

*Yes We Can! Optimism, Cooperation, and the Rationality of Collectively Self-Fulfilling Beliefs*

*Yes We Can! Si Se Puede! Amandla Awethu! Unidos Podemos! Hope! Change We Can Believe In!*

So say the slogans of movements that have transformed societies, from the anti-Apartheid movement, to César Chávez's United Farm Workers, to Barack Obama's presidential campaign.

These declarations do not simply *assert* that reformers, progressives, and protestors have the power to change the world. They help to *make* it so. Such slogans urge listeners to believe that success is achievable. It is the belief in the feasibility of success that draws new adherents into the movement for change. And it is their allegiance that makes success a real possibility.

But this is philosophically puzzling. The first people to believe any such declarations seemingly *have no reason to do so*. At its inception, there is usually little evidence that a new social movement has any serious chance of creating change. But if enough people can be convinced that success is possible, and are thus induced to join the movement, then success will, indeed, become possible. The *belief* in the possibility of success *makes it true* that success is possible. The *evidence* that success is possible is, in part, the fact that enough people believe it to be so.

Here is an example. When Russia invaded Ukraine, most onlookers expected the war to be brief and decisive. Russia's vast army would march rapidly to Kyiv, Ukrainian resistance would collapse, and the population would demand that their government surrender to Moscow.

But that is not what happened. Far from calling on their government to bow to Moscow, the Ukrainian people fought back. What was supposed to be an easy Russian victory has turned into a long and grinding stalemate, and there is little prospect of Russia seizing Kyiv.

An abiding image from the war is of Ukrainian farmers using their tractors to tow away Russian tanks. When the first farmer did this, was he irrational? After all, the chance that his action would play any useful role in the war was minimal – he could only prevail if thousands upon thousands of his compatriots followed suit in resisting the invasion. And the downsides were only too clear – peril for him, and a fear of reprisals for his family and community.

But perhaps, when those first Ukrainians threw themselves into harm's way to resist their attackers, they *believed* that enough of their compatriots would join them to make it worthwhile. And, in fact, enough did. Collectively, their belief was self-fulfilling. On the other hand, if the Ukrainians had believed, along with most experts, that *resistance was futile*, then this belief would *also* have been self-fulfilling, since they would then have surrendered as predicted.

Here, then, is my puzzle. An orthodox view of rationality includes the following two claims:

**Evidentialism:** We should form our beliefs in proportion to our evidence.

**Practical Individualism:** When engaging in practical reasoning, the options that an agent may choose between are only those which are open to her, taken individually.

As I argue, forming *Yes We Can!* beliefs *violates* evidentialism. So forming such beliefs does not appear rational in an orthodox sense. It seems like the kinds of wishful thinking that philosophers decry elsewhere.

But, as I'll show, *Yes We Can!* beliefs are systematically helpful in solving collective action problems. They lead us to cooperate where evidentialist individualistic rationality – even supplemented with altruism – would not. And this is precisely *because* they violate evidentialism.

We could just conclude that *Yes We Can!* thinking is systematically strategically useful, even morally valuable, but, nevertheless, irrational. I am reluctant to accept this conclusion, and with it, a view of rationality that would condemn one of the most powerful resources we have in resisting oppression. I think that we should be sceptical about a theory that posits such a gulf between what is rational and what is a reliably beneficial way for us to think. Rather, as I argue, the case of *Yes We Can!* thinking offers strong support for the *rejection* of the orthodox view of rationality.

Although *Yes We Can!* beliefs may lack evidence at the start of a social movement, they are nevertheless self-fulfilling, and I argue that we should reject strict evidentialism in favour of a *limited pragmatism*, according to which forming self-fulfilling beliefs *in general* can be rational. Still, *Yes We Can!* beliefs are only *collectively* self-fulfilling. So, furthermore, I think we should accept a view of practical rationality that is not individualistic, but which allows for *team-reasoning*. The theories of limited pragmatism and team-reasoning are independently attractive; together they allow us to say that *Yes We Can!* thinking – having a certain kind of *faith* in one another – is not only morally valuable, but also rational.

My argument has three main parts. In Part 1, I try to identify what, exactly, is involved in proclaiming and adopting slogans like *Yes We Can!*, in order to counter suggestions that we can interpret these beliefs in more innocent and less radical ways than I propose. In Part 2, I explain how *Yes We Can!* beliefs aid in the struggle against oppression, and discuss ways in which

oppressors attempt to use propaganda to co-opt individual evidentialist rationality in order to instil a belief that resistance is futile. In Part 3, I draw on a Jamesian account of self-fulfilling beliefs and upon game-theoretical accounts of “team reasoning” in order to explain how collectively self-fulfilling beliefs – such as *Yes We Can!* beliefs – can be seen as rational.

