

# **MEANING, MODALITY, AND PASSION IN PROFESSIONAL POLITICAL LIFE**

**Matthew Mahler**  
**PhD Candidate**  
**State University of New York at Stony Brook**  
**Stony Brook, NY 11794-4356**  
**[matthew.mahler@gmail.com](mailto:matthew.mahler@gmail.com)**

## **MEANING, MODALITY, AND PASSION IN PROFESSIONAL POLITICAL LIFE**

**ABSTRACT:** *Based on the first long-term participant observation ethnography to analyze the world of professional politics, this paper seeks to unearth the embodied logic of political practice. It begins by briefly describing the Janus-faced nature of political practice, where politicians experience at once a sense of belief and of “doing good,” on one hand, and a certain level of cynicism and an appreciation for strategic realities, on the other. To overcome the difficulties representationalist models of action have in explaining this apparent contradiction, this paper employs the analytical category of passion, defined here as one’s modality of engagement with the world. It shows that the passion of the politician is one where the politician takes on the phenomenal body of an immanent presence that embodies the universal. While this mode of engagement manifests itself in a sense of belief and of doing good, it also manifests itself in a cynicism and awareness among politicians that, within the oppositional structure of politics, other political agents fail to recognize their status as immanent beings. Thus, belief and cynicism among politicians do not stand in mutual opposition to one another, but following Merleau-Ponty’s terminology, are inseparably intertwined, as the visible and the invisible, with one as the invisible lining of the other.*

### **THE JANUS-FACE OF POLITICS**

Observe politicians – whether it is politicians, members of their staff, advisors, pollsters, or campaign consultants – in their natural environment, and you are certain to notice a paradox that is central to political life. On one hand, politicians experience politics as a unique vocation that affords them a special opportunity to “do good” or to “make a difference.” “The best thing about being in politics is that you feel like you’re really making a difference – you’re apart of something... you have the chance to do things you wouldn’t otherwise,” is how the Chief of Staff to the Majority Leader in one State House explained it to me. Another long-time political aide, in the aftermath of a loss, said that working in politics provides a special opportunity that

few ever have, “to be a part of and work for something that’s tremendously larger than you.” A member of a State House of Representatives said that one of things that “always hits home is having someone come up to you on the street and tell you you’re either doing a good job or not. That really reminds you how important it is – what you’re doing.” When asked about their initiatic experiences in politics and when they first knew they wanted to make a career out of working in politics, politicians often reference how they believed in a candidate for the first time and came to recognize the power of politics. “Working for Mondale was that ‘a ha’ moment for me – you know, I saw what politics was about, and the power you had to affect people’s lives.” “It was special pretty much as soon as I started working for him. I definitely drank the Kool-Aid.” “Ever since I ran my first city council campaign, I knew there was something special about politics and the difference you could make.”

On the other hand, politicians recognize that one of things that separates professional politicians from mere dilettantes is not their level of belief but a certain cynicism and an appreciation of strategic realities. “The problem with them [newcomers who were working on their first campaign] is they don’t get it. They’re so in awe of Bill, they think we just have to put him out there, and... you know... Bill will be Bill, everyone’ll love him, and that’ll be that.” “Sometimes I really have to bite my lip with her. I mean, Mary Ann is a great health care analyst – uh, you know really knows her stuff, and well, obviously we’re lucky to have her volunteering with us, but there’s only one right way with her. In her mind, I think the most important thing is that we come out for single payer [government sponsored and government run health care] regardless of what happens in the election. How many times do I have to remind her that we’ve already taken a position on that and what would happen if we changed now?” “Someone has to be more careful about who comes and goes from headquarters. They [newcomers to the

campaign] are so damn naïve and just so damn happy and proud to have extra bodies and new faces here and [are] not worried about anything else. We don't even know who these people are!”

This, then, is the Janus-faced appearance of official politics. On one hand, politicians experience their world as one where they are given an opportunity to “do good” and to “make a difference<sup>1</sup>.” On the other, politicians recognize politics as a world of strategic realities that are shaped by the dynamics of power and require them to act accordingly. This contradiction is nicely synopsisized by the fact that while politicians are apt to criticize newcomers to politics as being insufficiently cynical and too naïve to the realities of political life, they are also apt to make fun of – and criticize – those who casually change ideological positions for political expediency or those who have a reputation for being in politics for nothing other than personal gain. “He’s just a hack.” “He’s just a two-bit hack.” “He’s just an operator who likes to have his face on T.V.” ““Can you imagine changing parties like he did?’ – ‘Hell no!’” As Hall (1972) describes the conundrum for politicians:

“To say that someone is a politician is to color him dirty while to refer to statesmanlike actions is to evoke the highest form of integrity... Political activity is a fragile and problematic enterprise because at the same time one is being applauded for self-sacrifice, he is being criticized as self-serving. The past of the society is replete with the crumbling of idols and the revelation of incompetence and corruption as well as the creation of heroes, myths, and history” (53)

Although differing in methodology, empirical focus, and theoretical underpinning, most accounts of political life, can be pithily categorized based on how they envision the role of “interest” (what I have generally described here as cynicism)<sup>2</sup> and “belief” in political life. Given the vast sway of rational choice theory in political science, one of the most common

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<sup>1</sup> This is confirmed by Kleinknecht and Shaffir (2002) in their interviews with members of Canadian Parliament, who “readily believe that they are affecting change in a needed direction” (1).

<sup>2</sup> In general, I have chosen throughout this paper to refer to belief and *cynicism* as opposed to belief and *interest* because of the broader meaning evoked by cynicism: it can refer to both a certain level of suspicion but also to one’s cynical, i.e. self-*interested*, motivations. In those instances where I have chosen to use interest, I have done so because the more narrow meaning was apt.

approaches is to argue that political practice is directed toward the maximization of a certain outcome or interest (power, number of votes, etc) and is thus, guided by an implicit calculus on how best to achieve those desired ends. The general tendency here is to treat any experience that politicians have of “belief” or of “doing good” as a subjective misrecognition of objective reality or an example of how “altruism” or belief can “nest within returns to self-interest” (Mansbridge 1995). At the opposite end of the spectrum from such rational choice approaches are culturalist approaches, which argue that agents often act in opposition with what objectively might be classified as their material interests. As Kertzer (1988) notes, “People have the unsettling habit of willingly, even gladly, dying for causes that oppose their material interests, while vociferously opposing groups that espouse them” (8). According to this perspective, if a line of action is consistent with a set of symbolic representations, whether one’s ideals (equality, democracy, freedom), or one’s identity (American, radical, conservative, etc), then it can be said to be based on “belief.” The corollary that generally accompanies this view of action is that if agents depart from the proscriptions of symbolic representations, then they are said to be acting strategically or cynically. The obvious tendency in each of these instances is to treat “belief” and “interest” or “belief” and “cynicism” as though they are each derivative of the other. Thus, belief often exists as a residual category that can capture all forms of practice not easily defined as being guided by interest just as actions that depart from the norms of symbolic proscriptions are often classified as being driven by interest.

