becoming increasingly *style over substance*. That is not intended. It is much rather intended to accuse political communication of generating *style masquerading as substance*.

Having been involved in empirical projects that consisted of extensive content analysis of political text and campaign coverage in the media, the author has plenty of firsthand experience with the content of political campaigns. Much of this can only be

described with the term bullshit. Consider for example the following excerpt from a conference speech on ‘empowerment’ by the Minister for Communities and Local Government, David Miliband:

Our values are strong. Our mission is clear. Our vision is compelling. Civic pride based on a new age of civic power, not for some of the people, but for all of the people, all of the time. (David Miliband, Labour Party Centenary conference, 12 February 2006)

Or this passage from the Labour Manifesto in 1997:

New Labour is a party of ideas and ideals but not of outdated ideology. What counts is what works. The objectives are radical. The means will be modern.

Or this quote from David Cameron’s speech, launching his leadership bid at the 2005 Conservative Party conference:

So let's build together a new generation of Conservatives. Let's switch a new generation on to Conservative ideas. Let's dream a new generation of Conservative dreams.

Neither of these statements contains a shred of information. Of course, speeches and manifestos also contain policy statements, but meaningless phrases like the ones quoted are more than rhetorical decoration. They are, much rather than the policy statements, the essence of modern political communication. Their function goes beyond the production of soundbites. They reveal the purpose of political text and speech in the era of political marketing, which is to simulate, to artificially generate the appearance of political identity. What that political identity consists of is immaterial and exchangeable. The theoretical proposition at the heart of this paper is that *political bullshit* is not just a widespread phenomenon in modern politics, but a symptom of a *political relativism* that manifests itself in the practice of *political marketing*.

Before considering the concepts of political relativism and political marketing, it is necessary to discuss the notion of bullshit, as proposed by Frankfurt (2005). The purpose is to define political bullshit as proactive strategic communication, meant not to hide a truth or reality, or to divert from a particular responsibility, but to create and manage an impression. The phenomenon of political bullshit, thus defined, will subsequently be put into context, the context being a culture of political relativism that produces and legitimizes a purely rhetorical model of politics. The final part of the paper discusses the concept and practice of political marketing, which is driven by a relativistic approach to political reality and results not just in the systematic production of political bullshit but also in the establishment of an artificial, insubstantial evaluation of political parties, a simulation of party-voter relationships,

and of a phoney and misleading redefinition of politics as a system of choice, not representation.

Bullshit, lying and deception

Bullshit and humbug are of course well-known and frequently used concepts in colloquial speech. Especially to accuse someone of producing bullshit has a vulgar and derogatory connotation. Frankfurt explicitly points out that here a term which describes excrement that 'is merely emitted, or dumped' is used to characterise an instance of communication (2005: 21f.). In the examples provided by Frankfurt and Black (1983), the words bullshit and humbug are frequently used as single-word utterances, with exclamation mark, meant to deride the content of what a speaker has just said; to question his sincerity, or the logical value of his statement. In aiming to develop a conceptual understanding of bullshit, Frankfurt acknowledges that the term is more than a simple means to foul-mouth an opponent or an idea. He contends that bullshit is a generic form of communication, one that he tries to define primarily by distinguishing it from lying. Not surprisingly, given the importance of truth-seeking and epistemology in philosophical thought, lying and deception are topics repeatedly discussed in philosophical journals (Stern 1967; Chisholm and Feehan 1977; Simpson 1992; Adler 1997). Lying is understood as 'a species of deception' (Simpson 1992: 623), a false assertion made to someone else in order to create a respective false belief in that other person (Chisholm and Feehan 1977: 152f.). Crucial to the definition of lying is that it '[must] be intentional or voluntary' (Adler 1997: 435). In his view, there is equal intent to deceive in bullshitting as is in lying, the difference being that the liar 'defies [the] authority [of the truth] and refuses to meet its demands', while 'the bullshitter ignores these demands altogether' (2005: 60f.). Whereas lying is a matter of falsity, bullshitting is described by Frankfurt as a matter of fakery, a bluff, not a false but a phony assertion (46f.). Frankfurt considers bullshit to be 'a greater enemy of the truth than lies are' (61), because one cannot lie without believing to know the truth. This requires a person who lies to be 'responding to the truth, and he is to that extent respectful of it' (56f.).