## **1. What Are *Yes We Can!* Beliefs?**

I have suggested that *Yes We Can!* beliefs are puzzling because, when early adopters of the movement believe that that they have the power to change the world, they believe something for which they have no evidence. But is that the right construal of what is going on when people accept such slogans?

### **1.1. What Do You Mean “Can”?**

Now, we need to be careful here. Whether there is such evidence will depend upon the content of the claim. If the sense of “can” were very weak – so that believers hold only that success is *not impossible*, then of course it is almost always true that movements *can* succeed, and the evidence required would be very minimal. It would almost always be true that even early adopters of the movement would have evidence for the truth of this proposition.

But I doubt that this could be all that sloganeers are asking us to believe. After all, if from cynicism or despair I conclude that *resistance is futile* – which, I’ll argue, is a belief for which oppressors routinely try to give us evidence – I am not thereby believing that success is *impossible*. I mean, rather, that bringing about change is not *feasible* – it is not likely *enough* to be worth the risks and the costs of resistance. If the content of a *Yes We Can!* belief were only that success is not impossible, then it would not be incompatible with believing what we might call a *Resistance*

is *Futile!* belief. But, of course, the point of such slogans is precisely to persuade people to reject such enervating conclusions.

## **1.2. Success and Strategic Rationality**

So, my hypothesis is that the sense of “can” involved in accepting a *Yes We Can!* belief is that success is feasible, realistically achievable, or, more abstractly, has *whatever level of probability required to rationalise action*. Now, this in turn will depend both upon our theory of strategic rationality, and upon the preferences and values of the actors involved.

With regard to the first question, I don’t want to presuppose the strict maximising-utilitarian view of strategic rationality: that it is only rational to select the single course of action with the *highest* expected utility.<sup>1</sup> That’s unnecessarily demanding for my purposes. More minimally, I want to suppose that a course of action must have a *sufficiently* high expected utility in order for it to be strategically rational to select it, rather than some other option.

But we can understand “utility” in two senses. One understanding is a moral or impartial sense – to say that something has a high utility, we mean that it makes the world a better place or is beneficial for people in general. The other sense is the one appealed to in standard theories of strategic rationality, which understands utility as relative to the agent’s individual preferences or values (her “subjective utility function”). The agent’s values may include concerns for impartial utility, but need not be exhausted by them. So, whether or not agents think that the expected utility of joining the movement reaches the threshold of sufficiency *in an impartial sense*, it may be sufficiently worthwhile *for them*, given their own concerns and preoccupations. Thus [Philosopher’s Name Redacted] told me the following story:

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<sup>1</sup> Or, one of the courses with the joint-highest expected utility.

My father lived in [Eastern Bloc country] before the fall of the Iron Curtain. He didn't need to think that he had much chance of defeating the communists when he joined the resistance. He just hated the regime so much that death was better in his eyes than enduring their rule. Don't you think maybe that was what the Ukrainians were doing? Maybe they didn't believe they could win – they would just rather die than let the Russians take over.

This is a good point – often early adopters of resistance movements will be people who combine an impartial desire for justice with rage, desire for vengeance, and an indifference to personal cost. The common preference for “one-shot explanations”<sup>2</sup> is even more dangerous in social theory than in the natural sciences – social phenomena almost always stem from a variety of causes. So I want to say – yes, this kind of passionate personal motivation is probably part of the story in a great many cases of resistance.

But I don't think we should accept that this is the *only* way to rationalise the decision to join a nascent political movement. That conclusion would make resistance hostage to the presence of actors with such extreme personal preferences. And it seems to miss the fact that resistance movements often *shape* the values of their actors, rather than simply reflecting pre-existing preferences: Ukrainian attitudes towards Russia were far more ambivalent, even positive, before the war than they are now. This is part of why onlookers expected Russian victory to be so swift. It is precisely because Ukrainians *did* fight back that the Russian army could no longer portray themselves as liberators or natural allies, rather becoming the enemies who were slaughtering Ukrainians and obliterating their homes. As many commentators have noted, the war has helped shaped and harden a distinctive Ukrainian national identity.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I take this term from Currie (2019).

<sup>3</sup> For representative commentary see <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/24/ukrainian-identity-russian-invasion/> or <https://www.politico.eu/article/forged-by-war-ukraines-new-sense-of-nationhood/>.

More worryingly, this view would suggest that the decisions of resisters cannot be rationalised from a purely moral or impartial perspective – after all, it was only via appeal to *non-impartial* preferences that [Philosopher’s Name Redacted] explained her father’s decision to resist. But given the great moral value of resistance movements, I think we should want to say that such decisions can be rationalised *even* from an impartial perspective.