The challenge that exists with such a residualist view of the relationship between belief and cynicism is that we have very little theoretical leverage with which to explain the co-existence of belief *and* cynicism. If each is simply a residual or a remainder of the other, then social scientists are in a position that while they can meticulously measure the conditions that are

said to militate for or against pure forms of belief or pure forms of cynicism but they have very few tools which to understand those instances where they mutually inform and shape one another. Goffman's (1961) discussion of "role distance" and how agents might simultaneously embrace a specific line of action or role, while maintaining a sense of detachment from the actual performance, is one of the richest accounts we have of the lived complexities between belief and cynicism, and it has the distinct advantage of calling attention to the fact that the meaning is often determined by the degree to which agents throw themselves (or not) into action. Yet, Goffman's work suggests that in order to assess agents' level of belief and cynicism, one merely has to measure their relative distance from the symbolic construct (the role) they are enacting; their level of belief is measured by assessing their relative proximity to the norm or role – described tellingly, in Goffman, as the extent to which they *embrace* the role, while their level of cynicism is measured by determining their relative distance from that role. Thus, the possibility of co-presence of belief and cynicism is conceptualized not as a scenario in which *belief* and *cynicism* are both present, but one in which there is a *half-measure* of belief and a *half measure* of cynicism.

The question this paper explores is how we might conceptualize the relationship between belief and cynicism as something other than one of mutual opposition. Specifically, it asks how can we best analyze the practice and culture of professional politics, a world whose Janus-faced appearance has long haunted social scientists. I begin by discussing the implicit ontology shared by standard theories of political practice – one that views agents' main connection to the world as *representations* of the world. I argue that an embodied dispositional theory of action that uses the analytical category of passion to problematize agents' mode of engagement with the world, will provide us the theoretical vantage point from which we can till the soil of everyday political

life without the shopworn antinomy of belief and cynicism. I then illustrate the fruitfulness of such an approach using microscopic observations of everyday political life gathered over the course of two-years' worth of ethnographic fieldwork. I argue that the vocation of politics is a meaningful one for politicians – one that is shaped by both belief and cynicism – not because of some model of the world stored in their minds that dictates what calculations they should make or what rules or norms they should follow, but because of how they inhabit the world and how it inhabits them.

The data for this paper come from four main sources. The first source of data comes from the first long-term participant observation ethnography of professional politics, in which I split a little over a year's worth of time between a high profile Congressional campaign in 2006 and then in the office of the new Congressman after he had scored a victory over his incumbent opponent. During that time as a participant observer, I fully subjected myself to the demands, expectations, and stresses of political life including 16-hour workdays (sometimes longer) and countless nights with little to virtually no sleep, as a conscious research strategy designed to better grasp the experience and meaning of politics-in-action. For the majority of that time, I was part of the inner circle of staff and advisors to the candidate, and then after our victory, to the Congressman, and was privy to and a participant in most ongoing discussions about strategy and policy. My second source of data are the over 40 in-depth semi-structured interviews I conducted with politicians from across the spectrum of politics (i.e. Democrats and Republicans, men and women, political veterans and political novices). Third, in an effort to find the political animal in its foliage, as Garfinkel would suggest, I followed politicians in their off hours and hung out with Congressional aides and staffers over drinks, played in Congressional softball and football leagues with them, watched presidential debates and political documentaries with them,

and analyzed the latest political news with them (e.g. discussing whose stock was up and whose stock was down in the world of politics; speculating on the reasons why politicians took the stands they did on issues, etc). My fourth source of data is an extensive analysis of works of political non-fiction, including political memoirs, political biographies, and journalistic accounts of politics-in-action, that enabled me to capture details from everyday political life that were not available to me either through participant observation, interviews, or through following politicians in their off hours. I evaluated each of these four types of data using standard evidentiary criteria employed by ethnographers (see for example: Auyero 2008; Becker 1958, 1970; and Katz 1988): 1) actions that agents witness have a higher evidentiary value than thoughts agents are presumed to have had; 2) actions witnessed by multiple observers have a higher evidentiary value than actions witnessed by only one or two observers; 3) and repeated modes of behavior or actions have a higher value than those that seldom occur.

### **BELIEF, CYNICISM, AND ONTOLOGY**

The opposition between belief and cynicism and the question of what role they play in shaping social action has been present in various forms throughout the history of social scientific thought. It can be found in the opposing thought of Hobbes and Locke, in Tönnies' dyad of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, and in Durkheim's couplet of mechanical and organic solidarity, to name just a few of the most famous examples. To offer a complete history of the dualism and to assess the difficulties it has posed for social scientific analysis is far beyond the scope of this paper. My intent here is much narrower: to arrive at a better understanding of why standard theories of political practice run into such difficulties conceptualizing the relationship between belief and

cynicism as something other than mutual opposition. To do so, we must first consider the basic ontology upon which they are based.

Joseph Schlesinger's path-breaking *Ambition and Politics* (1966) set the tone for generations of future political scientists for whom rational choice theory would become the most popular instrument with which to examine the practice of politics. The basic tenet of ambition theory, as set forth by Schlesinger, is that, "[A] politician's behavior is a response to his office goals. Or, to put it another way, the politician as office seeker engages in political acts and makes decisions appropriate to gaining office" (Schlesinger 1966: 6). Using such assumptions, political scientists often formalize the logic of political practice under an explicit calculus, as Black (1972) attempted to do for the likelihood that a politician would run for office:

$$u(O) = (PB) - C,$$

where:

$u(O)$  = the utility for the potential candidate prior to the election

$P$  = the candidate's estimate of the probability that he can obtain an office should he attempt to seek it

$B$  = the benefit, in *utils*, that an individual will receive from achieving an office

$C$  = the cost required during a campaign to obtain an office,

so that the potential candidate would find it reasonable to run for office if the benefit of office-holding, ( $B$ ), times the probability of obtaining the office, ( $P$ ), is greater than the cost of obtaining that office, ( $C$ ) and if the utility of office holding,  $u(O)$ , is more valuable than the alternative ways the individual might invest his resources, i.e.,  $u(O) > u(A_1)$ . Leaving aside, for the moment, the possible critiques of this mode of analysis, it is worth noting the implicit ontology upon which it is based. Rational choice theory more broadly, and ambition theory

more narrowly, both assume that agents are connected to their worlds through representations, stored within their minds, of what ends are desirable and which ends are not based on the estimated costs of those ends. In Black's case, these representations are approximated by his formal equation:

$$u(O) = (PB) - C.$$

When external circumstances change and a given outcome becomes more or less likely, it is generally assumed that agents' minds process these external stimuli, determine their significance by comparing them to their internal system of representations, and then feed them back into their ongoing calculations of what ends are desirable (or not). As Black (1970) describes the process, "When one examines the ambitions and political commitment of prospective politicians, we are *in fact* examining *the rational calculus that the political actor makes* with respect to a given set of alternatives" (877, emphasis mine).

Although culturalist approaches look at political life through an entirely different theoretical lens, they rely on an ontology similar to that which undergirds rational choice theory. For culturalists, agents are connected to their world through the representations or webs of significance they have spun, to paraphrase Geertz (1973). Thus, Kertzer (1988) argues that, "Living in a society that extends well beyond our direct observation, we can relate to the larger political entity *only* through abstract symbolic means" (8, emphasis mine). According to such a view, political action is in fact made possible through the symbols that connect the agent to the abstract entity of the state: "The state is invisible; it must be personified before it can be seen, symbolized before it can be loved, imagined before it can be conceived" (Walzer 1968: 194).

