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Book Review: Appeals to Interest: Language, Contestation, and the Shaping of Political Agency

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Appeals to Interest: Language, Contestation, and the Shaping of Political Agency, by Dean Mathiowetz. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011. 228 pp.

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When we say that interest is the backbone of politics in electoral democracy what do we mean by interest? Moreover, who determines what interest is and how? Is interest something objective that can be calculated with certainty or is it a subjective reflection of what individuals prefer as individuals or as groups? These questions are essential in contemporary politics and hardly answerable in a quick and simple way. Dean Mathiowetz suggests in this insightful book that the ambiguities and slippages in the language of interest should be an invitation to reexamine the place of interest in liberal political thought. "My fundamental argument is that appeals to interest are sites of identity formation, rather than simply products of calculating self-regard. In other words, the usual priority that we accord to identities in the pairing of identities and interests must be turned around" (p. 5). One might hear a Marxist echo in these words. Yet Mathiowetz does not want to argue that economic interest governs social and political relations or that identity issues are proxy for class relations. His aim, to paraphrase Marx, is tackling the issue of interest from the point of view of superstructural rather than structural relations. Mathiowetz wants to question the tradition of conceptual history that has brought scholars of modern political thought to endorse the individualist interpretation that neoliberalism created, which regards interest as "something" that is attached to a person like an attribute to a substance. Contra this mainstream interpretation, he writes that "interests are not in themselves individual phenomena, nor does the importance of interests to politics in itself lend credence to methodological individualism in the study of politics and society" (p. 19). Conceptual history is the strategy he adopts to attain this valuable goal.

Two pivotal works are Mathiowetz's critical reference points: Albert O. Hirschman's *Passions and Interests* (1977) and Stephen Holmes's *Passions and Constraint* (1995). "Self-interest" is the catchword in Hirschman's book and moreover Holmes's, which applied Hirschman's pioneering work to the interpretation of the birth and growth of liberal political thought in order to support a reading of interest as an egalitarian foundation of politics.

The interpretation inaugurated by Hirschman was motivated by the "noble" goal of retaining the priority of interest while emancipating it from the neoliberal view. Yet, Mathiowetz observes, this "democratic" move did

not come cost free. The cost was that of transforming interest into a “simple fact,” in relation to which information was selected and elaborated, exchanged and processed, and motivation was directed. But the most effective answer to the neoliberal paradigm, Mathiowetz suggests, would be to unpack it by dethroning the “prejudice” it tacitly presumes of an individualistic rationality. Thus, he proposes an “alternative” theorizing of interest that starts with a philological and historical analysis of the term in the Roman juridical tradition, which nurtured the formation of the modern theory of the state and sovereignty. Interest was born as a “juridical” category rather than a psychomoral one. It was truly behavioral and “plural” in its foundation and early interpretation—not a “simple fact.”

In the Roman language, interest was not something we have but a mode of attention as “being interested in something”; as such, to be interested entailed that someone entered in a relation to both the collective and the others. Interest registered an identity formation in a context of mediation that was ordered by the law. The identification of interest with a “simple fact” of rational calculus started around mid-twentieth century along with the reinterpretation of modern political history according to neoliberal tenets. Yet still until the nineteenth century, the language of interest as self-interest was limited to the utilitarian school and far from uncontested. The juridical roots were not yet disappeared but continued permeating liberalism and modern politics, as the idea of government and society in Benjamin Constant and John Stuart Mill shows (although Holmes did not see). On this historical basis, Mathiowetz thinks possible to counter more radically the neoliberal notion of interest than Hirschman’s and Holmes’s conceptual history of self-interest.