Relatedly, we might think that the problem stems from my decision to frame the question of resistance in terms of *strategic rationality*. Rather, we might think, early resisters are motivated by a sense of *duty* – a commitment to fight oppression no matter the costs, no matter the chance of success.

Again, I have no doubt such motivations play a part. But we shouldn’t, for this reason, abandon the strategic frame altogether. After all, it is telling that sloganeers *don’t* content themselves with attempting to instil in their followers an inflexible desire for victory or death, but also employ *Yes We Can!* exhortations to persuade people that victory is within their grasp. Indeed, it is a mistake to see the dutiful and the strategic as strictly incompatible perspectives. The duty involved is teleological – it is the duty to fight for justice or for freedom, and it is surely beholden upon those who join this fight to select means suitable to their end.

After all, there are always multiple ways to make the world a better place, and if resistance really were *utterly* futile then it would seem wiser to devote our efforts to care for the oppressed rather than throwing away our lives on the barricades. Resistance is a goal-directed activity, and the ideal revolutionary is strategic, not a latter-day Pierre Bezuhov wandering the streets of Moscow in vague hopes of shooting Napoleon, only to be arrested and brought before the firing squad. More deeply, I want to argue, in Part 3, that dutiful motivations, rather than

running counter to – and thus being condemned by – standards of strategic rationality, should in fact be seen as *implementations* of the motivations required by a form of collective strategic rationality.

### **1.3. But Is It *Belief*?**

I have claimed that *Yes We Can* beliefs are interesting because they seem to violate the evidential norm – in accepting that we can succeed in our struggles, we believe something that we lack the evidence that orthodox accounts of epistemic rationality claim are required for justification. But, of course, the evidential norm is a norm on *belief*. Are *Yes We Can!* judgements really beliefs?

One possibility is that early adopters don't really *believe* that change is realistically possible, but simply *pretend* to believe it or adopt some other, non-doxastic mental state, in order to manipulate others into believing, until the movement does have enough followers to have a realistic chance of success. But this doesn't avoid our problem. If pretend-belief doesn't require evidence, equally, it doesn't rationalise action. What makes success a realistic possibility is that enough people are prepared to act, and until *someone* has the relevant beliefs required to rationalise action, success will remain beyond our grasp. Even if some early adopters are manipulative in this way, we cannot *all* wait for other people to believe and plan to act before forming our own beliefs and plans – resistance would never get off the ground. Someone has to leap.

A more interesting proposal is that, rather than *believing* that success is possible, early resisters merely *hope* that it is. After all, “Hope” was another of the Obama campaign's slogans which I quoted above. And perhaps hope is not subject to the same evidential standards as belief – as Martin says, it “is surely mistaken that ... hopes are beholden to the same epistemic norms as



beliefs” (2011, p153). But how does hope rationalise action, if it *doesn't* involve a belief in the feasibility of success?

A traditional account of hope, traceable to Aquinas, Hobbes, Hume and Spinoza, and built upon by neo-traditionalists such as Bovens (1999), Milhona (2019) and Martin (2011), *denies* that hope involves a belief in the realistic feasibility of what we hope for. Rather, credence in the hoped-for object must merely be somewhere between 0 and 1. Hope’s special motivational power, on the neo-traditional view, stems from our imagining or fantasising about the hoped-for object. But, as Martin emphasises, this is a weak motivational impetus. As such, she argues that we shouldn’t distinguish sharply between *hoping* and passively *wishing*. As Milhona says “hopes do not necessarily involve acting as if the hoped-for outcome will (likely) come about” (2019, p3).

Other accounts, such as those of Walker (2006) and McGeer (2004) regard *agential investment* as necessary for hope – in order truly to hope, we must not only wish for and imagine the outcome, but actually form plans and intentions, and act where the opportunity presents itself. Of course, this then raises the question of whether such plans and intentions are rational, and so we are immediately thrown back to the question of whether success is realistically feasible. As Kwong argues, in another version of the agential view, “hope requires that we are additionally able to see a way in which the outcome can be realized and to see such a way as a genuine possibility” (Kwong 2018). In that case, hope *does* involve a belief in the feasibility of success, and my puzzle about evidence arises again – if this belief is a constitutive element of hope, then whatever evidential norms apply to belief will, *a fortiori*, apply to agential hope.

I don't want to take a stand on what hope *is*. Perhaps the agential view is right, and *Yes We Can!* beliefs are cases of hope. Alternatively, some critics charge that the agential view is really an account of *faith*. Perhaps that's right, in which case *Yes We Can!* beliefs are best understood as a certain kind of moral faith.