Expanding our analysis, for the moment, beyond theories that directly address the role of belief and cynicism in political life, this same ontology is also present, somewhat paradoxically,

in standard empiricist explanations of political practice, which envision agents' actions as a direct reaction to external conditions, stimuli, rules, and/or norms. This is perhaps best seen in Lord Acton's famous aphorism, often cited today as folk-sociological wisdom, that "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely" (*Oxford Dictionary of Political Quotations*). Here, the understanding is that agents are connected to the world by their internal representation of external stimuli (power), which is perceived as causing political actors to think (have internal representations) that they are above the law or that power is so desirable (internal representation) that they will do anything to maximize their quotient of it. Quite commonly, there is thought to be such a tight fit between external demand and internal representation that the internal representations are left out of the model all together and the stimuli is purported to cause the action itself.

In each of these cases, then, there is an implicit premise that agents are connected to their world through representations of that world – in the first instance through the formula or calculi that determine which ends are desirable, in the second instance through the symbolic systems that determine what is meaningful to them, and in the third instance, through an estimation of what is necessary based on the demands of the external environment. If we were to summarize this basic model: agents determine what is necessary in a given situation, in conjunction with their own representations of what ends are desirable or meaningful, and they then deductively carry out a specific line of action in hopes of bringing about their intended goal. In each case, the implicit understanding is the same. Action is made possible by the abstract model of the world that agents possess. But, as Wittgenstein ([1953] 1958) has shown with respect to the question of whether or not actions can be determined by rules, not only are agents not fully aware of everything they would need to know in order to successfully follow such an *a priori*

abstract model, but also, and, even more importantly, it is simply not possible for them to be aware of everything they would need to know in order to successfully follow such a model. This is the case, Wittgenstein argues, because any given rule or set of directives are subject to an endless range of interpretations. If agents are to correctly follow a rule or any implicit model of action in a specific setting, then they would necessarily have to have an endless supply of knowledge as to what interpretations of the model were correct and which were incorrect. Without such knowledge, however, “[N]o course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action [could] be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict” ([1953] 1958: I 201<sup>3</sup>). Such a scenario leads us to one of two theoretical dead-ends: either a “foundationalist construal” in which a finite list of thoughts, interpretations, and/or rules lead to and/or justify a finite set of actions, or a view in which the agent plays no role and “brute, *de facto*, connections” are what determine actions (Taylor 1993: 53).

Herein, lies the problem with respect to examining the role of belief and cynicism in political life. If one conceptualizes the experience of belief as the product of foundationalist construal (i.e. following a pre-existing set of ideas or norms leads to a sense of belief), then the only way in which to conceptualize cynicism is as something that contradicts those foundationalist standards, just as if one defines cynical self-interested actions as the product of agents following a foundationalist preference curves (again, foundationalist construal), then any action that does not follow that preference curve must necessarily have been based on a separate representationalist model (i.e. belief). Likewise, if belief and cynicism are based on some external stimuli (brute, *de facto* connections), which then excite internal receptors in a way that

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<sup>3</sup> My reference includes the part and paragraph number from *Philosophical Investigations*.

identify (again through internal representations) whether one should act interestedly or distinterestedly, there is again very little way to conceptualize the dualism of belief and cynicism as anything other than an antinomy.

As Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1968) and Bourdieu (1990, 2000), among others, have shown, the way in which to overcome the challenges of representationalist thought is to posit an agent that is not connected to the world by its representations but by its bodily presence in the world and the world's presence in it. Thus, as Merleau-Ponty (1962) argued, we do not experience the world based on external stimuli acting on us, nor through a specific set of beliefs or calculations about how best to maximize outcomes. We experience it through an "I can," an embodied orientation in and to the world based on our acquired capacities and habits. This, of course, is similar to the understanding reflected in Bourdieu's work that one's practical knowledge is made possible by the fact that the body, "[H]as the capacity to be present to what is outside itself, *in the world*, and to be impressed and durably modified by it" (Bourdieu 2000: 135, emphasis mine).

If one of the consequences of representationalist thought is that it struggles to overcome the antinomy of belief and cynicism, then using an embodied dispositional theory of action to explain political practice should grant us some theoretical leverage with which to move past the Janus head that sits atop our current understandings of politics. Over and above that, as I will show, what is also necessary is not just to posit an embodied agent but also to problematize and investigate the knotty relationship between body and world. To do so, I use the an analytic category of passion, defined here as one's modality of engagement with the world, drawing on the recognition that while the visible body may be bounded by flesh, there is always another phenomenal or lived body that is extending beyond the boundaries of our physical body and

inhabiting the world, as Polanyi's (1966/1967) stunning phenomenology shows so well. Although the tendency is to speak in terms of subject/object, consciousness/world there is never an autonomous transcendental subject acting upon a world of objects. At best, there are changing constellations between agents' bodies and the worlds they are inhabiting, based on the agents' embodied dispositions and the structure of the worlds they inhabit. Our challenge, as sociologists, is to delineate, dissect, and explain the variation in modes of engagement, how they are a part of our ongoing practical achievements, and how they shape our experiences of and practices in a given world.<sup>4</sup>

### **IMMANENT PRESENCE AND THE PASSION OF POLITICOS**

The political animal stands in a rather unique relationship to its environment. In contrast with any view that might see politics as an inherently exoteric practice in which the sheer power of politicians' knowledge and personality enables them to successfully navigate the routines and rituals of their daily lives, politicians and their aides are continually looking to shape their environment and their encounters with it. Take for example the work done by politicians' advance staffers, who are responsible for scouting locations (i.e. a borough hall, city hall, a gymnasium, a restaurant, a coffee shop, a supporter's home, a union hall, etc) for future events. Among the considerations to be made in selecting such a site is its size and how many people it can hold, but not necessarily because of a concern to make sure everyone gets a seat. For example, in late August of 1968, Richard Nixon convened a training session in New York for the advance team for his still unofficial campaign for president. He directed his advance staffers to predict attendance for each event, but then, rather than encouraging them to select a venue where there would be more than enough seats for everyone, he told his staffers to rent halls that were

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<sup>4</sup> For a more in-depth, if less empirical discussion of passion, see Mahler (2008).

*too small*, so that members of the press who attended the event would recognize it as “standing room only” (Perlstein 2008: 128). Once an event site is chosen, an advance staff is then responsible for preparing the venue for the actual event. The former director of advance for President George W. Bush, Greg Jenkins, described the degree of coordination and planning that goes into preparing for a presidential event as such that, “*Nothing is not thought through.*” According to Jenkins, when planning how best to stage various White House events, the Bush advance team went so far as to consider re-choreographing how Marine Corps One, the president’s helicopter, would land on the South Lawn of the White House. “*These things don’t just happen,*” Jenkins said (Lee 2009: 1-3, emphasis mine). At the Obama White House, members of President Obama’s staff study images of how other administrations have used each of the different White House rooms for events, so they can in turn determine how best to use each of those rooms for their own announcements (Lee 2009: 1-3). In preparation for an Obama presidential campaign event at Carnegie Mellon University featuring Michelle Obama, staff from the Obama campaign carefully selected the students who would sit behind the stage and likely be on television. As they went about selecting students, one staffer turned to another and said, “Get me more white people, we need more white people.” (Peters 2008: 1).

