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**Divergent Meanings of Politics
- a Study of Social Representations
in Swedish Twitter Conversations**

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Abstract

This article examines everyday thinking and common sense knowledge about the ontological meaning of *politics*. To map out patterns in such conceptions about politics the study analyzes Swedish political conversations on Twitter, an interactive social media platform where political news and issues – among other topics - are shared and discussed. Different meanings attached to politics in these conversations are analyzed within the framework of *social representations*, a social psychological theory developed by Serge Moscovici. The findings illustrate that politics can be understood as idealistic, complicated, antagonistic, cynical and more or less separable/inseparable from other dimensions of our lives. An analysis of how these themes interplay in the conversations shows that some of these different meanings are conflicting, which points to politics as a dilemmatic phenomenon. The divergent conceptions about politics are suggested to bring different entries to - and ways of interacting with - political reality. The article further discusses the collective potential of clichés about politics. It also discusses how the adopted views on politics may be affected by the argumentative context in conversation. The study provides new insights into how social representations theory can be methodologically used to analyze communication about contradictory topics. Further research is recommended to clarify how the divergent understandings of politics are distributed, nationally or globally, among different social groups and to investigate what emotional characteristics the divergent views are linked to.

Keywords: Politics, Common sense knowledge, Social representations, Meaning, Twitter, Social media, Communication

Word count: 12 453

Introduction

Moscovici proposes that a prime task of social sciences is to study the contents of the *thinking society*, which involves the views of its individuals (Moscovici 1984:14-16; Billig et al 1988:1). Correspondingly, Berger & Luckmann argue that a sociology of knowledge should first of all investigate what passes as knowledge in society, for people ‘in the street’ so to say (Berger & Luckmann 2011:14-17; 21-22; 45; 54-62). Such common sense knowledge differs thus from theoretical knowledge developed via scientific institutions. The knowledge of what is taken for granted as ‘real’ in people’s lives, Berger & Luckmann argue, is what renders the structures of meaning without which society could not exist. Meanings that we attach to phenomena can however be contradictory. For research on the contents of the thinking society, Billig et al (1988:1-2) have thereby stressed the importance of exploring the divergent and dilemmatic nature of common sense.

Politics is the focal phenomenon in this article. The study is an examination of how the essential nature of politics – in itself - is socially understood and communicated about. I find it particularly motivated to examine common sense knowledge about politics as it concerns the way society is governed and as it points to an everyday thinking that politicians arguably must take into account when formulating their ambitions. Our ideas about politics can thus ‘bounce back’ at us, since our ways of understanding politics can affect how we want the governance of society to be conducted.

Theoretically, politics has been distinguished from ‘the political’, which has been defined as an arena of public deliberation and freedom by some theorists and as constituted by power and conflict by others (Mouffe 2005:8-9). Still, as Mouffe points out, this distinction is not commonly done in everyday language. Several studies of public approaches towards politics in advanced democracies point to a widespread mindset of *rejecting* politics (Baiocchi et al 2014:37; Bruno et al 2011; Taft 2006; Möller 2000:32-34; Eliasoph 1997; 167-181). Similarly, many scholars identify a contemporary *post-political condition* (Baiocchi, Bennett, Corder, Klein & Savell 2014:11; Mouffe 2005:8; 164-176) in such countries, where people commonly tend to abandon the struggles of democratic life by cutting politics out of their

community life. This avoidance raises questions about what ways of thinking that exist today concerning the essential nature of politics. It would thus be of interest to map out (Doise & Staerklé 2002:152-154) what different meanings are attached to politics in public debates. Doing this in a manner open to any findings would shed light on the repertoire of thought-patterns about politics that is reflected in the thinking society and among its individuals. It would thereby also allow the detection of possible thought-patterns that constitute alternatives to the widespread post-political mindset.

The aim of this study, consequently, is to examine common sense knowledge about politics in a Swedish speaking context. The ambition is to map out characteristics and conflicting divergences concerning the meaning attached to politics and its essential nature. This does not involve a comparison between social groups, but a comparison of different thought-patterns concerning politics. Moreover, the study seeks to investigate how these divergences collide and interplay in conversations about politics. Since our political views are presumed to be influenced by norms and trends from mass media (Kumlin 2002:16; 21-23), it was found appropriate to study an arena where mass media content is spread but where the everyday thinking and discussions between individuals can simultaneously be captured in search for collisions between different ideas about politics. Therefore, I found the interactive social media platform Twitter to be advantageous for investigating the communicated everyday thinking about the meaning of politics. Swedish conversations are chosen as a delimitation of the study, and Sweden further exemplifies the advanced democracies associated to the post-political condition.

More specifically, the study addresses the following research questions: 1) *What meanings are attached to politics in Swedish Twitter conversations?* 2) *How do different meanings attached to politics interplay in the conversations?* The article suggests that a suitable framework for examining this common sense knowledge and the ways of communicating about it is the theory of *social representations*.

Social representations theory

According to their theoretical founder Serge Moscovici (1988), *social representations* (SR from now on) embody our everyday thinking and the ideas or beliefs that shape and are part of it. The social-psychological theory of SR adopts a constructivist approach in that SR can be seen as socially constructed building blocks in common sense knowledge. They permeate the automatic connections we make to understand and navigate in our social surrounding. SR enable us to classify persons or impressions and to objectify such phenomena as parts of our lives. As they thereby guide our actions, SR are “ways of world-making” (Moscovici 1988:231) with effects that can be traced in the ‘real’ world (Elcheroth, Doise & Reicher 2011).

SR can be understood as a dynamic update of Durkheim’s *collective representations* (Durkheim 1915:10-16) in that SR theory softens Durkheim’s dichotomy between the individual and society by allowing a greater plurality or diversity of representations in-between individuals and groups (Moscovici 1988). Collective representations, thus, is a more static idea about consensual, common beliefs in a society in comparison to SR theory which emphasizes social interaction and exchange as processes where representations are continuously moulded. This goes hand in hand with Berger & Luckmann’s notion on conversation as a process that “maintains, modifies and reconstructs subjective reality” (Berger & Luckmann 2011:313).

SR involve convictions, conceptualizations and understandings that we develop collectively (Moscovici 1996:10). Societal phenomena such as science, religion or - as highlighted in this study - politics, are tied to certain ways of understanding and communicating. These ways shape common sense and the view of reality (Chaib & Orfali 1996:18). The interactive element to them is thus what makes the representations social. Communication is vital for the formation of SR via the representative nature of language and via the influence, consensus or conflict that social interaction brings (Jodelet 1996:45). Hence, studying human interaction – like the twitter conversations examined in this work - is an established way of capturing SR in their making (Moscovici 1994; Moscovici & Markova

1998; Jodelet 1996:43).

Objectification is a mechanism crucial for understanding how SR, as in this case concerning politics, come into being. Objectification involves concretizing the essential meaning of a phenomenon (Moscovici & Vignaux 2000:157; 162-166; Bauer & Gaskell 1999). It is done when we attach certain themata or concept images to something. This act of image-making can further bring about metaphors and certain emblematic clichés that become symbolic for the phenomenon in question. Moscovici notes: "When a representation emerges, it is startling to see how it grows out of a seeming repetition of clichés [...]" (Moscovici 1988:243-244).