In order to understand better the concept of bullshit that Frankfurt proposes, it is useful to examine the two definitions given by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED):

bullshit n. & v. *coarse sl.*—n. 1 (Often as *int.*) nonsense, rubbish. 2 trivial or insincere talk or writing. —v. *intr.* (-**shitted**, -**shitting**) talk nonsense; bluff. **bullshitter** n.
(*Oxford English Dictionary*)

The first definition of the noun bullshit (nonsense, rubbish) and the respective first definition of the verb (talk nonsense) both refer to the nature of what is said, whereas the second definition of noun (trivial or insincere talk or writing) and verb (bluff) makes clear references to the state of mind of the bullshitter. The latter is the definition that Frankfurt concentrates on, as was also pointed out by Cohen (2002: 324f.). Bullshit is, in that sense, evidence of an argumentative approach the purpose of which is to misrepresent or hide one's objectives (Frankfurt 2005: 54) and to deflect responsibility for one's words or actions (56). It remains somewhat unclear what exactly would drive a speaker to employing such a strategy. Lying and other deceptions appear more straightforward: when a certain truth is inconvenient, it can become instrumental to lie about it. Frankfurt discusses at some length the notion that bullshitting is less frowned upon, and less sanctioned by society than lying, and that for those reasons it may be preferable to 'bullshit your way through' rather than lying about a matter (48ff.). This is, however, a somewhat incoherent argument, since he also points out that the bullshitter does not respect truth, so how would one be able to choose between bullshitting and lying in a situation where some inconvenient matter requires deception? Given Frankfurt's definition of a bullshitter as 'someone who ceases to believe in the possibility of identifying certain statements as true and others as false' (61), a bullshitter would be logically incapable of lying, hence does not have a choice in the matter. Not only does Frankfurt conceptualise lying and bullshitting as substantially different means of deception, according to him they also require philosophically different, mutually exclusive states of mind, which should render it impossible for an individual to oscillate between bullshitting and lying.

This is, however, an easily falsifiable proposition. Just consider the former US president Bill Clinton who, faced with allegations of personal misconduct during the Monica Lewinsky-affair, first lied on January 26, 1998, during a White House news conference, by stating 'I never had sexual relations with that woman' and later, in August of the same year, when confronted with evidence, tried to 'bullshit his way through' by denying to have lied since he did not consider oral sex to constitute a sexual relation. If one and the same person can manage to lie and bullshit, the difference between the state of mind of the liar and that of the bullshitter cannot

consist of mutually exclusive epistemological worldviews. That is unless we could reasonably assume that Bill Clinton converted from respecting the existence of objective truth to utter moral relativism. It is perhaps more reasonable to propose that with regard to epistemological conviction most individuals can be placed on a continuum, being more or less inclined towards a purely relativist point of view. Imagine a lawyer who is defending a criminal without being concerned about his guilt or otherwise, who contends that any accusation can be countered by a good argument. He could be regarded as a prototypical bullshitter. Yet, even he may still concede that if he himself had been unfaithful to his wife, he would, when confronted by her, have to make a choice between being truthful or lying about the affair. Hence, even though a committed relativist in his profession, he would not necessarily be incapable of believing in the possibility that a statement could be identified as either true or false.