On the Johnson for Congress campaign, these same considerations were constantly in play. Venues were carefully selected based on: their size, with the goal always being for them to be “too small;” any historical, political, or symbolic relevance they might have based on the intended “message of the event;” and what the backdrop (including supporters) would look like at each event. How overtly political should the event be? Was the setting such that a more somber or respectful tone might be needed? Should attendees have campaign placards to wave at the event or some other signs? How easy would it be to “control” or to keep any potential

protestors or hecklers who might show from protesting?<sup>5</sup> For other events, the biggest challenge was not selecting the right venue or deciding who should *not* attend, but finding the right people to attend the event. In preparation for an event touting Johnson's support for stem cell research, Johnson aides spent countless hours searching for an individual with diabetes, Parkinson's, cancer, or some other disease for which stem cell therapy might provide a cure, and who might also be supportive of the campaign and be willing to speak about his or her belief in the need for stem cell research at the event.

Just as politicians look to control their external environment, they similarly look to control how they interact with it. In some instances, it was not a specific individual with a specific background for which the campaign searched but for individuals' stories that Johnson could tell at the event. For example, in preparation for Johnson's first debate with Mark Kramer (our opponent), Steven Skyler, a senior adviser to the campaign, approached me with a question, "Are there any stories Bill tells about people he's met on the campaign trail? ... You know about how 'Suzie' lost her health care or how 'Betsy' can't afford to pay her mortgage and the cost of her prescriptions – that sort of thing." After asking other staffers and not being able to think of any such stories myself, Steven then asked whether the campaign had received any particularly poignant letters from supporters, which Bill might mention at the debate. After combing through stacks of mail and not finding any stories worth telling, Steven then suggested we call Bill's brother and sister to get their stories about growing up in the District – the places they would go and the things that they would do with their brother, so that we might go to Bill with those stories as suggestions of things he might mention at the debate. None of this is to mention the hours the campaign spent putting together briefing books for Johnson to study in advance of the debate,

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<sup>5</sup> Beaucar Vlahos (2005) describes a limiting case, of sorts, of the screening tactics used at presidential events.

covering everything from subjects and issues of local import, names of local leaders he had met with whom he could refer to at the debate to show his local ties, to briefing papers on domestic and foreign policy issues, and records of what he had said on specific issues throughout the campaign. Nor is it to mention the entire evening that Johnson and senior staff from the campaign spent strategizing for the debate with two former press aides from the Clinton administration who had been brought in to help Johnson prepare for the debate<sup>6</sup>.

Politicos devote such attention not just to ensuring that politicians are prepared for debates but also to ensuring they are prepared for their daily lives on the campaign trail, in the halls of Congress, or state legislative houses. Listen to political aides as they describe their daily routines and they are likely to mention putting together “briefing books” for their “bosses.” Inside such briefing books, politicians or candidates will likely find everything from their schedule for the next day or days’ events (depending on how far in advance the book is prepared); biographies of any official, constituent, party leader, or anyone else they will be meeting with; talking points for any interviews they might have with the press or for any other public appearances; copies of any speeches they will be delivering or questions they will be asking at a legislative hearing; briefing materials on any specific issue or policy they are interested in learning more about, whether out of a general interest or in order to prepare for a future event, interview or legislative debate; call sheets with the phone numbers of all calls that need to be made, and information on who to call, for what reason (call Joan Schmidt to ask for a \$1,000 donation; call State Rep Mikulski to ask for his endorsement) and even what to say (Joan’s a good friend of Mayor Richardson – talk about your mutual friendship; Mikulski is a HUGE policy wonk – he’ll love it if you pick his brain about the landfill issue)<sup>7</sup>, among many

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<sup>6</sup> This level of preparation for debates is hardly unique. See Pickler (2008) for confirmation.

<sup>7</sup> For further confirmation of the level of detail that often goes into call sheets, see Fineman (2007).

other possible contents. In order to prepare candidates or office holders for an interview or television appearance, press aides or media strategists often advise them of what questions are likely to be asked and strategize about how best to answer them. Press aides themselves often refer to “Tully Message Boxes,”<sup>8</sup> polling results, or previous quotes that they have used, to help them stay “on message” both as they talk with the press about their own boss and/or party and as they talk about their opponent or the other party.

Some might interpret this attempt by politicians to incessantly shape their surrounding environment and their own interactions with it as merely the “stagecraft” through which politicians go about constructing the “political spectacle” (Edelman 1988). What often follows from this is the notion that policy and stagecraft, legislating and spin, governing and campaigning, operate as to two distinctly different types of political practice driven by opposing motivations, with one as the content (e.g. policy, legislating, governing, wielding power) and the other its form (spin, messaging, campaigning). Yet, try as one might, there are no objective grounds on which to differentiate policy from spin or spin from policy. This is not to mention the challenges one faces in trying to distinguish better spin from worse spin or “real” policy from ersatz policy or contrivance. Listen to virtually any floor debate in any legislative body and you will quickly find that one politician’s earnest attempt at policy-making is another politician’s political gimmick. Further complicating things is the fact that legislating and “spinning” go hand-in-hand even in the halls of Congress. Legislative aides often work closely with press

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<sup>8</sup> The “Tully Message Box” is a two by two box, with one quadrant containing the basic “messages” your campaign says about itself (Johnson stands for change; wants to put this country’s economy back on track), a second quadrant containing the “messages” you say about your opponent (Kramer has lost touch with his district, has been in Washington too long), the third quadrant containing the messages your opponent says about him or herself (Kramer is an experienced leader who knows the district and what it needs), and the fourth quadrant containing the messages your opponent says about you (Johnson is inexperienced and wants to raise your taxes). For a visual example of the Tully Message Box see Fitch (2004: 54).

secretaries or communications directors to strategize about how best “to sell” legislation, just as legislative aides often work closely with press secretaries or communications directors to help explain to them what a new piece of legislation accomplishes.

If not simply an interest in constructing a political spectacle, then what else might such an interest in controlling or shaping one’s interactions with the surrounding world reflect? Another potential explanation is that this desire to actively shape one’s environment and one’s encounters with it is necessity turned into a virtue – a functional response to a world where there are other agents who are also actively looking to shape the flow of events to their own advantage so that one can either follow suit or risk being marginalized. In a world with a “24 hour” or even “24 minute news cycle” (Poniewozik 2008: 1), in which any potential slip-up will immediately be broadcast across the country or splashed across the front pages of countless Internet sites within minutes – and if it does not make it there on its own, one’s opponents will make sure it does – the careful management of public encounters and the routinization of “messaging” is not only a logical adjustment to external circumstances – it is a necessary one – or so the theory goes.

Despite the intuitive appeal of such a model, it runs into a number of insuperable difficulties. First, it is unable to explain the often sensual attraction to practicing politics – an appeal that cannot be explained by the power or coherence of the symbols employed or in one’s ability to “pull off” an event despite an opponents’ efforts. As one Johnson aide described the prospect of holding a rally touting Johnson’s labor support in Kramer’s hometown, “That would be a major cockpunch!” Furthermore, such a functional account of politics cannot explain the reactions of politicians to the sometime surprising threats that they find in surprising places; sometimes something as objectively small as a letter to an editor in a local paper can provoke countless speculation as to, “What are they up to?”