The thematizing work of objectification further involves outlining the conceptual borders of the phenomenon in focus (Moscovici & Vignaux 2000:176-178). Hereby the contents ascribed to the phenomenon are classified as *interior* to it whereas the *exterior* points to what it is not or does not include. When studying SR of politics, then, this would entail determining what is claimed to belong to the domain of politics and what is not.

A related road to capturing the objectified meaning of a phenomenon is to look beyond or deeper into the sentences communicated in order to find underlying presuppositions (Moscovici 1994). These are certain assumptions in which the SR are embedded, and they are taken for granted in communication. Now and then, such presuppositions about reality clash when communicated about. This leads, categorically described, to a dilemma in the interaction where the conflicting presuppositions held are either clarified, by anchoring the ambiguous words used into manifest positions, or left to 'float' in a latent manner without clarification between the communicating actors.

Generally, I have found situations of conflicting ideas about politics to constitute interesting moments for empirical observation. This includes different forms of clashing objectifications – presented here as themata, concept images, emblematic clichés and presuppositions - concerning the ontological meaning of politics. As the theory suggests, SR come into being through battles between ideas and though communication marked by conflict, tension and negotiations of meaning (Moscovici & Marková 1998). Moreover, I see such conflicting communication as vital for capturing the dilemmatic nature of common sense (Billig et al 1988:15-20) since divergent ideas about politics are made visible when they clash

in discussion. I thus consider situations with explicit conflicts to be most helpful when it comes to identifying how the meaning of politics is objectified in conversation. Nevertheless, it should be said that objectifications may also be expressed and captured in consensual conversations without any conflicting perceptions about the meaning of politics.

Speaking of politics as the focal phenomenon here, Doise & Staerklé (2002:151-172) interlink it with SR theory when commenting the field of political psychology. SR, they point out, reflect shared meanings and common knowledge but not only. Researchers will simultaneously have to map out the differences in understanding that individuals can have in relation to a political issue. Abstractions like democracy, freedom or justice cannot be universally described but must be understood as shaped by complex systems of social interaction (Doise & Staerklé 2002:151-172). In this article, the political issue - or abstraction - examined is politics in itself.

For examining everyday thinking about politics in medial interaction, SR theory offers a highly suitable framework, both theoretically and methodologically (see for example Höjjer (2011) and Lipizzi, Dessavre, Iandoli & Marquez (2016)). It is a well developed and recurrently used theoretical tradition that offers a multifaceted explanatory toolbox and rich terminology to clarify the content of common sense knowledge. Moreover, it has guided my methodological and analytic procedure via deductive starting points that, in this study, were centred on how twitterers objectify politics during conversation. This is described in more detail later along with the methodological design of the study.

Previous research

This article intertwines three components: (1) the ontological meaning of politics, (2) SR about this meaning and (3) how this is communicated in Twitter as a social media platform. This combination of studied elements - SR of politics in social media - has not shown to be researched on before. However, studies using SR approaches or ones somehow similar to SR theory - looking at mindsets, attitudes or personal relations towards politics - have been conducted outside the domains of social media.

Previous research is presented below with a first subheading for studies that specifically examines SR of politics, and a second subheading for studies that use similar approaches to grasp everyday thinking, or public perceptions, of politics. Under a third subheading, the contribution of the study is motivated in relation to relevant previous studies.

SR of politics

Numerous studies concern the SR of particular political issues, like the meaning of left and right (Corbetta, Cavazza & Roccatò 2009), economic crisis (Roland-Lévy, Kmiec & Lemoine 2016), climate change (Wibeck 2014) and human rights (Gély & Sanchez-Mazas 2006). However, studies that examine SR concerning the meaning of politics are few. These studies were done exclusively via material elicited by researcher and participants (Charmaz 2006:36), in the form of interviews, word association methods and surveys.

Most studies of SR about politics have investigated the views of youths. Through word association techniques, questionnaires and interviews with Greek youth, Geka (2014:171-181) observes power to be a central framework in which politics is placed. Moreover, politics is represented as a social link involving interpersonal relationships that stretches even further than the formal milieu of party politics and elections. Bhavnani (1991) used ethnographic approaches and open-response interviews with British youths to discover that they depict politics as the regulating of challenging, unequal relations.

Some youth studies describe a more negative experience of politics. Bruno, Barreiro & Kriger (2011) confirm that rejection of politics is widespread among responding Argentinean youths. Their word associations showed that “corruption, president, politicians, government” were attached to politics and to some degree also “lie, unfair, power, nation and money”. In a Colombian study based on group interviews and surveys, Galindo & Acosta (2008) discover a resilience in existing political traditions that limits the possibilities to answer questions about young people’s relation to politics.

The only example of SR research that involves non-youths is a study based on group interviews with Polish voters (Trutkowski 2000). According to the findings, the voters see politics as a service to the citizens more than the homage to an idea. However, the author describes this view as wishful thinking in contrast to the widespread dark picture of politicians

that focus on campaigning in media and on quarrelling about everyday activities reported in the news. These findings are thereby part of the common pattern that points to negative experiences of contemporary politics.

Other forms of public perceptions of politics

Rejection, disaffection, scepticism or at least some form of distancing against politics are repeated findings in non-SR-studies of how citizens perceive or relate to politics, which thus confirms findings in the SR-based studies. Arguably, these recurring patterns point visibly to the contemporary post-political condition described in the introduction.

Mainly through interviews with users of child- and elderly care, Möller (2000:32-34; 167-181) examines the increased political mistrust among Swedes whose voting rates, at the time of the study, had gone down the last elections. The mistrust takes the form of apathy, scepticism or cynical contempt towards politicians. A feeling of meaninglessness is found attached to politics (Möller 2000: 182-194). This is rooted in the perception that the power of politics has decreased in society and that trying to influence in the traditional political way thereby becomes pointless. Still, Möller observes that such expressions of meaninglessness and mistrust are often first reactions when thinking of politics in the interview situation and that these viewpoints can be revised when more deeply reflected and reasoned about. In terms of mistrust against politicians, Landini (2013) observes that Argentinean peasants picture politicians as mostly interested in their own benefits instead of looking after the general public.

Jacobsson & Sandstedt (2010:144-148) investigate how people relate to politics and how these relations vary between interviewees that represent different social class positions in Sweden. The interviewed blue collar workers tended to express a pattern of passivity and compliance towards the political sphere and the social services dictated there. In this group, there was a greater concern with one's private sphere and what can affect it, which could be linked to their experiences of powerlessness in relation to the public sphere. Groups of higher position, here top executives of large companies, perceived themselves as more active political subjects able to influence the political and societal sphere, in many cases through the lobby activities of their company.

Hay (2007) examines the emergence of political disaffection and finds that many of those who avoid formal politics participate instead in other forms of political activity. This observation of behaviours that entail political disaffection can be linked to ethnographic research on American civic groups and individuals conducted by Baiocchi et al (2014:37-55). They use the concept *civic imagination* to illustrate how Americans envision a better political, social and civic reality. “I am not political” (Baiocchi et al 2014:37) is highlighted as a chorus line among common Americans who, driven by scepticism, often seek to withdraw from politics. Still, the authors illustrate an indirect connection between scepticism and engagement in that the disavowal of what politics currently is perceived to be (a polluting obstacle to democracy) indirectly points to what kind of democracy is actually desired (Baiocchi et al 2014:39; 41-47; 115). Correspondingly, Taft (2006) looks at the meaning of politics according to American teenage girls, a group that tends to reject politics. Through interviews and participant observation, she finds their refusal to identify with politics to sometimes be a way of demonstrating commitments to social justice and that associating politics with disaffection can thus be a way of opposing its contemporary character.