Distinguishing between defensive and proactive types of bullshit

From this we may conclude that the essential difference between lying and bullshitting is not always and never just a question of epistemology, but is also a matter of strategy. As Frankfurt has pointed out, ‘people tend to be more tolerant of bullshit than of lies’ (50), which means that lying is a higher-risk strategy than bullshitting. Because of this, there will be instances when bullshitting is chosen as a preferable strategy to lying. Necessarily, if bullshitting is chosen just as a risk-avoidance strategy, the state of mind remains the same as if one were lying. A liar always aims to hide, or avoid, something. And as long as bullshitting is only chosen as a preferable alternative to lying, because it helps avoiding possible revelation and accusation of being a liar, that bullshit is still uttered by someone whose state of mind is that of a liar. He continues covering up some truth, which keeps him, in the Frankfurtian sense, ‘respectful of the truth’. The type of bullshitter that Frankfurt describes differs from the liar in that his strategy is not defensive but offensive or proactive. The Frankfurtian bullshitter, whose state of mind is truth-indifferent, creates something. As Frankfurt points out, ‘his focus is panoramic rather than particular’, ‘the mode of creativity [...] is less analytical and deliberative [...] more expansive and independent, with spacious opportunities for improvisation, color and imaginative play. This is less a matter of craft than of art’ (52f.). Also consider the various possible functions of bullshitting that Mears (2002) summarizes:

socialisation, exploration of the self, expressing feelings, passing time, resolving personal or interpersonal strain, impression management, gaining social, political or economic leverage, and defining and creating reality. None of these are defensive undertakings, aiming to hide something.

In order to develop a sound theoretical understanding of political bullshit, we need to distinguish between instances of political bullshit that are mere substitutes for lying, the function of which remains defensive, and instances of political bullshit that are symptomatic of utter indifference to truth.

The above mentioned case of Bill Clinton following on to his lie by trying to bullshit his way out of his predicament, when he questioned whether oral sex actually qualifies as a sexual relation, is both defensive and deceptive. It retains the same motive that was behind the initial lie. The bullshit is actually intended to cover up the preceding lie, through challenging the criteria by which the previous statement would qualify as a lie. Similarly, the use of euphemisms that Orwell (1946) refers to when discussing the practice of ‘defending the indefensible’ remains deceptive and defensive. When, for example, in recent wars military officials and responsible politicians have tended to talk of ‘collateral damage’, their objective has been to distract from or play down the costs of war, in terms of human life and destruction of livelihoods. The use of euphemisms is a propaganda technique that is closely related to political spin, which consists of exercises in damage limitation, attempts to deflect responsibility, or distractions from negative events. The concept of political spin is much used, but has barely received any theoretical exploration. It is mainly used in descriptive accounts of political communication strategies. However, the following quote from a prototypical such account of spin by Kurtz (1998) may help distinguishing spin as a defensive form of bullshit:

McCurry was a spinmeister extraordinaire, deflecting questions with practised ease, sugar-coating the ugly messes into which the Clintonites seemed repeatedly to stumble. He would mislead reporters on occasion, or try to pass them off to one of the damage-control lawyers who infested the public payroll. He would yell at offending correspondents, denounce their stories as inaccurate, denigrate them to their colleagues and their bosses. He would work the clock to keep damaging stories off the evening news, with its huge national audience. (Kurtz, 1998, p.14)

The job description of a ‘spinmeister’ or spin doctor covers such strategies as deflecting questions, misleading reporters, controlling damage, imitating or denigrating reporters, keeping damaging stories off the news, etc. Euphemisms and political spin are both strategies that qualify as preferable alternatives to lies. The

euphemist or spin doctor may be despised by the media and/or the public, but he cannot be held responsible in the same way as the liar. On the other hand, the euphemist or spin doctor still remains quite close to the liar, insofar as they all cover something up. By choosing bullshit over lies, the euphemist or spin doctor is only strategically relativist in his approach to truth or responsibility. This form of bullshit is not characterised by ignorance towards truth, but is avoidance of dealing with an inconvenient truth, hence an effort to hide it.

