

## TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF “PARTIAL UNIVERSALISM“: THE OBJECTION OF JOHN FEREJOHN AND DEBRA SATZ TO THE PATHOLOGIES OF RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY

Hristina Dobрева<sup>1</sup>  
e-mail: [h.dobрева@rncd.bg](mailto:h.dobрева@rncd.bg)  
[n\\_hris@yahoo.com](mailto:n_hris@yahoo.com)

### Abstract

*The paper compares and tries to find a common ground between two camps, proposing different interpretations on the notion of “partial universalism” as opposed to unlimited universalism in rational choice theory. The explanation preferring different theoretical approaches in a complex environment of blurred boundaries is juxtaposed with the explanation of a two-level hypothesis: rational and intentional, where the “weak” additional independent hypothesis is also tested for rationality. The need for a synthesis in the first case is compared to the need of a situational/context dependent causal mechanism, avoiding circular causality. The pragmatic common ground is the improvement of rational choice methodology.*

**Keywords:** rational choice theory, partial universalism

**JEL:** B40

### Introduction

The paper will outline the two views of partial universalism presented by the authors and will try to find the similarities and contrasting points without finishing with a single definition but hopefully creating a basis for the future reconciliation of the debate about the image and contribution of rational choice.

### Green and Shapiro’s view

In chapter three of *The Pathologies of Rational Choice* Green and Shapiro criticize the methodological defects that hinder the empirical applications of rational choice. They focus their critique on the techniques and practices used by rational choice and on its “universalist aspirations” (Green and Shapiro, 1994, p. 33) that cause recurrent weaknesses when results are compared with evidence. The idea of the authors is that a universal theory cannot be created and instead

---

<sup>1</sup> Senior Assist., PhD, Defence Advanced Research Institute, Rakovski National Defence College – Sofia, Bulgaria, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-2581-4356

a researcher would better use different approaches. They suggest improvement of rational choice: abandoning the drive for systematic explanation or reduction of the drive for universalism and turning it into a “partial universalism” (Green and Shapiro, 1994, p. 69). This is kind of a modest version of rational choice – one that admits its deficiencies (anomalies) and accepts its “arbitrary domain restriction” (Green and Shapiro, 1994, p. 44). The rational choice approach in this way finds out how to build its evidence upon a “credible null hypothesis” (Green and Shapiro, 1994, p. 37) and avoid the vicious practice of mere interpreting the data and fitting it into the theory. Thus rational choice hypothesis must reflect the complex reality, allow for the existence of an alternative and in this way escape basing its explanations on universal hypotheses.

Green and Shapiro base their critique on an interpretation that relates rational choice mostly to the goal (final end) of the actors which is rational maximization. That is why their explanation of partial universalism is equal to a reduction of the universalist application of this factor so that rational choice admits other factors as also influencing the outcome. Instead of explaining the outcome in simple terms (by parsimony) they suggest the use of a “synthesis of different theoretical perspectives” (Green and Shapiro, 1994, p. 69). What remains unclear is how a synthesis or a general view can be achieved by way of “sharpening the theoretical boundaries” (Green and Shapiro, 1994, p. 69).

There are several specific features of the authors’ view about the role of science (and rational choice in particular). In the first place, Green and Shapiro do not share the image of science presented by Kuhn (1962). In terms of the Kuhnian paradigm the sharpening of boundaries is the last phase of the maturation of the science when the specialization of the field increases. Anomalies are typical of the revolutionary science and they are regarded as forces that bring about paradigm shifts and introduce innovations in the discipline. The anomalies in this way restrict the field and lead to specialization and progress, not to backwardness (as in the version of Green and Shapiro). By introducing the term “partial universalism”, the authors want to sharpen and blur at the same time the boundaries between the approaches so that they refute the idea of Kuhn about the establishment of a paradigm (or a pattern) and adjust the anomalies to their view of partial universalism.

In the second place, Green and Shapiro do not accept the Downsian version of democracy (Downs, 1957). However they fail to acknowledge the fact that Downs improves his theory later, through the use of social values as the most important variables in explaining society (Downs, 1991). If they had taken this Downs’ improvement into consideration, maybe they could find a common ground with their opponents with regards to partial universalism.

Downs admits that in the explanation of democracy the actors (be they voters, parties or governments) cannot be treated with precise assumptions about their rationality in pursuing specified goals. In his new version he combines the use of positive rules with normative, social axioms (duties) and thus values and preferences find their place in the analysis. Downs reevaluates his economic approach and concludes that his earlier version of it is narrow. Three years after he publishes his reassessment, Green and Shapiro still insist on this narrow basis as a starting point for their critique.

In the third place they conclude their suggestions for healing the anomalies with an idea for the need of a thick version (a synthesis) of rationality as the basis for research. However they do not broaden the interpretation of rationality or explain rational choice in terms of its means.