In another American study, Eliasoph (1997) examines the avoidance of politics to understand capabilities of formulating political opinion. She uses examples from field work and interviews with volunteers, activists and recreation groups. Her findings involve a recurring *close-to-home* focus that involves what is ‘do-able’, and that the political is neither considered do-able nor close-to-home among the respondents. In addition to cynicism and powerlessness, her findings involve a desired *privatism*, where one carves out a space of private freedom apart from the abstract, dry space of the public. Even back in the American fifties, Rosenberg (1951) observed that politics was seen as remote from people. Many Americans simply perceived politics to be an impersonal form of entertainment comparable to a sports game or a film.

An alternative approach of examining relations towards politics is adopted by Löfmarck (2010:295-327) who examines different types of *entries* towards politics that are expressed in letters sent to the Swedish prime minister. He identified a number of letter-writing roles that illustrate different styles of relating to politics. These included the “guardian” who states demands, the “informant” who poses questions and recommendations,

the “privatist” who writes about how the conducted politics affects the personal life condition, and finally the “politician” who in a straight-forward manner seeks to interfere with the political process.

With a discursive approach, Stapleton & Wilson (2010) use researcher-led group discussions between urban citizens to clarify the community discourse about politics in Northern Ireland. In tune with the pattern of negative views on politics, they find the perception of politics as wasteful to be an underlying metaphor in this discourse. They also identify alternative frames where politics is understood as local, as leadership or as freedom.

The contribution of this study

What motivates the angle of this study in comparison to related previous research is primarily the lack of studies that seek to map out variations in the ontological understanding of politics. Taken together, previous studies tend either to focus on how – in terms of attitudes, emotions and behaviours - people *relate* to the political sphere, or on the dominant discourse concerning politics in the studied context. Mapping out divergent views on the ontological meaning of politics and examining how these divergences are interrelated and discussed in conversations, thus, could contribute in understanding dilemmatic content (Billig et al 1988:24) concerning how politics is perceived to be a part of reality. The previously unemployed design of this study, investigating SR about politics and the way these SR are communicated and elaborated through interaction in social media, is hereby considered useful for clarifying this dilemmatic content. As related previous studies mainly use material elicited from interviews or surveys (with the exception of field work examples and letters to the prime minister), this study thus provides an alternative approach with the use of extant, digitalized communication on Twitter.

Method and material

With SR theory as its leading framework, the study necessitated an operational method that could easily be adapted to the theoretical framework and also be open to any qualitative findings in the empirical material. Some operational approaches have built in criteria that

would be difficult to merge with SR theory. For example, grounded theory starts in a set of questions around the basic social or social psychological processes that happen in the data (Charmaz 2006:20) and discourse analysis investigates the social power of discourses (Van Dijk 2008:9-12). *Thematic analysis* (Boyatzis 1998: vi-vii; 3-5; 33-37) was thus chosen as it easily integrates deductive starting points (see them further described below) from the theory used with an inductive way of coding. It is moreover well compatible with the thematic structuration through which SR are objectified (Moscovici & Vignaux 2000:162-163). *Themes*, as central in both thematic analysis and SR theory, were thus what I was seeking for in order to code and map out communicated meanings of politics.

It turned out difficult to use digital data-mining techniques (for example used by Lipizzi et al 2016; Törnberg & Törnberg 2016a; 2016b) to select relevant Twitter data, as the requested conversations about the ontological meaning of politics – in Swedish language - were not easily distinguished from conversations about specific political issues or news. Manual interpretation was therefore needed for the selection of relevant conversations about politics in itself. Certain combinations of Swedish search words were developed pragmatically to catch such conversations, for example ones translated into English as “politics is”, “politics means”, “politics concerns”, “view of politics” and more semantically ‘open’ combinations like “is politics”, “what politics”, “that politics”. See the appendix for full list of search phrases with approximate English translations.

Another criterion was to pick full conversation threads involving at least two different Twitter profiles. The data collection included between 130-140 tweeted conversations, ranging from two tweets between two profiles to more than 20 tweets between four or more profiles. The threads were collected in 2017 from a time span between February 22 and March 9. Overviewing the data, I observe that some politically related events reoccur in the data from this limited time span, which could be seen as limiting the empirical breadth of the material. But taken together, the number of conversations analyzed has offered a significant amount of relevant discussions concerning other political topics beyond these repeatedly debated events.

The material was coded in line with SR mechanisms that objectify meaning, which involved recurring patterns of themata, concept images, emblematic sentences/clichés, presuppositions and the ways of outlining the interior versus the exterior to politics. These

functioned as theory-driven starting points to a coding process that thereafter entered an inductive, data-driven phase of filling these SR mechanisms with content specific to the SR of politics found in the data. Hence, the SR framework pointed out the forms of objectifications to look for (as suggested by Höijer 2011) and the data offered the detailed characteristics of these objectifications. In a first round of coding, the themes were considered *saturated* (Mason 2010) when no new themes were identified. They were then *clustered* (Boyatzis 1998:128-143) into overarching themes (presented as headings in the results) that qualitatively were found linking the initial codes together. In a second round, the co-occurrence of the overarching themes in the empirical material was in turn coded to map out the way in which meanings attached to politics collided and interplayed in the conversations. More or less conflicting co-occurrences between two themes were coded with an x between them, whereas more compatibly co-occurring themes were coded with a plus sign. In so doing I could identify and saturate patterns that demonstrated how these different understandings of politics were related in conversation and argumentation.

Twitter conversations as data source

The social media space of Twitter is an international, interactive microblog that in 2016 activated 6% of Internet-using Swedes daily whereas 18% had used it ‘some time’ (Davidsson & Findahl 2017). Elected or candidate politicians are often present there and many users rely on Twitter to update themselves about political events (Barberá & Rivero 2014). Studies imply that those already interested in politics tend to be the ones that are likely to tweet about it (Bekafigo & McBride 2013). Twitter can be understood as a *social milieu* (Bauer & Gaskell 1999) that in SR research embodies the communication system where representations are circulated, received and elaborated. Twitter thereby serves to expose what in reference to Moscovici (1994) would be a linkage between representation and communication, and the digital search-ability among the users’ conversations enable such interplay to be empirically captured (Lipizzi et al 2016). The conversations are extant documentations (Charmaz 2006:35) that, contrary to interviews or surveys, are in no way directed by the researcher. Possibly this form makes it harder to capture relevant data content, but on the other hand, it allows an outside perspective on the conversations that would be impossible via interview

guides or survey questions.