The complexity and plurality of Mathiowetz’s history of interest emerges as soon as the scholar abandons the assumption that there are bodies—for instance, individuals and groups, or individuals and the state—as sites of identification to which interests are attached. It emerges when interest is investigated within the juridical language in which it was born before the neoliberal success, when the individual was itself a juridical “persona,” a *factio juris* or a legal site of multiple and complex relationships and properties. Within the Roman legal vocabulary, interest was linked to person, to community, to property, to the law. It was thus conceptualized not as a calculating and self-oriented category but as a bundle of relationships that was achieved or stabilized through a process that was regulated by law and achieved through a complex work of interpretation, conflicts, and mediation. Mathiowetz engages in a work of conceptual history that pivots not on the context of an actor’s intentions, as with the method of the Cambridge School,

but on the significance of verbal actions, in a way that is close to the hermeneutic approach. This move changes the very notion of anachronism.

Examples of anachronism in the liberal conceptual history of interests are many in Mathiowetz's book, whose goal is also to show how this ideological history was based on a pre-made category, that of the "simple fact" of self-interest, "a prejudice of a recent, broadly liberal discourse" that has induced "blindness to what the language of interest does in and for political discourse" (p. 6). For instance, the family resemblance between our contemporary idea of interest and seventeenth-century's is a twentieth-century construction that has made a great disservice to knowledge insofar as has concealed the legal genesis of interest, with its roots in scholasticism and its difference from the humanist roots that scholars have most explored, beginning with Marx. To amend this "prejudicial" conceptual history, Mathiowetz suggests we "start again" the historical analysis of interest. "Engaging the language of interest as a resource for a democratic politics rooted in contestation, difference, and collective action, we may recover a critical theory of interest, one that departs from the mainstays of contemporary liberal theorizing, formal modeling, and empirical social science" (p. 12).

The paradox of the neoliberal representation of interest and society is that it "threatens to erode the very autonomy and liberty that earlier writers supposed that the juridical determination of interest could ensure" (p. 142). This is so because the subjection of our domains of life to the "relatively invisible governance and control by the market, rather than to democratically accountable political institutions and the law" as according to a juridical approach, makes all of us less free and less in control of our interests. Neoliberalism turns out to be an ideology that justifies a tenor of life that is not autonomous and not truly free as it presumes (p. 142).

Neoliberalism's narrow picture of interest reverberates in the condition of political science as a discipline that is progressively less apt to bear the recognition that interest is genuinely political in its own right, because it is engendered in participatory institutions and yet retained as a claim of identity. Mathiowetz's analysis of Arthur Bentley's and David B. Truman's rendering of political science according to the tenets of this reductive view of interest is a turning point in detecting the transformation of politics into a technique of measurement of simple quantities of calculation like individual or aggregate interests. "Individuals *have* interests, but are not seen as *interested* by means of politics and actions" (p. 189): this is the fundamental move that changed the statute of interest from a juridical relation (persons who are interested in something in relation to some others and the law) to an ontology that has preference and holds a monadic identity's

psychology. The paradox is that the application of this view of interest to groups without a correlative view of common interest makes the whole society in a clash of irreducible interests: group-interests are like individual interests, that is to say a given to be accepted and measured but that cannot be equated with something that is external to it such as, for instance, the “social” or national or the state interest. Thus whereas until at least the nineteenth-century—certainly from Hobbes to Mill—there was a notion of civic or state interest that could not be diluted into the sum or clash of individual and group interests, in the twentieth century any collective entity disappeared, and political science abandoned any notion of a collective interest in relation to which people could measure their interests.

Given the approach to interests as “facts,” and of collective interests as aggregations of particular “facts,” every time “collective interests are invoked in political discourses—‘special interests,’ ‘women’s interests,’ ‘national interests’—they are apt to approach these articulations with an air of suspicion” (p. 191). Indeed, who is to say what women’s interests or the nation’s or the minorities’ are? In fact, no one has this authority, and therefore the measurement of quantity of preferences is the only solution to the problem. On the other hand, interest as contestation or conflicts among opposite interests seems to be the only alternative to the aggregative or calculating rendering, an alternative that is, however, internal to the concept of interest as a “simple fact.” It seems that there is no escape from the neoliberal language and vision.