Doublespeak and pseudo-communication

More interesting for political theory are instances of bullshit that truly reflect a relativistic, truth-, reality- or responsibility-ignoring attitude in the speaker. These instances of bullshit will, just as suspected by Frankfurt, be of a more panoramic, reality-generating nature. Also, truly relativistic bullshit will be of a deceptively undeceptive kind:

Most of us are subjected to [rhetoric] almost every day of our lives, and we are sick to death of half-truths and rationalizations that fall just short of outright lies. [...] The effect of this is to make us rhetoric-weary, but this is not the same as rhetoric-wise. Our longing to be free from rhetoric [...] makes us especially susceptible to what I would call the rhetoric of sincerity. [...] We demand that our leaders be masters in the art of special pleading, but we give the greatest prize to the one who can persuade us that he is not pleading at all. (Burke 1982: 54)

A first extensive debate about the phenomenon of morally or politically relativistic bullshit developed in the US in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) formed a Committee on Public Doublespeak in 1972.² The NCTE still hands out a Doublespeak award, and its current Chairman, Dennis Baron, recently defined doublespeak as “the subtle art of massaging language to deflect the public's attention from the truth” (NCTE 2006). While that definition still sounds very much like a defensive strategy, the early debates about doublespeak in the 1970s reveal an indeed more panoramic and relativistic meaning of the concept. Moran (1974) characterises doublespeak as a form of ‘pseudocommunication’, which differs from communication in that it is a one-way form of communication; that it is highly controlled by the sender and imposed on the receiver; that it is imprecise in the meaning of messages and relies ‘on authority and uncritical acceptance of ideas’; that

² This is according to Moran (1974: 112), whereas the NCTE itself claims on its website to have formed the Committee on Public Doublespeak in 1974 (NCTE 2006).

it is characterised by a hidden agenda, with either ‘stated purposes and the observable purposes [...] being different [...] or in that the stated purposes are not verifiable by empirical observation’; that it requires collective and non-critical thinking; and finally, that it is characterised by the use of ambiguous symbols (112f.).

Kehl (1977: 395) adds to this the suggestion that doublespeak ‘seeks less to *express* than to *impress*’ (emphasis in the original) and declares that the doublespeaker’s axiom is: ‘If you can’t dazzle them with brilliance, baffle them with bull’. He illustrates his point by using examples from the Lockheed affair, in which some of those accused of corruption tried to redefine concepts that are required to establish the presence or absence of corruption. For example, Lockheed’s then President, Daniel Haughton, redefined bribes as kickbacks (397). Such argumentation does potentially move beyond simple defensive means of hiding a truth behind waffle: the suspicion is aroused that the accused do not consider there anything to be wrong with financing political favours; hence it is the concept of bribe and bribery that is the problem and requires reconsideration, not the practice itself.

Similar examples are given by McCracken (1975) who recounts some of the legal wrangling during the Watergate hearings, where for example an early Doublespeak award recipient, Nixon’s White House press secretary Ronald Zeigler, labelled ‘a previous statement as *inoperative*’ (325, emphasis in the original). It remains unclear whether the bullshitter redefines what would normally be called a lie in order to cover it up, which would indicate understanding of wrongdoing, or instead rejects outright the requirement for truth-telling and taking responsibility for the truthfulness of communication. We are at the threshold between defensive and proactive, relativistic bullshitting. The threshold appears to be solidly overstepped by more recent practices in ‘taking political responsibility’. For example, when in May 2004 US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld acknowledged that the alleged prisoner abuse in Abu Ghraib ‘occurred on my watch, and as secretary of defense I am accountable for them, and I take full responsibility’ (Garamone 2004), what exactly did taking responsibility mean? It amounted to exactly what the above quote was: a statement, nothing more than a figure of speech. Taking responsibility increasingly becomes an activity without consequences, hence is removed from the sphere of political action to that of political rhetoric.