Our SR of phenomena are reproduced via mass media and different forms of social conversation (Jodelet 1996:32). In research, mass media has traditionally been ascribed a key role in the construction of dominant knowledge and ideology (Törnberg & Törnberg 2016a; 2016b). As Kumlin (2002:16; 21-23) points out, our political judgements are based on *sociotropic perceptions* that are our imaginations of how the collective experiences social trends or events. Such norm-oriented perceptions, reproduced by societal elites and mass media, are much more influential for our opinions than our direct individual experiences of society (as in our personal use of welfare services). Traditional mass media use has however declined last years, to be replaced - globally and across age groups – by Internet and social media (Törnberg & Törnberg 2016a; 2016b). This development motivates Twitter as an arena to study. Moreover, Twitter offers a combination of two functions that I find particularly suited for studying the communication of SR. Firstly, it is a platform where major news, trends and topics are spread ‘top-down’ in a way similar to how traditional mass media provides passive consumers with information. But secondly, it is an interactive space where the shared content is commented on, discussed or debated about by grassroots individuals who simultaneously have the digital possibility to create new discussions from ‘bottom-up’ (similar remarks were made by Törnberg & Törnberg (2016a; 2016b) in discursive studies of Flashback, another social media site).

So, as SR are constituted by common sense thinking that is reproduced via media and social media content can be seen as “empirical (digital) traces left by a population” (Chartier & Meunier 2011), Twitter conversations are useful in answering my research questions.

Although there is a tendency of politically interested tweeters to tweet about politics, this does not exclude that utterances about politics from less politically interested persons have been captured in the material.

Twitter adopts a 140 character constraint for every tweet. Arguably, it is possible that this digital limit somewhat acts *technically mediating* (Latour 1994) when primarily encouraging short word phrases of everyday thinking in the conversations. Analyzing Twitter conversations can hereby actually be particularly useful for capturing the condensed, emblematic clichés that constitute effective collective symbols for everyday knowledge about

phenomena. That kind of collective potential has been emphasized by Moscovici (1981:192): Such dense “commonplace statements”, he notes, hide in their banality “an immense amount of knowledge, a condensed culture and a mystery, which constitute its compelling strength and attraction.”

Ethically, I consider the quoting of the Twitter conversations as unproblematic, since they are already shared publicly in the first place. As I saw no scientific motive for exposing the profile names of the twitterers, however, I found it appropriate to anonymize the conversations (that furthermore were translated from Swedish into English). It should nonetheless be clarified that the interpretations made are my own and that there may be intended meanings that I have not covered in these interpretations. Striving for validity and transparency in the presented results, I have anyhow tried to motivate my interpretations and why I have attached certain elements and characteristics to their respective overarching themes. I have also made notions about the extent to which the patterns of meaning recurred in the data. And by keeping in mind to make consistent judgements throughout the coding process I have sought to uphold an interpretive reliability (Boyatzis 1998:144-150).

Results and analysis

The results presented here are divided into two parts. The first part presents descriptions of the themes - interpreted as different *meanings of politics* - identified in the material. The second part presents patterns identified in how these different meanings of politics *interplay* with each other when conversed about.

Meanings of politics

The coding of the material resulted in a number of themes that reflect different ways in which the ontological meaning of politics was objectified in the conversations. These themes point to different ways of understanding the essential nature of politics; they were expressed in the data through the form of repeated themata, concept images, emblematic clichés and

presuppositions attached to the phenomenon of politics as well as perceptions about the interiors (as opposed to exteriors) to the domain of politics. When thematic content is related to previous research or theory concerning perceptions about politics, the connection is highlighted with supporting references. The characteristics of each theme are exemplified with quoted excerpts from the Twitter conversations examined. The letters A, B, C etc stand for different Twitter profiles in each conversation thread. Notes and clarifications of words used are made in square brackets when needed.

Politics is separable/inseparable from our lives

A highly prominent pattern in the conversations concerns the extent to which politics is embedded in people's lives. At a basic level this appears as an ontological conflict between presuppositions implying that 1) politics can exist separately from other dimensions of life, in contrast to presuppositions implying that 2) politics is more or less present and integrated in all of life whether we like it or not. The first position was the most commonly expressed in the data, and the second sometimes - and mainly - appeared as a counter-argument to the first.

This line of conflict is commonly made visible in debates around political manifestations highlighted in arenas where political activity is found controversial. The data points to sports, music, film, science or religion as examples of such arenas where the integration of political activity is questioned. In the following excerpt, three twitterers enter this theme when debating printed quotes of Swedish politicians on the shirts of the women's national football team. As also exemplified in the conversation, human rights were in some cases debated in the data as something apart from politics.

A: What happened here? Messages (no matter which) from political persons do not belong on the national team's shirts. One can wear it on one's own shirts.

A: Could it be that the Football federation's president doesn't know who [Twitter profile link:] Gudrun Schyman is? Or that she is a political party leader [of the Swedish Feminist party FI]? Perhaps he has not heard of

FI?

B: 1. Are there unpolitical party leaders? 2. Is it not okay to quote something that is actually about fundamental human rights?

C: The sports world outlines its own ideals. Politics, religion, sexuality should be kept out.

B: Can one be apolitical as a person? As a fellow human being?

C: It is not your politics that you outline in sports but its ideal and artistry.

B: If I am a famous sportsperson/actor/artist, isn't it good that I raise my voice for human rights?

C: Sure. But in competition it is the ideals of sports – being human rights – that are outlined.

B: Ok, I respect and understand your opinion, but I have a different one. Isn't advertising problematic then?

C: Advertising could be. But it is usually necessary for the players' salaries for example.

A: That's how it is with all major sports federations, that I know of, in the world – politics is banned.

B: Can one consider FIFA and IOK as apolitical organizations permeated by the ideals of the sports world?

At quite fundamental level, some conversations involved expressions in which politics is something presupposed to be separable from one's very self, be it protecting oneself from political messages or claiming that "politics does not concern me". In the following conversation, the twitterers similarly claim politics to be separable from parts of everyday social life and common meeting spaces.

A: [I] was one of those who voted in protest against Loreen [Swedish music artist]. [I] don't want political struggle in any direction in Melodifestivalen [Swedish part of Eurovision Song Contest].

B: No, it would be comfortable if people could “meet” somewhere without politics being mixed into it. Like it used to be, simply...

What I identify in this theme as a whole, is a spectrum of presuppositions ranging from distinct reductionist views where politics is thought of as something isolated from other dimensions of life, to a view where “everything is politics” and thus cannot be escaped from even though defenders of the prior position often wish to. In terms of social representations theory, this debated outline of politics can be understood as different ways of defining how widely we should set the borders of what can be anchored as interior versus exterior (Moscovici & Vignaux 2000:177) to politics as a phenomenon. At deeper theoretical level, this can further be seen in the light of contradicting views about how interconnected different phenomena and events are in life. Atomistic world views expressed through privatism, close-to-home mindsets and the rejection of politics (Eliasoph 1997; Baiocchi et al 2014:37-38; Taft 2006) hereby stand opposed to convictions about the interconnectedness of everything (Braidotti 2013:43-48; Des Jardins, 2013:205-216) where political decisions and strivings consequently permeate all aspects of everyday life.

Politics is idealistic

“Politics is to will” appears repeatedly as an emblematic sentence (Moscovici & Vignaux 2000:157) for the idealistic meaning attached to politics. At the core of this theme is the advocating of one’s ideological conviction and the intentions, or strivings, in line with this ideology. In contrast to perceptions of politics as merely a shallow game, this view defines politics as rooted in conviction about what should be done to change social reality in a desired direction. Many manifestations of this theme reflect an honest and transparent striving for a better society and that politics is the tool for such achievements. This position is held by twitterer B here:

A: AKB [leader of the Swedish conservative party] made a tough decision about the government issue. Then you don’t make the 100-list

of women of the year. [Link:

<http://www.expressen.se/noje/bild/arets-kvinnor-2017/...>] [hashtag:

“svpol”, for Swedish politics]

B: “Tough decision”? – you mean one which the aftermath will know like “How noble of AKB! We have so much to thank for”

A: Politics is rarely noble. It is for example not very noble of the Center party to support a line that will not last after the election.