The answer to overcoming each of these difficulties lies not in any number of ad hoc adjustments that might be made to our standard theories of political practice – adjustments that would still rely on the same basic underlying ontological view of agents – that they are separated from their surrounding world, connected only by their internal representations of that world. The answer lies in a radical reworking of this ontological assumption – one that replaces it with an embodied theory of action that places at the center of its analysis a problematization of the agent’s mode of engagement with its world. While one could analyze the process of becoming a politico by identifying each of the standard tasks one masters and their functional uses (e.g. in learning how to write a press release, one knows how to communicate with the public; in learning how to interpret a public opinion poll, one learns which voters to target in an election; in learning how to draft legislation, one learns how to change laws to affect a certain outcome) to do so, however, overlooks a key fact – the extent of knowledge one internalizes through the mastery of a specific task, not only is not captured by identifying the sum total of each of the discreet tasks one masters and their manifest and their latent purposes, it *cannot* be. To suggest otherwise is to posit a radical separation between subject and object or agent and world where the only outcome of using a tool or object is its functional use.

In addition to its functional uses, part of what one learns in mastering how to competently use a tool is how to modify one’s bodily engagement with the world. For example, as Polanyi (1966/1967) shows, mastery of how to use a pen to write does not simply entail a mental mastery of discreet lines, curves, or shapes (a mental picture of what an individual letter looks like); or the knowledge of how to make specific shapes using one’s wrist, arm, and shoulder. In mastering how to write one also learns how to phenomenally project one’s body into the pen, or to dwell in the pen (indwelling as Polanyi calls it), so that if you come across a rough patch on

the paper while writing, you experience the roughness at the tip of the pen. And as Katz (1999) points out, what is mastered in learning how to drive is not equal to the sum of each of the discreet ways of touching the steering wheel or ways of stepping on the pedals; in order to drive one must become “sensually intertwined with mechanic tool and the perceptual field” in front of it so if other cars cut in front of you while you are driving, you experience them as having “cut you off.” Thus, we can say that the writer does not engage with the world as a writer who happens to be holding a pen in his hand, he engages with it as a *pen-body-thing*, just as the driver does not engage with the world as someone who happens to be sitting in the car, she engages with it as a *car-person-thing*.

How does all of this affect our examination of political practice, and more specifically, the question we started with – the nature of the relationship between belief and cynicism in political life? Just as Polanyi and Katz showed that our experiences of writing and driving are neither the result of external stimuli acting directly on us nor the result of disembodied agents’ mental representations of how they should act, we can say the same for political practice. This is of course the major insight of Bourdieu’s theoretical concept of *habitus* – that one’s embodied capacities for action, sedimented in one’s body – in the *habitus* – are at once cause and consequence of one’s positioning in, openness to, and experience of the world. But at the same, as Polanyi and Katz show, embodied presence in the world is indeed variable. What is significant is not just that we have a taken-for-granted or tacit awareness of the world when we are writing or driving, but that in each case we inhabit the world as a pen-body-thing and as a car-body-thing respectively. While at first, these metaphorical transformations may strike one as hardly integral to either the act of writing or the act of driving, as both Polanyi and Katz show, these transformations are both what shape our experiences of the world while we are writing and

driving, and also what make each action possible. Stop too long to think about how to write a letter or how to navigate rush hour traffic and both cease to be possible any longer; instead of being a writer, one becomes someone who is thinking about writing or who is making discreet markings on a paper, and instead of being a driver one becomes someone whose car moves sporadically – this way and that – but fails to smoothly navigate the road.

As I will show, these insights have an, as of yet, unrealized significance for how to analyze and understand political practice and on a more strictly theoretical level can help us to more fully flesh out Bourdieu's sociology. Bourdieu rightly asserts that an agent's positioning in and inhabiting of the world is fundamental to practice. In those instances where an agent's subjective dispositions match the objective requirements of a field – agents are, as Bourdieu describes it “caught up in the game” – in the *illusio* or state of “fundamental belief in the interest of the game and the value of the stakes which is inherent in that membership” (2000: 11). In those instances where there is not the same coincidence between dispositions and objective structures, Bourdieu suggests that a “Don Quixote” (160) effect, of sorts, exists in which the taken for granted expectations of what is right and what is wrong, what should be done and what should not be done, are no longer possible. While arguing that each field has its own stakes, and thus that the *illusio* held by members in different fields will vary from field to field, Bourdieu implicitly holds that in each case the agent's relationship to the world is the same (assuming a match of one's dispositions with the objective requirements of the field) – that of doxic complicity or taken-for-granted awareness. But as our examples from Polanyi and Katz show, while agents may share the same doxic or taken for granted awareness of the world, that does not necessarily mean they share the same mode of engagement or passion. Although writers and drivers may both be dwelling in their objects and have a tacit understanding of what they are

doing, they do not inhabit the world in the same way. While one inhabits the world as a *pen-body-thing*, the other inhabits it as a *car-body thing*, so that in order to understand how each experience the world, we cannot overlook or ignore each of the bodies they take on. As Katz shows in his analysis of the emotional dynamics of driving, because drivers are inhabiting the world as car-body-things while passengers are not, drivers often have very different emotional reactions to what is happening on the road around them than the passengers do who are sitting right next to them. Thus, to better understand one's experiences of the world, and why we do what we do, we need a much broader understanding of embodiment – one that incorporates the varying modes of engagement between agents and their worlds into the analysis – or one, we might say, that is more fully *fleshed* out. This is my intent in using the analytic category of passion to examine everyday political life. In so doing, I seek to bring into relief the way(s) in which politicians relate to their world, and to examine how this, in turn, shapes their experiences of belief and cynicism. To be clear: my goal here is not to sketch the full variation in how politicians relate to their world across the political field. Instead, I look to sketch in thumbnail fashion what an ideal-type of political engagement might look like.

If it requires a certain leap of the imagination to envision our bodies merging and becoming one with pens and cars, then the challenge before us is to take a similarly large leap and attempt to adumbrate the phenomenal body that competent political agents take on as they go about their everyday lives. To be clear, this is decidedly not to suggest that what is at stake is to identify some new representationalist model that exists in the heads of political agents and specifies how they should act in their everyday lives. Doing so would not only lead us back into the same theoretical aporias of representationalist thought, it would also completely distort and misrepresent the logic of practice itself. The pen-body-thing and the car-body-thing not only are

not models that writers and drivers follow in their heads in order to write and drive, they *cannot* be something they consciously seek to take on or follow – otherwise the projects of writing and driving would no longer be possible. These metaphorical forms are the phenomenal bodies through which each engages with and experiences the world. Thus, while we cannot expect politicians to tell us what the phenomenal bodies are they take on in becoming competent political agents, as Katz shows with the case of drivers, we can nevertheless discern what the characteristics of these bodies are based on agents' descriptions of how they interact with or inhabit their world and their understandings of what is at stake in their world.

As we have already seen in our descriptions of everyday political life, politicians experience a certain need to control or to shape their environment and their encounters with it. Ben, a Republican staffer for over 10 years, who first got his start in politics working on a local city-council race, indirectly confirmed this when recounting the advice his former mentor had given him about what it takes to be successful in politics. “I would often complain about things,” said Ben, “I would bitch and moan about how Democrats were up to know good, didn't know what they were doing, that sort of thing, and he [his mentor] would tell me, ‘That's great and all – but you've got to always have some skin in the game – how ya gonna fix it, what's your rebuttal?’” Mario Cuomo, then candidate for Governor of NY, also described the ability to shape one's interactions with one's environment as a key trait of politicians. Lamenting the fact that the well-known strategist who had advised him in the past – David Garth – was no longer working for him, Cuomo remarked that his campaign was suffering from a lack of form:

“The value of Garth is clear from the way our campaign is shaping up—or, rather isn't. It has no form. *It is not being driven by anyone along any particular path...* It requires polling and an ability to analyze the results. Sullivan, with Green, can do that, I expect, as well as anyone. They will tell us what message we need to deliver. The next step is to find a way to *deliver it*. That requires creativity. By issue paper, endorsement, event, commercial?” (1984: 154, emphasis mine).