Politics as rhetoric

When bullshit becomes consistently and systematically proactive, we have entered a model of society such as that described by Burke (1983) in which ‘rhetoric, rather than morality or force, is made the principle of politics’ (48). His rhetorical conception of politics is based on pluralism and the primacy of opinion over morality or force. Democratic elections are means to decide which side is winning the argument about being better equipped to govern, rather than a means to select the best possible government. The holding of elections itself is a most effective rhetorical strategy of what Stern (1967) and Bailey (1988: 162-5) have labelled ‘make-believe’, since it generates the impression among the citizenry that they have the last say, that they autonomously and ultimately delegate power to either of the competing elites. It is identical to the perhaps more easily deflatable myth that trial juries are meant to discover the truth about a criminal offence; they are clearly only there to judge the believability of the competing reasoning offered by defence and prosecution. In those instances, culpability of a defendant may well be asked to be judged on the basis not so much of factual evidence but from the accounts of character witnesses, outward appearance, etc. In similar vein, voters are asked to form political opinions less on the basis of political information but on the basis of rhetorical cues.

Philosophers like Kant or Plato would argue that, insofar as an appeal is addressed to irrational desires or fears or is based on fallacious arguments, it tends to deprive the audience of autonomy and transform it into an object of manipulation; but such an equation of rationality and freedom is contrary to the rhetorical model of society I have been developing. In this model I am free to believe whatever I want, however contrary to the *evidence* or my *real interest*, and any appeal to my beliefs is an appeal to me. (Burke 1983: 52, emphasis added)

According to Bailey (1988), political competition, i.e. the effort to generate public support, is an exercise in enchantment. He defines the phenomenon of political leadership in general as requiring suspension of disbelief in the public. Leadership requires following, and following requires belief, not rationality. Hence, establishing leadership means to diseducate the public (23f.). While the methods used by modern campaigners for the purpose of generating a following, or public support, are increasingly scientific (151f.), the message ‘consists of promoting irrationality, enchantment, and faith at the cost of rationality and intellectuality’ (153). To a large extent, this is the case, according to Bailey, because while rationality ‘deals primarily with means’, ends are ‘determined [...] by rhetoric’ (149). Election campaign messages cannot purely consist of explanations as to *how*, i.e. through which policies,

a candidate or party plans to achieve certain outcomes, but have to answer question concerning the *why* of policy making. This is why so much of campaign talk is about spelling out ‘a vision’ to the electorate.

Impression management

Spelling out a political vision basically means to create or generate an identity for the party or its candidate. What a party or a party leader *stands for* is nothing that can be objectively verified or falsified. It is an impression. Bailey stresses this point when discussing the artificial nature of publicly perceived or historically attributed charisma.

Once we go beyond the narrow circle of people we know and begin to find charisma in individuals known only through history books or through the media, we must drop the assumption that any attribution of charisma is a true assessment of the individual’s personal qualities. [...]
Charisma in public life is usually a manufactured quality and is available to those who have power. (169f.)

Manufacturing charisma, just as the creation of a political vision, is an exercise in *impression management* - which is one of the core functions of bullshitting that Mears (2002) identifies. The concept of impression management was originally coined by Goffman (1959) who rejected the notion that status, social role or position is ‘a material thing’, and instead proposed that social identities depend on performance, that they are ‘something that must be realized’ (75). The notion of impression management has since been extensively used in studies of organizational behaviour, for example in order to analyse success or failure in job interviews.³ While traditionally, impression management was treated as a form of deception or manipulation, more recent approaches, claiming to take a ‘more expansive view’, contend that some ‘forms of impression management may be *authentic*, that is, the applicant presents an identity that closely matches his or her self-image’ (Rosenfeld 1997: 804). It is of course revealing that authenticity is defined by how close there is a match between perceived and self-image. If identity is something to be realized through performance, then the authenticity of the performance can only be evaluated

³ It should be noted that referring here to academic studies about job interviews is a lot less off the topic than it may appear. In politics, election campaigns can be understood as the functional equivalent of job interviews.

by reference to what was intended to be realized. This is precisely the kind of relativism that Frankfurt (2005) laments:

Convinced that reality has no inherent nature, which he might hope to identify as the truth about things, he devotes himself to being true to his own nature. (65)