B: Politics is will, ideals and striving to create a better society. Call me naïve but I don’t agree -->

B: --> one should be able to have long-term strategies as well as short-term, but never compromise with one’s fundamental values in favour of strategy.

The idealistic view has its focus on visions of social change and not the conditions that enable or hinder the vision advocated or strived for. As twitterer C implies below, the idealistic view welcomes anyone with a wish for social change into the world of politics.

A: Isn’t there going to be one of those Follow Fridays on Twitter today? Any recommendations?

B: Preferably people you can talk politics with.. who accept it if you perhaps aren’t an expert of everything and so on [smiley with red cheeks].

C: Politics is not an occupation for experts. It departs from our everyday life and our wishes for change. When we consider ourselves stupid we also make>

C: >our political representatives stupid [“mean” is an alternative translation]. A comfortable situation for stupid [or mean] politicians.

A more suspicious form of ideological striving is ideas about politics as acts of enforcing a more or less hidden agenda. In the following conversation, twitterer B who is a reporter defends himself against accusations of embedding a political agenda in his journalistic work.

To his defence he uses the previously presented theme that presupposes politics and ideological intentions to be separable, in this case from reporting journalism.

A: You speak about Trump, link to speeches about Trump and you claim you want to be apolitical? Connection[:] Trump = murder in Sweden?

B: It is a half time long interview. It is not only about Trump. Trump comes in specifically because of criminality and the role of the reporter.

B: The interview is about how one as a news reporter shall avoid being a political propagandist in any direction.

A: You think that wanting law and order, and that people should not be murdered, is politics because of the party you belong to. Biased silence.

C: What party does [B] belong to?

A: Obviously not one that doesn't want to see more police officers, and that rather talks about the [hashtag:] image-of-Sweden.

No matter if conducted openly and transparently or in a hidden manner, thus, the core of this theme is that politics means to advocate one's ideological values and ideological ambitions for society as well as act instrumentally in line with these.

Politics is complicated

A view often adopted as a counterargument to the idealistic view of politics is the perception that politics is more than idealism: it cannot exist apart from the complicated nature of reality. From this viewpoint, politics is thus not easy, neither to understand nor to accomplish. Accordingly, the creation and conduct of politics cannot be separated from the conditions surrounding it. Therefore it presupposes and incorporates realism, and human skills are required to handle the complex reality where politics evolves. The most emblematic cliché used from this angle is an explicit critique of the idealistic position: "politics is to will, but also to be capable [of accomplishing it]". In the following discussion, twitterer B emphasizes

this view as a way to justify that some Swedish political parties broke the pattern of not negotiating with the nationalist party called the Sweden Democrats:

A: Liberalerna [Swedish liberal party] don't negotiate with SD [Swedish nationalist party]. From yesterday and on, M+L+KD [the conservative + liberal + Christian-democratic parties] in Hässleholm [Swedish city] put themselves in dependence on SD. Not acceptable.

B: Accomplishing politics is more important than idealism.

A: In Uppsala [Swedish city], Liberalerna will never cooperate with SD. Liberals who cooperate with SD have misunderstood liberalism.

B: What is politics? To present ultimatums and refuse cooperation belongs at the kindergarten. Grow up!

In tune with this theme, politics puts demands on individuals who want to understand it or co-shape its content. A politically active twitterer highlights relevant knowledge - in the following example academic knowledge - as a human skill held crucial for understanding and navigating in the complex world of politics:

A: Concerning alternative facts, the resisting of facts etc: Has anyone changed opinion about something after being introduced to new/convincing facts?

B: Studying political science made me realize that politics is more difficult than I had thought. No specific fact, but I changed some opinions.

In brief: knowledge, experience, maturity or realism are key attributes required from this perspective on politics. And the political reality is in its nature described as complex, advanced, unpredictable, inopportune or difficult to tame.

Politics is antagonistic

Objectifications that depict politics as antagonistic point to a conflict-focused idea about politics. Mouffe (2005:8-13) has highlighted antagonism as constitutive of *the political*, drawing on Carl Schmitt's notion of the political as characterized by conflicting groups classified as friend versus enemy. The social world is pluralistic, Mouffe declares, and with this come conflicts that cannot be solved by rational means.

The antagonistic elements found in the data involve struggles between different ideological preferences, and they are in this sense related to the idealistic idea of politics. "Politics is to prioritize" is a commonly used statement attached to this theme. The antagonistic meaning, it can be concluded, is further built upon a presupposition about politics which implies that there is a restricted playfield of possibilities upon which one has to choose what to give priority. From this viewpoint, politics is thus understood as the art of distributing from a limited cake of resources. Correspondingly, A and B debate politics in terms of such a zero-sum conception in the following argumentation.

A: "The lines are growing", it is said about the county council of Västerbotten in [hashtag for a Swedish public service news program:] Ekot. It will be fixed with more resources. Is that health care personnel then? No, artworkers.

B: Haha, nooo, now you're joking. Do you put artworkers against health care personnel? [laughing smiley with tears flying]

A: Politics is about prioritizing. The county councils should prioritize health care.

B: But these are two totally different services? Do you mean that the county councils should have neglected, decayed art collections?

A: The question, rather, is whether they should have art collections at all.

B: Why shouldn't they?

A: It's more important to prioritize the core task.

B: Why does arts in health care stand against core tasks?

A: They have long lines and limited resources.

B: How would it affect health care lines to be without artworkers?

A: One crown [Swedish currency] for artworkers, is one crown that does not go to the core task.

Another emblematic sentence often used from this perspective is “Politics is to put groups against each other”, which can be understood as an agency-driven process where the political agents actively *create conflict*, as opposed to the assumption about conflict and prioritizing as naturally inherent to and unavoidable in politics. Notably, twitterer C employs sarcasm to confirm the tweet of twitterer B when framing the Swedish government as prioritizing passivity against gun violence ahead of cancer operations.

A: More and more brutal shootings: ”Intention to kill” | SvD [Swedish newspaper link: <https://t.co/hUJ0XvrW93>]

B: For each person damaged by shots that comes in, six cancer patients get their operations postponed (according to chief physician at the surgery clinic, Gothenburg)

C: Politics is to put groups against each other. The feminist government are clear about their view.

An alternative aspect of the antagonistic perspective is the element of compromising. By some twitterers it is pointed out as an unavoidable element in politics and it is arguably antagonistic in its nature as compromising by definition presupposes some form of negotiation between antagonistic wills. Yet compromising can simultaneously be said to produce a consensus at another level as the conflict between antagonistic wills is merged into an agreement. As implied in the following discussion, compromising is a way of handling antagonistic goals in party politics:

A: Let Hässleholm be a model. Together we can demolish the socialist power monopoly in the whole country!

B: [I] don't say that either. [I] only praise the fact that they choose cooperation rather than confrontation and blacklisting.

A: For me who live here political cooperation without content and vision is is pretty frightening no matter the form.

B: [I] believe that internally the parties have probably both visions and goals. Now it is about executing common similarities and solve the opposites.