In many instances when I have asked Chris, a former colleague of mine from the Johnson for Congress campaign who still works in high-level politics, how work is, he often comments on the various successes that each party is having “controlling things.” “It’s amazing how well the Republicans have been able to dominate the message.” “Today was amazing – it’s one of the first times that we were really in control; we completely dominated in the press.”

In addition to being able to control one’s environment and one’s interactions with it, politicians often talk about the need to be decisive, to make snap decisions, and/or to know what is right or wrong, and to be able to do so with the strongest of convictions. For example, when James Carville, the well-known political strategist, learned that an academic had applied for the job of research director on one of the campaigns he was running, he saw this as a significant disqualification: “I don’t want any goddamned professor on this campaign. Trouble is, they can’t get off the can and make a decision. To them, everything is gray; I want black and white. I want to nail our opponent. I want to rip his head off. I want answers, and I want them now” (Johnson 2001: 61). During my time on the Johnson campaign, especially my initial months there, my status as an academic led to similar reactions from many of my colleagues, including Johnson himself and Chris, who was the campaign’s communications director. On several occasions, Johnson, after reading a draft of a press release I had written, would shake his head and say, “Matt – this isn’t right.” His reasoning? “Politics isn’t like writing a dissertation. It has to be – you know – sexy! Come on! Where’s the sex?” On another instance, I had written the first draft of a release and given it to Chris to edit. When I asked Chris how it was, he backhandedly remarked, “Don’t worry. It’s fine. I can always sex it up,” reminding me that my academic tendencies were often a mismatch with the world of politics. While one might interpret Johnson’s and Chris’ remarks as though they were simply directed at the *form* of my

writing, a more literal and more appropriate interpretation, would suggest that they were directed at both the form *and* the content of my writing; it was not *assertive* enough – it did not take enough of a *stand* – it had no *conviction* or *emotion* as one would in having sex (thus the sexual imagery).

Finally, we can also say that the phenomenal body of the politico is one that aims at omniscience. In my interviews with politicians, one of the most frequent things they mentioned when I asked them what it takes to be successful in politics is “relationships,” with the implication always being the more people you know, the better. “It’s all about who you know in politics,” as one said, or “it’s not necessarily about what you can do but about whether you know who to call to get something done or to get a question answered,” as another said. KC, another former Johnson staffer, often bragged about how many Facebook friends he had and how these relationships would ultimately pay off for him professionally, while staffers in Johnson’s Congressional office would often come back from legislative hearings or other meetings brandishing the different business cards they had received, as though they were badges of honor. In other instances, staffers might comment in one breath about how great a Congressional reception was, while in the next commenting on how many people they met there, “I met so many people!” When they are not cultivating relationships, another routine politicians are likely to be engaging in is staying abreast of news stories. Throughout the day on both the Johnson campaign and in the Johnson office, staffers would often email each other news stories that might in some way affect the race. “Did you see this?” the emails would often read. The first thing David Plouffe, the campaign manager for Barack Obama’s presidential campaign, said he typically did each morning during the campaign would be to reach for his Blackberry so he could read the latest news: “We’d get the [news] clips overnight, and I’d read all of them. Hundreds of

them. That's basically what it was like. Wake up, reach for your blackberry, the way guys used to reach for their packs of cigarettes" (Taddeo 2009: 5). Field staffers on the Johnson campaign, who were responsible for building the campaign's Get Out the Vote (GOTV) operations across the district, would often brag to each other about how well parts of the district, and how they knew whom each of the local committee members. Should someone learn a particularly interesting bit of knowledge from their time "in the field" or come across a news story no one had seen, the likely response was often, "Great catch!"

Given all of this, what types of characteristics can we say that this phenomenal body of the politico exhibits, and even more importantly, what does this say about how politicos are inhabiting their world? It knows with moral assurance what is right or wrong, it gives order to and shapes things in the world, and it is well connected to and has a presence in the world. Again, to be clear, the point of this is not to suggest that this phenomenal body functions in the form of a *deus ex machina* in the minds of politicos that dictates their actions. The point is that in order to successfully become a competent politico one must inhabit the world in a specific way (again the analogy is how one must become a *pen-body-thing* in order to write or a *car-body-thing* in order to drive). If politicos were to stop and think about each of the individual discreet tasks they should be doing, how they should be doing them, what they should be saying, whom they should be saying it to, etc, political life would come to a screeching halt. Instead, because of their embodied knowledge, which is inculcated through their membership and presence in the field of politics and functions as a tacit awareness of how to phenomenally inhabit that world, they are able to dwell in or live through this phenomenal body. This body then shapes their perceptions of the world around them, their awareness of what things are to be done in it, and how to do them.

Based on a phenomenological re-interpretation of Geertz (2001) and Shils (1965), we can say that the phenomenal body of *politicos* is an *immanent presence* that embodies the universal. This is not to say that this is a presence in the sense of something that is merely co-present in time and space with other agents (i.e. a physical “presence”). This presence is a *presence* in the sense of an *immanence* that gives order to and shapes the things of this world and does so in ways that embody the universal<sup>9</sup>. While suggesting that this phenomenal body of the *politico* embodies sacred powers might offend one’s general (political) sensibilities, yet that is the central point Geertz makes in his analysis of the “symbolics of power” (2001) – that there is an inherent sacredness or “numinosity” (146) to sovereign power. Contrary to Geertz, however, it is not a “deep, intimate involvement” with master *fictions* that produces this immanence but a deep, intimate involvement or connection *in and with this world* that produces it. To pass beyond mere physical presence, it must necessarily carry an awareness, appreciation, and proximity to order or that which is “vital” (Shils 1965: 201), so that presence necessarily implies a certain posture or stance, whether “affirming or abhorring, defensive or destructive” (Geertz 2001: 146). Finally, this presence can be neither capricious nor arbitrary, but must be reasonable, “coherent and continuous,” (Shils 1965: 201) which is to say based on larger universalistic principles that integrate it with a larger moral order.

To be clear, this is not the same thing as saying that this embodied form, in and of itself, is what determines how *politicos* experience their world. To do so, would be to subsume the entire meaning of political practice under another abstracted representation. Instead, it is worth emphasizing that how *politicos*’ experience their world and their practices therein are directly

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<sup>9</sup> This is not to say *a la* Hegel that *politicos* or other agents of the state actually reach the level of the universal. *A contrario* theirs is a universal *project* – an *intentionality aimed at the universal* while still falling short, sometimes more starkly than others.

tied to how they perceive their immanent presence fitting into their social environment.<sup>10</sup> Thus, in order to understand how this phenomenal body of politicians affects their experience of their environment, we must understand it in relation to the world that politicians inhabit. One of the more helpful ways in which to begin doing this is by paying particularly close attention to the metaphors that politicians use to describe their everyday routines and experiences of politics. This is because, as embodied agents, we are present in a world which is external to us so that our understanding of the world is a nonconceptual understanding, which in turn means that metaphors should be seen as revealing “not the thisness of a that’ but rather that ‘this is that’” (Jackson 1989: 142).