Sophism and marketing

Impression management and bullshitting in general, has as its guiding principle the sophistic premise that ‘of everything and anything the measure [truly is] humanity (*Protagoras*, quoted in Pullman 1994: 54). The moral and political relativism that can be found in sophistic rhetoric provides any willing and committed bullshitter with a solid theoretical foundation, and justification, for such practice. And indeed, Laufer and Paradeise (1990) have made a valuable attempt to explain political impression and media management, i.e. *political marketing*, as ‘*the bureaucratic form of Sophism*’ (2, emphasis in the original). They point out that both (political) marketers and Sophists have been accused of the same things – placing style over substance, being mercenaries dressed up as pragmatists, and disrespecting culture. Plato and Aristotle despised the Sophists because of their ignorance for truth, and considered them not to be philosophers but mere rhetoric teachers who would sell their technical skill to whoever would hire them. The Sophists’ response was to argue that there is no objective truth to be sought through debate, but instead that debating is about winning, and that whoever wins an argument has not proved the *truth* of a cause, but its *superiority* (11). Accordingly, Laufer and Paradeise give a definition of campaigning and political competition, which entirely relies on the notion of impression management. It is ‘the search for the best candidate, that is, the one who will be able to show that he is the most fit to meet the demands of the greatest number of voters’ (10).

The reason why (political) marketing and Sophism are so similar is, according to Laufer and Paradeise, a historical one. Sophistic tendencies gain in strength and attractiveness in times of crisis of legitimacy. Legitimacy, according to Weber, can be derived from the sacred (charismatic authority), history (traditional authority) or nature (rational-legal authority). Hence, legitimacy is based on belief. Sophism and marketing cannot manage to replace or emulate other forms of legitimacy when those run into crisis. This is the case, according to Laufer and Paradeise, because

Sophism and marketing accord belief a central place [...] only to the extent that belief is useful to action. The referent-less world of relativism is emptied of meaning. All that remains is an endless cloud of opinions. Power is therefore reduced to *de facto* power, and domination to a pragmatic problem: that of its preservation through the manipulation of opinion. (14)

Political marketing and irrationality

A very crucial argument that Laufer and Paradeise make, which is otherwise missing from the growing body of literature about political marketing, is that the notion and practice of marketing only emerged because of a crisis of legitimacy of the economic order in the late 19th and early 20th century. Classic economic theory assumes perfect markets, and the political marketing literature derives its assumptions about market conditions and rationality, which it then applies to political behaviour, from classic economic theory. However, tendencies towards monopolistic or oligopolistic markets undermine the ‘natural order’ of markets, of demand and supply determining prices. Marketing emerged as a means to artificially create demand. Pricing, accounting, intra-organizational relations, all become part of a company’s strategy of placing itself in the market, generating a reputation, a public image (41ff.). And marketing aims to generate demand from dormant needs and preferences. Crucially, marketing theory dispenses with the concept of homo economicus and instead sets out to explore consumer psychology in order to enable producers to target segments of the market. Marketing not only allows for but exploits irrationality. This should be of importance to any theoretical model of political marketing, simply because marketing theory is not easily reconcilable with classic economic theory, but has been systematically overlooked. Political marketing models (Lees-Marshment 2001a) tend to assume Downsian rationality amongst voters. From that assumption, it is then deduced that market research will reveal the rational policy preferences, according to which the market-oriented party will adapt its product. This fallacious assumption about marketing results in political marketing theories turning prescriptive, and advocating the move from product- to sales- to market-oriented parties (Lees-Marshment 2001b). This is not only recommended because the latter is argued to win elections, but also because market-orientation is implicitly or explicitly assumed to lead to a revival of

citizen input. In that sense, market-orientation is understood as a means to democratise, i.e. to bring about a more participatory form of representative politics.⁴

It is frankly absurd to assume exogeneity of preferences, which is part of any model of economic rationality, when describing the practice of marketing, political or commercial. Market research consists of ‘in-depth studies of *buyers’ motivations*’ (Laufer and Paradeise 1990: 52). The very nature of that exercise is to get to understand buying practices and the role that ‘habits, customs, fashions, knowledge, education, imitation, profession, climate and religion’ (*ibid.*) play in forming those practices. The objective of marketing is to endogenise preferences, in order to enable their understanding, prediction, anticipation, and shaping.