A: That is what politics IS. Visions, goals, compromises. Politics is the art of patience.

B: In Hässleholm there are mostly compromises without given negotiation inputs, decisions that favour individual politicians more than citizens.

It should also be noted that compromising, through the patience it necessitates according to twitterer A above, could in part also be associated to the understanding of politics as a complicated phenomenon.

Politics is cynical

Cynical conceptions of politics were identified as a theme in contrast to the idealistic view on politics, in that it detaches the link to ideology. The cynical meaning thematized here involves that the processes of politics are guided by other driving forces than ideological conviction. Notions about politics as 'only a game' is a repeated message attached to this theme. Shallowness, dishonesty, immorality, manipulation, self-interest, 'spinelessness' are words that help illustrate the cynicism that many twitterers attach to politics from this viewpoint. This aspect of politics tunes in with previous observations of cynicism and scepticism towards politicians (Möller 2000:22-23; 69-71) and with the emergence of policy professionals that engage in the political game of implementing tactical tricks in policy-making and political communication (Garsten, Rothstein & Svallfors 2015:136-153). In the following discussion, A and B illustrate this theme using the concept of 'game theory'.

A: "When politics becomes game theory, trust in politics decreases. It's known since earlier" (Novus) [Swedish opinion poll] Do we have any lesson to learn here, Sweden?

B: Well, politics incorporates game theory in its nature. I don't think one can get away from that.

A: [You have] a point, but one can discuss "what do you want to do with whom", not just "who, who, who".

Along this line, the cynical theme involves tactics not used for ideological ambitions and societal change but for winning the shallow game that politics is perceived to be. Below, twitterer A emphasizes the need for being tactical in order to gather a majority of voters.

A: Please [link to Twitter profile], read the agreement on the arms directive and then tell what Swedish weapons you think the EU wants to ban!

B: Are there any other possible reasons for implementing a completely meaningless directive without connection to the problem?

A: No, and I did not want to see [any], and I have probably more than anyone else in parliament tried to prevent a new directive.

A: BUT can not get the majority for it. Therefore worked fairly successfully to get a compromise we can live with.

C: The fact that we do not get the majority depends on politicians who argue like you. Spine and principles are needed!

D: It's a bit like saying I could not keep up nagging any more so the kid got candy on a Monday.

A: Politics is not about being right. But about getting right [alternative translation: getting support]. Being able to count to 51% =>

A: If I cannot, I have to make a proposal (compromise) that gets 51% =>

A: Otherwise, someone else wins with another agenda, I lose and do not

influence all.

E: Very strange posture. No one forces you.

Self-interest as a driving force in political activity fits into the cynical theme as it can take the form of political parties using rhetoric and symbols that shallowly appropriates morally appealing ideological messages to attract support and make personal gain. This is primarily demonstrated by twitterer B here:

A: - Increased demands in school – Ban on begging – Hard line against criminals - Responsible refugee policy...

B: Now also in Sweden, the Social democrats go far, far to the right. Embarrassing, cowardly and counterproductive. [link: <https://t.co/e5r3lADbfW>]

B: We have seen "follow-my-leader in politics" since the days of Ny Demokrati [Former Swedish right-wing populist party]. Parties without goals and meaning, only power attracts [them].

C: Depressing. Irish politics is about turning their sails by the wind, more and more here too.

The shallow element of this theme is also reflected in tweets about politics as something simply used to boost one's self-image in relation to others, thus functioning only as a symbolic accessory. Twitterers A and B illustrate this with a chain of thoughts about taking stand against the Swedish nationalist party.

A: If Trump or Åkesson [leader of Swedish nationalist party SD] say they like to fish perch, I have to think that fishing perch is bad, or else I have supported them.

B: That's exactly how it is. Politics is not about making the world better

but about taking a stand against others. [link: <https://t.co/GlNm2LDftp>]

It should be noted, however, that between the lines of many of these cynical descriptions of politics lie wishes that politics could be different and much nobler than it is with its current characteristics. In this theme it is therefore difficult to distinguish the perceptions of politics as it is actually experienced from expectations or dreams of what it could be in an imagined, less cynical world. And as noted in previous studies (Baiocchi et al 2014:115), the rejection of politics-as-is can draw the contours of what type of politics with which one would wish to replace the current.

The interplay between divergent meanings of politics

As the reader might have noticed in the exemplifying conversations above, there is a continuous interplay between the different meanings of politics throughout the data. They activate each other, they collide, they intertwine, some contrast each other, some nuance or downplay each other and some are more compatible. In view of that, this part will throw light upon how the different meanings show to interrelate in the conversations examined.

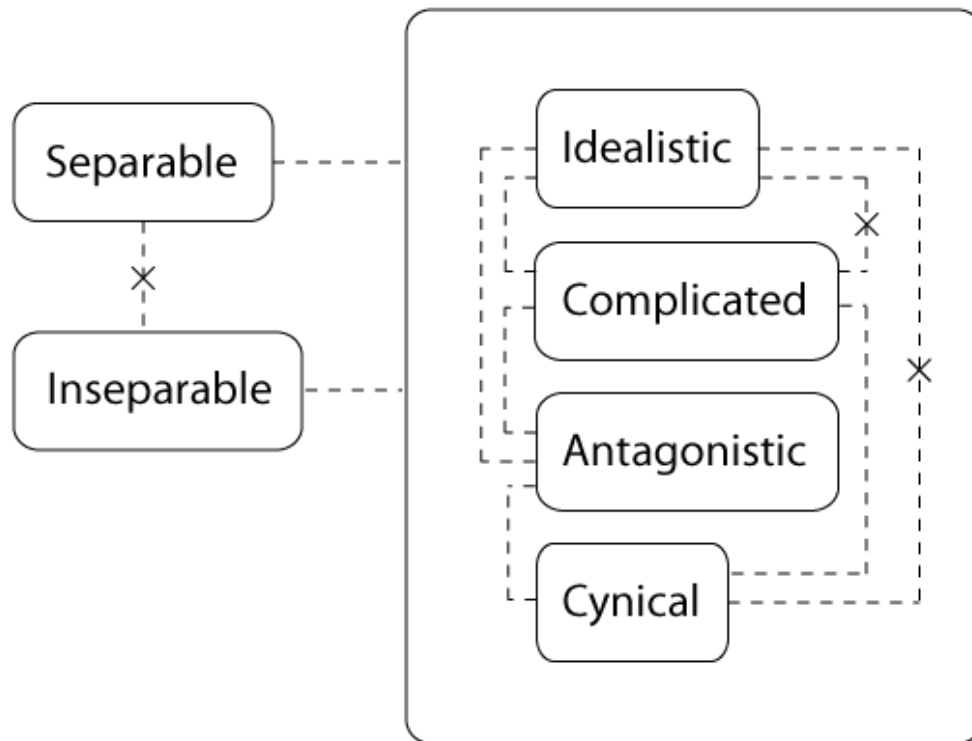


Figure 1: "The interplay between divergent meanings of politics"

The figure presents a model that illustrates how the interplay between divergent meanings of politics was coded in the analysis of the Twitter conversations. Dotted lines with an x symbolize a somewhat conflicting relationship between two meanings, whereas the other dotted lines illustrate a somewhat compatible relationship. It can be noted that (1) the separable and the inseparable theme are conflicting with each other but both are compatible with the four remaining meanings of politics (that are grouped together); (2) the idealistic and the complicated theme are understood as both compatible and conflicting, which is explained below.