Living their world in the form of immanent presence-body-things, the rituals of politicians’ daily lives often involve “pushing back” on their opponents, “stepping on” their opponents’ message or doing whatever they can to make sure their opponents do not get away with things (“we can’t let them get away with this!”). While it is tempting to think that politicians are “pushing back” on their opponents or “not letting them (their opponents) get away with” things simply for functional reasons, there is a seductive appeal to “pushing back” on them, or “putting out a hit” that cannot be explained with such an account. Thus, we can say that the emphasis on controlling their environment and their interactions with it is also a positive project for politicians and not just a negative constraint. For example, Phil Singer, a former press secretary for Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign said that finding out an “opponent said something and [then] putting it out there [against him]” comes with an adrenaline rush (McAlvanah 2008: 1-2). In addition to describing it as an adrenaline rush, politicians have many other distinctly sensual ways in which to describe the “highs” of “hitting” an opponent. On the Johnson for Congress

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<sup>10</sup> Here, as with my entire analysis of the immanent presence-body-thing of politicians, I am indebted to Katz (1999) and his seminal analysis of the emotional dynamics of driving.

campaign, Chris, the campaign's Communications Director, would often say, "BOOM" or make the sound of an explosion as he clicked "send" on his computer to email a press release or a quote to reporters attacking Kramer. In other instances, Chris would forward me the final versions of the press releases or quotes he had just sent out attacking Kramer, with a message explaining its phenomenal appeal, "BOOM – a nice shot across the bow," or, "A nice warning shot!" While the logic of how Chris' "send" button might double as a detonator might be lost from an externalistic perspective, when viewed from the perspective of his immanent-presence-body-thing, his choice of detonator makes *sense*. Inhabiting the world as an immanent-presence-body-thing, his words had the power to travel over the internet and to either smite Kramer or warn him that his morally repugnant ways must change – so that in pressing "send" Chris was casting damnation down on Kramer.

One day after the Kramer campaign had sent out what, in the vernacular of politicians, was a "hatchet release" or "hatchet job"– a negative release with little or no positive messages in it about Kramer – and two days after Kramer had several positive stories written in the local papers about his proposal on how to develop the land where a former Air National Guard base had been located in the district, Chris remarked, "Ugh, I'm just tired of their bullshit. I'm going nuclear today," referring to the fact that he planned on "firing off" a harshly toned release attacking Kramer for changing multiple positions for electoral expediency and for being a member of a Republican Congress that failed to pass several significant pieces of legislation. Thus, after two days of moral annoyances from Kramer, the words of Chris' immanent-presence-body-thing would now annihilate Kramer. Years later, I spoke to Chris while he was working on another Congressional campaign, and he raved about the research director who was working with him,

commenting that, “We’re an awesome team,” referring to the successes they had had in “defining their opponent,” and “turn[ing] this race around.” “We’re like a nuclear strike force.”

Talk on the Johnson campaign also often included proud recollections of what the “cockpunches” were we had landed on Kramer, as well as discussions of how to land them again in the future. “Man – can you imagine going to Charleston [Kramer’s hometown] and having a union rally there?” asked Rebecca, the campaign’s director of advance, when she was planning where the campaign should hold an upcoming rally to showcase its support from organized labor and union groups. As Rebecca described it, holding a labor rally in Kramer’s hometown, when Kramer had always prided himself on the support he received from labor, would “be a major cockpunch.” On another occasion, Chris opined that getting a story written in the *Gazette* about how Kramer had contradicted himself on whether or not he supported privatizing social security was not just a “cockpunch” but a “double cockpunch” – a point he emphatically underscored by making an uppercut motion simultaneously with both of his arms – as though he was literally punching Kramer in the “cock.” That politicians would describe their successes as tantamount to punching someone in the “cock” may grate against our better ideals of how democracies should work – yet politicians experience no such qualms. For them, the appeal of practicing politics is to be found in the ability their phenomenal bodies have to evoke a world in which they are immanent presences and advocates for or defenders of the universal. From the perspective of such a world, there are few better ways to show that Kramer’s moral claims fail to live up to the standards of universality than by “cock punching” him; after being hit, he is no longer erect or upright, he is bent over in agony, weakened, and left for all to see that his moral claims were just that – flaccid words that had no substance or abiding truth to them.

While these descriptions might strike one as too big of a stretch to be true, dismissing them out of hand ignores the fact that at least as politicians describe it, some of these punches, bombs, and hits find their intended target, or at least have the possibility to. For example, this is how Sarah, a former female Congressional staffer, described one of the best compliments that had ever been paid to her while she was working in politics:

The Republicans as usual were playing their stupid games and holding up the bill [not letting it get out of conference.] So I scheduled a press conference with a lot of the Democratic members we were in touch with. We had them stand up in front of the camera with the bill in hand and cite all the specific programs that the Republicans were holding up. Well, later that day, the Chief of Staff for Donaldson [the main Republican member who had been holding up the bill] ran into Mary, my boss, in the hall, and told her that the press conference was a real ‘nut kicker.’ A couple of days later, the Republicans finally stopped complaining and let the bill out of conference. Now I don’t know if that press conference was what made the difference, but – well – you know – it was a great compliment – we must have done something right if it was a nut kicker!

In 2004, as staffers on the Howard Dean campaign prepared for the campaign’s next primary debate and discussed the ways they could “whack” John Kerry, they also pondered the ways that Kerry could, “nuke” them (Depaulo 2004: 6). A former official from the Clinton Administration remarked that Rahm Emanuel, former Clinton staffer and Member of Congress, now Chief of Staff for President Obama was, when he or she worked with him, “Very smart, super quick and agile, but getting hit by him, particularly when you were blindsided, felt like being run over by a truck” (Cillizza 2008: 2). In an interview with Sean, a Republican staffer, he complained about how in his current job he was “getting hit all the time,” and how he was “totally outgunned.” On bad days on the Johnson Campaign, Rebekka would often say, “I’m getting killed over here!” Thus, if politicians’ phenomenal bodies have the power to transport them to new worlds where they are immanent presences who embody the universal, these descriptions suggest that perhaps their powers and their connection to the universal are not as strong as one might think and are

directly tied to how their experience their immanent-presence-body-things fitting into their social environment.

Further evidence of this comes from the story that Thom, a long-time Congressional aide and campaign staffer, told when I asked him what the best advice was he had received while working in politics. As Thom described it, Michael – one of the candidates he had worked for – called him one day to explain how he wanted his stump speech re-tooled:

I was working on re-tooling his stump speech when he [the candidate] called me and explained what he wanted in the new one, ‘You know – it should be about me and my policies, why I’m running – all that stuff, but I also want to hit him [the opponent] – I want to grab his balls and make him scream but in a way that when people hear him screaming they look over and just see me standing there with a smile on my face.’ Now I don’t know if that’s what you mean by advice but that’s always something that’s stuck in my head – that that’s often what you’re doing when you’re in politics or on a campaign.

That Michael would want it to appear as though he was just standing there with a smile on his face is hardly insignificant. It reveals an important fact about the embodied perception of politicians and the phenomenal world they inhabit. While Michael wanted to describe his own policies, and by extension their universality, he also wanted to hit his opponent, in much the same way as Johnson aides proudly described their cock punches on Kramer. If his embodied form as an immanent-presence-body-thing was all determining, we would expect Michael to go ahead and grab his opponent’s balls himself; as an immanent presence, why not make an example of his opponent? Yet, his directions suggest that Michael had determined that somehow he needed to camouflage the fact that he would be the one responsible for grabbing his opponent’s balls (he wants people to “just see me standing there with a smile on my face”). That he made this determination suggests that he was worried that if he overtly grabbed his opponent’s balls himself, it would appear as though he was grabbing them based on his own personal motivations, not because of his connection to the universal. Should we not interpret this

determination by Michael as reflecting the presence of a calculating mind carefully parsing how best to manipulate a situation?

Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh (1968) suggests otherwise. In his provocative chapter "Intertwining the Chiasm," Merleau-Ponty examines what he describes as the "adhesion of the seer and the visible" in which we, as seers, seers who see through our bodies, and are thus present in the world, are also caught up in our own vision. This ontological fact leads Merleau-Ponty to argue that there is a "fundamental narcissism of all vision" (139), in which the seer not only sees the world, but in doing so sees his or her own self in the world. Thus at the same time as one perceives from the perspective of one's own body, one also perceives one's own body from *without*, so that to borrow the example Merleau-Ponty uses, painters often feel themselves looked at by their paintings. Herein lies the significance of Merleau-Ponty's ontology for understanding political practice, for it allows us to better appreciate the nature and origins of cynicism in political life. While Michael lives everyday political life through his immanent-presence body thing, and wants to hit his opponent for his moral pretensions by grabbing his balls, he is hesitant to do so overtly. At the same time as he inhabits the world and perceives his opponent, he feels himself to be looked at by his opponent and the self-enclosed world of the campaign (narcissism of his vision). To be able to maintain the appeal of his transcendent project – to maintain his intertwining with his immanent-presence-body thing, Michael defends himself from those who would seek to separate him from it and treat him as just another individual. As Michael experiences it, it is not that his opponent looks at him as an immanent presence and wants to take his immanent powers from him; it is that his opponent looks at him like he looks at his opponent, as someone with moral pretensions who must be kept in place.

Thus, Michael recognizes that if he is going to grab his opponent's balls and make him screen, he has to be seen as though he is "just standing there with a smile on his face."

What all of this suggests is that it is not enough to have identified the phenomenal body of the politico as though this form automatically determines the experience that politicians have of practicing politics. We must also understand the way in which this metaphorical body fits in with the world of politics and its oppositional structure. Yes, there is a positive appeal to practicing politics thanks to the experiential possibilities of their phenomenal bodies. By engaging with the world in the form of an immanent presence-body-thing, politicians often experience the sense that they are "doing good" and "making a difference." But in other instances, this body can leave politicians feeling particularly vulnerable and exposed, evoking a great deal of anxiety in their daily lives. What is exposed in each of these instances – what is "on the line" – is not the politico's immanent being but the fact that inside that immanent presence-body-thing is their own personal body. As politicians experience it, in the world of politics where opposition researchers, rapid response teams, and opposition parties and candidates are constantly looking for potential weaknesses to exploit<sup>11</sup> (they too are living in the world as immanent presences for which there is a phenomenal appeal to "hitting" an opponent) it is not that their opponents would treat them as immanent beings, it is that they *do not*. Viewed from the same perspective as they view the world (again, the narcissism of vision, as analyzed by Merleau-Ponty), politicians often experience themselves not as divine beings incarnate, but as fallen individuals for whom there is a continual challenge to keep their countless sins and foibles out of full view. Thus, the sense of cynicism that often pervades political life is a product of this unique mode of engagement and the sense that politicians often have that their phenomenal bodies

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<sup>11</sup> A complete analysis of the passion of the politico would also have to dissect the structural properties and dynamics of the world of politics to understand how they impinge on the politicians' experience of political life, but such an analysis is far beyond the scope of this paper.

are hardly all powerful, but often leave them phenomenally exposed to the ever present eyes of their surrounding world, so that one struggles to distinguish “real” threats from imagined ones, or threats imagined by one’s sense of belief from threats imagined by one’s strategic sense.

### **CONCLUSION: INTERTWINING THE CHIASM OF BELIEF AND CYNICISM**

We began this paper with the question of how to overcome the difficulties of representationalist thought, which conceptualizes the relationship of belief and cynicism as one of mutual antagonism – a theoretical dead end that is especially troublesome in analyzing the world of politics where agents experience a rather striking sense of both belief *and* cynicism. As I have attempted to show, belief and cynicism need not be viewed as specific categories or schemata through which politicians *view* the world nor as the product of their own *representations* of how they should (or should not) act. Belief and cynicism are best conceptualized as the product of a specific posture, a bearing, or most appropriately, a specific *mode of engagement* in which politicians take on the phenomenal body of an immanent presence that embodies the universal. Through the narcissism of their sensual perception as immanent presences, politicians experience a sense of cynicism at the same time as they experience themselves as defending the universal and “doing good” or “making a difference.” To end our analysis here, however, would be to overlook what Merleau-Ponty saw as a key consequence of this narcissism, and what follows from this for our examination of political life, a key characteristic of the relationship between belief and cynicism. As Merleau-Ponty (1968) showed, because the viewer feels herself looked at by the outside, her activity – her seeing into the outside world – is *equally* a passivity (she is being looked at by the things) so that the “seer and the visible *reciprocate*” (139). Thus, to understand the nature of relationship of belief and cynicism in political life, it is not enough to

simply note that they are products of the same mode of engagement. There is also a fundamental reciprocity to them, so that despite our best efforts to analytically define one as distinct from the other the two are intimately intertwined and return on one another in Möebius strip fashion. Just as we “no longer know which sees and which is seen,” we must also say we no longer know which believes and which is cynical.

What all of this suggests is that the ongoing efforts by politicians to both control or shape their environment need not be viewed as either the direct result of external constraints acting on the politician, nor the product of the politician’s representationalist mind which is seeking out meaning or power. Political strategy need not and should not be seen as the practices of a calculating mind acting on a world that is external to it; is the upshot of an embodied agent seeking to maintain the intertwining between its physical body and its phenomenal body, in a world where opposing agents are seeking to separate the two to prove their own immanent powers and connection to the universal. Rather than attempting to disaggregate different types of political practice into their own categories based on the different types of tools they employ (i.e. spinning, legislating, etc) and then studying each in its own right, a more propitious approach to studying political practice would entail treating all political tools equally, with no *a priori* distinctions between different types of political tools or what might constitute a tool. The challenge for the sociologist would then be to examine how politicians use each of these tools to defend, police, or control their intertwining with their immanent presence-body-things. Viewed from such a perspective, political strategy is the set of practices by which politicians attempt to carve out the spaces in which they can maintain their phenomenal status as immanent presences. In using such strategies to shape their environment and their encounters with it, politicians are not privileging form over content nor content over form, they treat each as mutually constituting and

elaborative, with each as equally integral to whom they are as immanent beings. Controlling an event, having things go according to plan, saying the “right” things, making things look “just right,” are hardly epiphenomenal to a more central activity, say legislating, governing, or wielding power, they are what an immanent presence does. At the same time, passing “effective” legislation is not an incidental component of some more vital or all encompassing aspect to politics (i.e. messaging, spinning, campaigning, obtaining power). This is what an immanent presence, who has a “deep, intimate involvement” in and with this world and who knows how to fix things, how to make things happen, or how to make a difference, does. Moreover, and just as importantly, these are all things that an agent, who is worried about being cut off from its phenomenal body by attacks which threaten to reveal that what is inside the body is not an immanent presence, but a fallen, fallible individual, does.

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