Product differentiation and brand loyalty

The notion of political preferences is precisely the myth that political marketing exploits to simulate legitimacy. Preferences require information, and in particular political information is scarce, unattainable for most voters across the range of potentially relevant issues. It is widely acknowledged that voters use cues like partisanship, ideology or leader images to evaluate parties and candidates. With eroding partisanship since the 1960s and political convergence between catch-all parties, the most critical cues have to be simulated. The marketing techniques employed for such simulation are *product differentiation* (Chamberlin 1962, Simon 1969, Cremer and Thisse 1991) and the generation of *brand loyalty* (Bloemer and Kasper 1995; Fournier and Yao 1997).

A beautifully revealing definition of product differentiation can be found in one of the seminal publications on the subject:

A general class of product is differentiated if any significant basis exists for distinguishing the goods (or service) of one seller from those of another. Such a basis may be real or fancied, so long as it of any importance whatever to buyers, and leads to a preference for one variety of the product over another. (Chamberlin 1962: 56)

⁴ But not just the more recent theorists of political marketing, Downs (1957) himself contributed to the misperception inherent in any market model of politics, namely by adapting Hotelling’s spatial model to politics, but omitting the important qualification that this is a model describing oligopolistic competition. Under such conditions of oligopoly, core assumptions about rationality and self-regulating market mechanisms fail to apply, which makes Downs model itself somewhat fallacious, insofar as he presents political competition as a perfect market, in which the sole strategy of producers of products (i.e. policies) will be to adapt to market demands.

Two types of product differentiation are emphasized in the literature: horizontal and vertical (Cremer and Thisse 1991). Horizontal product differentiation refers to emphasizing (minimal) differences in the attributes of two products, while vertical differentiation refers to emphasizing differences in quality. Translated into politics, this means that a party differentiates itself and its policies from competitors horizontally by pointing to how their policies deviate from those of opponents, which implies that there is a choice over priorities in the next government. To differentiate oneself vertically from a political competitor is done by pointing out that one is better able or equipped to handle certain issues, which implies that the election provides a choice over the quality of the next government.

The concept of brand loyalty suggests that repeated purchase of a product may develop into a form of commitment (Bloemer and Kasper 1995; Fournier and Yao 1997). To date, little has been made of the brand loyalty concept in the political marketing literature. It should however be a concept of interest, since, when translated into the political sphere, it hints at the possibility of generating partisanship as a matter of choice. This remains pretence, of course, since loyalty that is not based on a deeper belief (which can generate legitimacy) is, if not hollow, at best temporary, because it is merely based on a consideration of utility.

The myth of political choice

The concept of *choice* is crucial in the discussion of political relativism, political marketing and political bullshit. (And it is not coincidental that choice is one of the catch words of the New Labour government in the UK, which they use whenever a further step towards privatization of services is initiated.) The core political myth that is being propagated by the marketing-driven current system of electoral politics is that it is a system of political choice which has replaced the older model of political representation. The old model of representation was a system in which identifiable social groups (or classes) and their interests were organized into politics through the emergence of political parties that competed in elections by mobilizing their support base. The basic principles that make the system work were a coherent ideology and a consistent pattern of party affiliation. It was a representative system insofar as the political parties served as the agents of sectional interests within society. Mair (2000,

2003) has argued that parties ‘find themselves less and less able to function as representative agencies’, but are at the same time taking on a ‘perhaps even increasingly important role in the management of democracy’ (2003: 7). This results in a crisis of legitimacy, which manifests itself in decreasing turnout, party membership, and erosion of trust in political institutions as well as in political leaders.