As presented in figure 1 there is the discrepancy between politics as separable or inseparable from other dimensions of our everyday lives. These conflicting presuppositions are frequently debated in the data. As previously pointed out, the perception that politics is separable from other life dimensions showed to be more common than the assumption that politics permeates all aspects of life. With the separable idea about politics come often attitudes suggesting that it also *should* be held separate from the world of sports, music or other spaces of everyday life.

In many conversations, this is contested by twitterers that claim politics to unavoidably exist everywhere and that for example sports organizations in themselves are permeated by political agendas.

The polarized dilemma of a separable versus inseparable political sphere is often explicitly associated to the idealistic theme, which suggests that politics is ideologically motivated. Defenders of both the separable and the inseparable position recurrently suggest politics to be ideologically driven. They also link their perception to the antagonistic theme that holds politics to be about conflict. For many supporters of the ‘separable view’, then, quarrels and ideological agendas are portrayed as annoying or inappropriate things that should be kept away. Supporters of the ‘inseparable view’, on the other hand, hold that these ideological motives and conflicts permeate all - or at least most - areas of life. Many times, defenders of the inseparable view therefore tend to advocate that ideological motives and conflicts should be openly exposed or expressed, rather than hidden under what they more or less explicitly describe as an apolitical facade.

The antagonistic meaning of politics is repeatedly symbiotic with the idealistic one. The logic to this is clear, since there are naturally many conflicting ideological agendas in the world and since the clashes between them result in antagonistic struggles. For example, the prioritizing that - according to the antagonistic view - is presumed to be unavoidable between groups, interests or values are often based on different idealistic visions. This is however not the case when the antagonistic view is combined with the cynical view on politics, since then the struggle is not assumed to be ideologically honest but rather an empty game.

Moreover, the data points to the antagonistic theme as compatible with the complicated theme. This is illustrated when the antagonistic struggles that are part of politics simultaneously are described as an element that makes politics complicated. For example, different ideological visions clash in politics, which sometimes makes it a difficult challenge to negotiate and reach compromises between them.

The idealistic meaning of politics is recurrently contrasted with the cynical meaning. This is expressed when twitterers put the idealistic conception where “politics is to will” (for example a more just world) against the cynical conception where “politics is only a game” (for example about gaining power). In these clashes, the idealistically oriented twitterers

defend idealistic consistency and honesty while rejecting elements of party tactics or superficial, PR-oriented whitewashing. In opposite direction, some twitterers claim that playing tactical games is necessary to gain votes and that this diminishes the possibilities for idealistic loyalty in politics.

This later combination of views intersects with another recurring interrelation, in which the complicated meaning attached to politics shows to go hand in hand with the cynical meaning. In such argumentation, the complicated nature of politics involves the unavoidable necessity to adapt one's political strivings to a reality where politics is this more or less ugly, false and cynical game.

Taken together, the idealistic nature of politics can thus be found downplayed by the complicated reality it is embedded in and by the cynical elements attached to politics. Still, the opposition between the idealistic and the complicated (the realistic, in other words) can on the other hand be understood as a symbiotic relation in that idealistic visions can be fulfilled only if they are adjusted to the complicated playground of political reality.

As observed at general level, the interplay between different meanings of politics is mainly done via argumentation, be it in debates between different opinions or simply by arguing for something that others in the conversation agree with. In the discussions, expressed meanings of politics are often adopted as frames (Goffman 1974:1-20) that help strengthen one's argumentation concerning the specific issue discussed. In debates, the expressed meanings are often used to frame one's argumentation in an emotionally appealing or logically convincing manner that helps disqualifying others. For example, saying that "politics necessitates prioritizing" is a way to try to disqualify idealistic visions that, for example, propose an altruistic distribution of 'everything to everyone'. In conversations characterized by consensus among the involved twitterers, though, meanings are mostly highlighted as reinforcement for the attitudes shared.

Discussion

This study has firstly sought to map out existing variations in the ontological understanding of politics, through examining assumptions about the essential nature of politics. These have been presented in the results as divergent meanings of politics along with analyzed patterns of interplay between the divergent meanings in the conversations. The different perspectives on politics that come with the meanings embody different modes of thought that partly appear to represent conflicting world views. Politics can - according to the interpretations classified here - be understood as idealistic, complicated, antagonistic, cynical and more or less embedded in everyday life. Some individuals emphasize mainly one of these meanings whereas others embrace multiple meanings simultaneously with varying degrees of plurality. Nonetheless, the argumentative data mainly points to that individuals tend to place their emphasis in a quite polarized way by defending certain meanings far more than others. When, for example, idealistic meanings of politics clash with complicated meanings of it, individuals tend either to decisively advocate idealistic consistency *or* strongly defend the realism, rationality and mature patience that is required to handle the complicated world of politics.

Arguably, the meanings can - through their differing natures and the emotions they may be accompanied with - be expected to entail different *entries* to politics (cf. Löfmarck 2010:295-296), which in this study should be understood as ways of approaching politics in everyday life. The idealistic theme offers an entry through which politics may be described in terms of visions and possibilities for desired social change. An emphasis on the complicated theme could - conversely - be perceived as more of a challenge or obstacle to engage in the political sphere, which is arguably also applicable to the antagonistic and the cynical theme. The degree to which we consider politics to be embedded in our lives will likely determine how relevant we think politics is to ourselves and if we thereby should be concerned with its content. Thus, where we place our emphasis among these meanings may determine how we interact with the political sphere. It will affect what we perceive to be thinkable and doable in politics and in our relation to it. For example, a strong emphasis on the cynical or complicated understanding of politics is likely to give the average citizen a reserved relation to the

political. This, in turn, could increase the likeliness of avoiding personal participation in politics and staying close-to-home (Eliasoph 1997). It is in this intersection point between individual mindset and the ways of acting that follow from it, I argue, that the social representations of politics become world-making (Moscovici 1988:231; Elcheroth et al 2011), if not to say self-reinforcing. The overall reproduction of certain ways of picturing politics may - along these lines - influence the degree of public engagement in the political sphere. It may somehow also influence the ideological trends in public opinion in that, for example, the spread of 'separable', atomistic views may reproduce at the expense of 'inseparable' views of interconnectedness. Our understandings may thus affect what kind of politics we democratically elect to govern us, which is where the reinforcement of our most widespread social representations kicks in.

This article was introduced referring to a contemporary post-political condition wherein individuals tend to reject the political sphere in advanced societies. This condition is well reflected in previous research on how citizens in such countries relate to the political sphere in our time. Along this line, I would like to reason about how the post-political perspective relates to the thought-patterns mapped out in this study. To begin with, I suggest that an emphasis that qualitatively matches well with the post-political perspective is the repeatedly expressed idea of politics as a cynical game that happens separately from our lives. This emphasis encourages a distancing from politics that is reflected in images of politics as unattractive, out of reach and irrelevant to oneself. With this proposed, I suggest that an alternative to such a post-politically oriented emphasis would be found in its opposing meanings of politics. Based on the interplay shown between the themes, this would point to the idealistic view combined with the inseparable view of politics. With this ontological emphasis, politics becomes something that is constantly present in one's life and that always contains an ideological direction. From this perspective, political intentions and the powers that enforce them affect our lives all the time. The idealistic content in this counter-view to post-political views could hereby encourage individuals to consider what personal ideological standpoints they have concerning which direction social change should take.