In fact the peculiar features of their interpretation mentioned above make it different from the interpretation of “partial universalism” of Ferejohn and Satz.

### **The Objection of Ferejohn and Satz**

First of all, Satz and Ferejohn have a different understanding regarding theory. They accept the view that a theory can be built although not a universal one. That means they recognize the need for rules as a basis.

Second, they introduce a philosophical basis – intentions – as a foundation for the agents’ behaviour.

Their “partial universalism” (Ferejohn and Satz, 1996, p. 78) means holding constant (situation independent) the independence hypotheses or a causal mechanism governing the actions.

The third point in their explanations of the pathologies is that they refer to Imre Lakatos’ rules of reason (Lakatos, 1970) and the idea that the pathologies (through falsification) may lead to the development of a progressive scientific research program. However no falsification is permitted before the emergence of a better theory so in this line of thought Green and Shapiro should develop a better alternative before going to a final conclusion. Satz and Ferejohn (1996) use the methodology of scientific research programmes proposed (and named a mature science) by Lakatos. His research program consists of methodological rules that are divided into a “hard core” or negative heuristic rules (that tell what path of research to avoid) and a “protective belt” or positive heuristic rules (that tell what path to pursue). The hard core in other words are the fundamental assumptions that should remain irrefutable and are not subject to question. The protective belt is the hypotheses that have to be tested. So there is a competition between the research programmes and the relative performance of each is important. In terms of the view of Lakatos the core of Ferejohn and Satz is the general causal process or intentions and this core leads to actions/choices. Intentional behaviour is equal

to actions. The intentional explanation of behaviour is preferred but this is “weak” privileging (Ferejohn and Satz, 1996, note 3) so that it allows for the existence of other forms of behaviour. The “weak” privileging is a partial universalism and a thin version of rationality. The view of partial universalism is explained with the introduction of a test for rationality – that is an additional hypothesis (preferences are independent of choice situations) which helps for the distinction between rationality and intentionality. The idea is that if we hold the additional hypothesis (which is the core) constant, the choices will be both intentional and rational. We have to hold something constant to avoid having circular results. Thus we hold constant the relation between preferences and situations and this is our independent variable (additional hypothesis or independence hypothesis) used as a test for rationality. This core hypothesis is weaker than the stronger hypothesis of expected utility (or rational maximization) which means that the utility maximization is not always the expected outcome and this kind of rationality is partial universalism. This version I think will appeal to Green and Shapiro in the part that admits other outcomes apart from rational maximization.

The fourth point is that Satz and Ferejohn prefer thin rationality as a basis (or the notion that instrumentally rational agents efficiently employ the means available to pursue their ends). Their emphasis is on the means not on the ends of rational actions and thus a broader concept of rationality is offered. A proof for the broadening of the interpretation of partial rationality is that two forms of partial universalism are offered by the authors.

Apart from Lakatos, judged by the notes at the end, Satz and Ferejohn back up their objection to Green and Shapiro’s partial universalism by referring to Jon Elster and Daniel Davidson. I will outline some of the ideas of both of them to show how they create a background for Satz and Ferejohn.

Jon Elster (1986) accepts rational choice as a normative theory that tells what we ought to do to achieve our aims but unlike moral theory it offers conditional imperatives pertaining to means rather than to ends. In order to know what to do we first have to know what to believe and that is why the theory of rational choice must be supplemented by a theory of rational belief and have the right kind of relation to the evidence available. The proposed relation is in the following order: evidence – desire – belief – action. Thus having rational behaviour means having consistent desires and beliefs and acting consistently upon them. One of the alternatives that may supplement, but not take the place of rational choice is cultural theory: human actions are understood in terms of social norms rather than individual rationality. This is similar to what Ferejohn proposes: the supplementing of rational accounts with interpretative (cultural) accounts. In Elsters’ version rationality and intentionality are synonymous – just as in the core of Satz and Ferejohn.

Davidson (2001) on the other hand emphasizes the role of causal concepts in the description and explanation of human action. His main tenets are that the reason leads to intentional actions and rationalizes the action. He differentiates causal laws and generalizations and uses induction to learn the truth of a law. Induction yields the knowledge that a causal law specifying certain conditions exists. He believes in externalism as the only alternative to subjectivism and ascribes it the meaning that our beliefs are objective in the sense that they are true or false. According to him there are two forms of externalism: social externalism (the contents of our thoughts depend on the interaction with others) and perceptual externalism (a connection between the contents of thoughts and the features of the world that make them true). At their core Satz and Ferejohn use the cause and effect relation between reason and action as well as this interpretation of objectivism.

### **The Comparison**

Both “camps” talk about partial universalism but understand different things mainly because of their different interpretation of rationality (thick or thin). Thus Green and Shapiro (1994) talk about rationality as an end while Ferejohn and Satz (1996) talk about rationality as a means. The dispute again proves the porous boundary between thin and thick rationality.