In response to the crisis, the post-ideological, post-partisanship model of electoral politics presents itself as a model of choice, not representation. It is relativist, insofar as any political party can potentially take on any position on any given issue, while more and more voters become afloat, which means that they are shifting allegiances between elections, and are increasingly capable of taking into consideration voting for just about any of the mainstream parties. Quite openly in their political texts and speeches, parties outline how they aim to generate identities that are suited to current social demands. For example, during the 2005 UK party conferences, Tony Blair and David Cameron provided with revealingly similar descriptions of how to generate a party profile that helps make their party competitive:

New Labour was never just a clever way to win; it was a fundamental recasting of progressive politics so that the values we believed in became relevant to the time we lived in. In the late 20th century, the world had changed, the aspirations of the people had changed; we had to change. We did. We won. And Britain is stronger, fairer, better than on 1st May 1997. (Tony Blair, Labour Party Conference, 2005)

We have to change and modernise our culture and attitudes and identity. When I say change, I'm not talking about some slick rebranding exercise: what I'm talking about is fundamental change, so that when we fight the next election, street by street, house by house, flat by flat, we have a message that is relevant to people's lives today, that shows we're comfortable with modern Britain and that we believe our best days lie ahead. (David Cameron, Conservative Party Conference, 2005)

Blair and Cameron seem to agree that the task is to make messages, or even values, becoming relevant for the times you live in, about changing and modernising not just policies but the identity of your party. Competitiveness is then a function of the quality of your marketing, of how well one accomplishes the task to make one's party's identity relevant. In the absence of a representative function of political parties, which legitimizes parties' actions and their policies in the eyes of followers, since it gives them ‘voice’ (Mair 2000, 2003), a synthetic equivalent has to be found.

Choice is a political myth, and indeed political bullshit, because it fakes democratic meaning for a party system that has ceased to be socially representative. The essential bullshit, in the Frankfurtian sense, inherent in this conceptualisation of the political world is encapsulated in Miliband's (2006) earlier quoted concept of *empowerment*.

Choice is presented as *people power*, or input of the citizenry into an ever more responsive party system. This quite deliberately ignores the reality that politics is still a system of representation, not choice - only that nowadays increasingly fewer and narrower interests tend to be organised into the political system of representation, in the form of lobbying or party financing. This narrow system of interest group representation marginalises the majority, and is already facing a public backlash.

Decreasing levels of participation, in the form of turnout and party membership, as well as frequently voiced public alienation from the political system show that Western democracies are in a crisis of legitimacy. Most notably, the UK has not experienced a continuous decrease in turnout, but a sudden erosion since 1992, after which almost 20% turnout were lost and have not been recovered in three successive elections. It is reasonable to propose a relationship between sudden public alienation and the development of the New Labour project, which is prototypical for the replacement of a system of representation.

In this situation, it is noticeable and indicative of the attempt to generate a synthetic form of legitimacy, that the major political parties are not longer just communicating on behalf of themselves and their own policies, but are also feeling obliged and forced to appeal on behalf of the hollowed party system, presenting themselves as champions of political inclusion and engagement. For example, deliberately oblivious to their own role in demobilising citizens since the mid-1990s, this is how the Labour party formulated their 'challenge' of reconnecting with British citizens in their 2005 manifesto:

Widening access to power is as important as widening access to wealth and opportunity. National standards are important to ensure fairness. But the best way to tackle exclusion is to give choice and power to those left behind. Our political institutions – including our own party – must engage a population overloaded with information, diverse in its values and lifestyles, and sceptical of power. However, people are passionate about politics – when they see it affects them. So our challenge is to bridge the chasm between the government and the governed.

The bullshit of such political communication does not just lie in the semantic meaninglessness of text and speech, but also in the indifference towards the alienation that is thus provoked. In the absence of meaningful representation, the political marketing of a system of choice and alleged empowerment is insincere and intentionally misleading. In the spirit of Harry G. Frankfurt who, contemplating how relativism has resulted in man trying to be true to himself instead of an indeterminate reality, concluded that 'sincerity itself is bullshit' (2005: 67), we may have to face the

fact that, rendered meaningless by political relativism and marketing, *choice itself is bullshit*.

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