A further notion on the world-making outcome of different meanings ascribed to politics concerns the role of clichés. These act repeatedly as emblems for the different

meanings of politics. Twitter's 140-character-limit shows to promote them well and it is not unlikely that this technical constraint supports the spread of such condensed pieces of everyday knowledge. It cannot be ruled out that their simplicity and their effective appeal for the collective (Moscovici 1981:191) may consequently pave the way for shorter trains-of-thought and perhaps then even populist messages. "Politics is to put groups against each other" could illustrate such a recurring thought-figure that easily encourages the political prioritizing of one's own group at the cost of others. Moreover, it is likely that these commonplace remarks have an emotional potency to them, which could make their effect upon everyday thinking even more powerful.

Twitter, the context of the examined conversations, has been defined as an arena of backchannelling (Lipizzi et al 2016) where news and currently debated issues are discussed. Most of the studied conversations involve taking stand in relation to these occurrences. Argumentation for different opinions in relation to the occurrences is thus highly present in the conversations. Different ideological standpoints are often expressed explicitly or implicitly in the argumentation. When defending their opinions the twitterers express their ideas about the ontological meaning of politics to clarify their trains of thought and to embed their standpoints into logical chains of argumentation. Thereby, the twitterers repeatedly lean on these definitions of the 'real' nature of politics in order to attach a sense of realism or objectivity to their argumentation concerning the specific event or issue discussed. In this sense, Twitter as a conversational context provides a bridge between (1) new politically related occurrences, (2) one's political opinions and (3) one's basic ontological assumptions about the nature of politics. And as the examined conversations imply, the argumentation becomes a process in which the twitterer seeks to put these three elements together in a logical, coherent order, as well as convince others about this potential coherence.

The partly inconsistent meanings identified in the data lead me to understand politics as what Billig et al call a *dilemmatic theme* (Billig et al 1988:15-24) that through its inherently contradictory nature provokes argumentation and deliberation. When studying such phenomena, Billig et al state, it is important to capture the strategies used in relation to its contradictory nature. And as observed, the different meanings manifested are central in the argumentation conducted in the tweeted conversations. Apparently, the SR of politics and

their associated emblematic clichés enable individuals to frame (Goffman 1974:1-20) and thereby legitimize defended attitudes in argumentation contra other attitudes. The frames or outlines that the expressed meanings help setting are thereby often used to disqualify counter-attitudes in the specific political issue discussed. This could mean that the expressed meanings may, to some degree, be dependent on and reshaped by the defended attitude so as to match it. This relates to sociolinguistic theories of how context and talk mutually shape each other (Goodwin & Duranti 1992:31-32). If so, the content of social representations can float in a flexible manner and thereby depend on argumentative demands in the particular situation. If defending a certain attitude is helped by formulating an idea about the nature of politics, such argumentative situations could be moments when social representations and their underlying ideas are shaped, reinforced or reshaped. Still, the direction could off course be the opposite, in the sense that ideas about the ontological meaning of politics come first and with them come more specific types of political attitudes.

Theoretically, this study can be found providing novel insights to how social representations are communicated and negotiated around a dilemmatic phenomenon (like politics) to which divergent meanings are attached. It points out a methodological way of clarifying how – in qualitative terms - such divergent meanings collide and interrelate in conversations. As previous research mostly describes human relations towards politics and dominant discourses concerning politics, the findings give insight to different understandings of the essential nature of politics and how these understandings can affect one's approach towards the phenomenon.

Finally, I find it important to comment on the digitally expressed perspectives on politics in relation to Swedish society outside of Twitter's domain. As investigations show, only 6 % of Swedes use Twitter daily and the users who are interested in politics are the ones most tending to tweet about it. This raises questions on how representative the identified meanings are for the Swedish thinking society generally. This matter has to be clarified by further research, based on a different research design. However, I would like to highlight the qualitative contribution in the study's findings that point to different approaches towards politics and the partly conflicting nature of these approaches. I suggest that the findings point to a repertoire of divergent perspectives that can be adopted in common sense knowledge

about politics. I would finally suggest that clarifying this repertoire of divergent understandings about politics could encourage discussions on which of these images of politics should be strived for in our collective making of political reality. Such discussions could thus involve envisioning what we would wish politics to really be about.

Conclusions

In the examined Swedish Twitter conversations, politics is socially represented as a dilemmatic phenomenon with divergent meanings attached to it. Politics can, in different proportions, be understood and emphasized as idealistic, complicated, antagonistic and cynical. It can also, to different degrees, be imagined as separable or inseparable from other dimensions of our everyday lives. In the conversations, the recurring interplay between these ideas about politics shows that some of them are compatible with each other whereas some are rather conflicting. In the Twitter discussions – that often concern widely debated news or issues - meanings attached to politics are employed as argumentative frames that help strengthen one's specific political opinions and disqualify opposing views. To some extent, the expressed meanings could be dependent on the particular argumentative context. By showing how the divergent meanings interplay in the conversations the article can be found giving new input for the analytical usage of social representations theory.

The social representations of politics can be understood as determined by where a person's ontological emphasis is placed among the identified meanings attached to politics. Different conceptions about the nature of politics, I argue, have effects on reality as they offer different *entries* to politics. These entries, or ways of approaching politics, can in turn be expected to guide the actions of individuals in relation to the political sphere, be these actions for example participatory or rejective towards politics. Moreover, I consider it possible that Twitter's technical reinforcing of short text phrases may be supportive of emblematic clichés that can be influential for people's everyday thinking about the nature of politics.

As only a fraction of Swedes use Twitter as social media, it is problematic to transfer implications from the study's findings to the national or global level of everyday thinking. It

is not unlikely however that the identified views of politics are also reflected in Swedish society outside Twitter. In any case, the findings present qualitatively divergent ways of thinking about politics that can be adopted by ordinary citizens ‘in the street’. By presenting these divergent views of politics this article could encourage discussions on what we would wish politics to really be (about), in relation to politics as it is perceived today.

To further explore the societal role – or effect – of these divergent meanings attached to politics, future research could both qualitatively and quantitatively investigate how they are distributed among social groups of varied class, gender, geographical background or other categories. It could moreover examine the mechanisms that cause possible asymmetries in this distribution. Another suggestion is to look for emotional characteristics that are linked to the identified views on politics, also then in relation to different social groups.

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Appendix

Word combinations searched for to capture Swedish Twitter conversations about the ontological meaning of politics.

<u>Swedish search term</u>	<u>English translation (approximate)</u>
"politik är"	"politics is"
"är politik"	"is/are politics"
"om politik"	"about/of/concerning politics"
"vad politik"	"what politics"
"det politik"	"that/what (which) politics"
"att politik"	"that politics"
"sådan politik"	"that which politics"
"politik innebär"	"politics means/incorporates/involves"
"politik betyder"	"politics means"
"politik handlar"	"politics concerns"
"politik går ut på"	"politics is about"
"politik berör"	"politics concerns/touches/involves"
"politik för mig"	"politics to me"
"tycker politik"	"think(s) politics"
"syn på politik"	"view of politics"
"bild av politik"	"image of politics"