The general impression is that Green and Shapiro’s critique is related mainly to voting behaviour and that they emphasize on the difference between the approaches and at the same time on the need of a synthesis (synoptic view of causes). That is why if we accept the synthesis as a thin view and the sharpening of the boundaries (as well as the dependence of the explanations upon the context) as a thick one, we conclude that they do not aim at separating the two.

Ferejohn and Satz (1996) on the other hand stress that the causal mechanism should be situation independent and thus accept the thin version. With a general causal mechanism at the core we have a basis for comparison. The core is that people are conforming to the general rules of intentional calculi. The broader interpretation of rationality is supplemented by offering two forms of partial universalism: 1) utility maximization depends on contextual forces (that shape preferences and beliefs) 2) universalism in general causal processes. The similarity between the two is that choices and actions are explained through intentions. The partial universalism comes from the understanding that Intentionalism is weaker than rationality (preferences may not be independent from choice situation).

In fact, having in mind Green and Shapiro’s response to the critique (Green and Shapiro, 1995) we find out that the objection of Satz and Ferejohn does not convince Green and Shapiro to abandon their view of partial universalism. Instead they respond with a similar objection and want to adjust the critique

to their view without accepting it. Examples to support this argument can be found in the statement of Green and Shapiro that a little philosophy of science is a dangerous thing, that Ferejohn has embraced both partial universalism and segmented universalism (in other words that Ferejohn and Satz accept Green and Shapiro) and that all in all, Ferejohn and Satz accept the described in *The Pathologies* view of a family of theories.

However the feature that both camps share is the disagreement with the rational choice's ability to create universal models.

### **Conclusion – Is a Definition Possible?**

When we think of this, it is useless to try to reconcile Green and Shapiro with Ferejohn and Satz because they have more similarities than they realize. The fact that they express them starting from a different basis helps for the building of a broader picture of the meaning of partial universalism. However, the right question or lesson that could be learned from this debate is how it contributes to the improvement of rational choice and to the development of the methodology of rational choice.

At the end we are convinced that rational choice alone cannot provide a full explanation and should be supplemented by other approaches. Another agreement between the “camps” is that the application of formal rational choice models leading to a predetermined utility maximization outcome does not always hold true. However, all of the authors admit that some rational choice hypotheses may be true and this is implied by the introduction of two-level hypotheses: that is one that reflects the logical relation and another that has to be tested and may be refuted in the process. In this respect I find the proposed versions of improvement of rational choice very similar (the idea of Green and Shapiro for “retroduction” and the idea of Ferejohn and Satz for a general causal mechanism).

On the other hand none of the authors recognizes the fact that rational choice proponents now also support the view of improving the rational choice application because they know that there is no such thing as unlimited universalism. A logical question then arises: how far should universalism be constrained or where are its boundaries? As this question cannot be answered it is open to lots of speculative interpretations in favor of one approach / discipline or another. This question may be posed not only related to rational choice but to the whole discipline of political science and its relation with other disciplines. As pointed out by Goodin and Klingemann (1998) the differentiation (drawing boundaries) and integration (universalism) proceed as parallel processes that supplement each other but also at times contradict each other. The boundaries within the discipline of political science cannot be drawn without drawing the boundaries between political science and other sciences and should better remain unmarked in order to permit

some form of collaboration and put the knowledge into a given framework. Maybe this debate (similar to whether political science is a science or an art) will remain open. However what partial universalism is meant for is providing a certain logical common ground of knowledge. The aim should be not resorting to endless debates about the demarcation of the territory of a given discipline or approach but holding this pragmatic common ground relatively constant and improving on its basis the knowledge in all of the disciplines.

### References

- Davidson, D. (2001). *Essays on Actions and Events*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Downs, A. (1957). *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, Harper and Row Publishers, USA.
- Downs, A. (1991). Social Values and Democracy, in Monroe, K. (ed.), *The Economic Approach to Politics: A Critical Reassessment of the Theory of Rational Action*, Harper Collins, USA, pp. 143-170.
- Elster, J. (1986). Introduction, in *Rational Choice*, New York University Press, pp. 1-33.
- Ferejohn, J. and Satz, D. (1996). Unification, Universalism and Rational Choice Theory, *Critical Review* 9, pp. 71-84.
- Goodin, R and Klingemann, H.-D. (1998). Political Science: The Discipline, in *A New Handbook of Political Science*, Oxford University Press, p.1-67.
- Green, D. and Shapiro, I. (1994). *The Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory: A Critique of Applications in Political Science*, Yale University Press.
- Green, D and Shapiro, I. (1995). Pathologies Revisited: Reflections on Our Critics, *Critical Review* 9, pp. 235-276.
- Kuhn, T. (1962). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago Press.
- Lakatos, I. (1970). *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, Cambridge University Press.