So I want to propose that we take "Yes We Can!" beliefs at face value – as involving *beliefs*, and, specifically, beliefs that success is sufficiently likely such that it is strategically rational (even for non-eccentric agents) to join the movement and contribute to its activities. Put like this, I hope my problem is clear – there really often *is not* enough evidence, *in advance* of people believing, that change is realistically feasible, for such beliefs to be rational according to standard evidentialist canons of rationality.

## **2. Oppression and The Power of Belief**

So, if *Yes We Can!* beliefs are *beliefs*, and, more specifically, *beliefs that others will join us in struggle*, we might ask – how can mere *belief* help resisters to overcome oppression? How can our beliefs about the world *change* the world, and bring into being new possibilities for resistance?

### **2.1 The Dilemma of the Oppressed**

The economist Kaushik Basu (2022) draws a general lesson from cases like this. As he argues, resistance to oppression has the shape of a classic collective action problem, as discussed by game theorists. Most oppressive regimes – including those of invaders like Putin – do not have the power to control the populaces they dominate in the face of concerted mass resistance. If the bulk of the people were to rise up in unison, the regime would be unable to hold out. But on the other hand, no individual or small group has any chance in defeating the regime on

their own. Unless their initial decision to resist was *emulated* by the mass of the population, they would face a near-certainty of death, and probably also reprisals visited upon their community.

Thus, oppressors must rely on the oppressed *failing* to coordinate in this kind of mass action. And, unlike in the Prisoners' Dilemma, the problem Basu describes does not presuppose that the oppressed population are *selfish*. After all, *if* I expect no-one else to join me, then there is *no point at all* in attempting to rise up against the regime. Even thinking altruistically, my efforts would be better apportioned to supporting my friends and family, or volunteering to help those most downtrodden by the regime – to say nothing of the risk of exposing others to reprisals. And, to the extent that I expect *other people* to think along these lines, then I will *indeed* not expect them to join me. So I will not attempt to rise up. And nor will they.

When Parfit first discussed (1979), in similar terms, the “*Dilemma of the Oppressed*”, he suggested that the solution to the dilemma might be *altruism*. But, as I have just argued, it is not sufficient for members of the oppressed population to be altruistically motivated. What matters most is what they expect each other to do. Does each person *expect* that others would join them if they were to fight back? If they do expect others to join them, then they may rise up, and overthrow the regime. If they do not expect this, then, so long as they are individualistically rational, they will remain quiescent.

That is why *Yes We Can!* beliefs matter so much – because, in many cases, they precisely *are* expectations that others will join us in struggle. And that is why oppressors are so keen to stamp them out.

## **2.2. Propaganda**

As Megan Hyska (2022) argues, the majority of philosophers of propaganda have offered an *irrationalist* account, according to which the core function of propaganda is realised by inculcating, eliciting or exploiting theoretical or practical irrationality on the part of its targets. However, whilst not denying that there are *some* – maybe many – cases of propaganda that match this irrationalist model, Hyska points out that there are cases that are not readily understood according to the irrationalist conception. For example, what Haifeng Huan (2018) calls “hard propaganda” involves claims that are so ludicrous that it does not appear that the regime expects people to believe them – they are so “crude, heavy-handed, or preposterous,” that they can be “seen through by citizens”. What function, then, can they serve?

As Hyska argues, the mere ability to issue such pronouncements (with serious fear of dissent, let alone ridicule) serves as evidence for the *power* of the regime. And although she does not employ this framing, the argument can be understood in the game-theoretic terms that Basu employs<sup>4</sup>. When I am bombarded with such messages, then, if I am rational, I know that the regime is powerful. More importantly, I know that others know that the regime is powerful, and they know that I know that the regime is powerful, and they know that I know that they know that the regime is powerful. It might be that the oppressed citizens have the numbers and resources to overthrow the leader *if and only if all or most of them were to cooperate*. But given their epistemic situation, it would be irrational to try to do so – since they are all aware of the obstacles, and they all know that the others are so aware, and so on. Importantly, barely anyone actually needs to form irrational beliefs for this dynamic to work. When Russia bombarded Ukraine with claims about the prowess of the Russian army and the love Ukrainians have for Putin, it wasn't necessary to *persuade* people in order to undermine resistance. Rather, the likelihood that *others* would be frightened or won over – or that *others* would expect others to be

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<sup>4</sup>Jacob Barrett (forthcoming) uses a similar argument in analysing the oppressive effective of ideology.

frighted or won over – gave each Ukrainian *evidence* that, if she were to resist, she would do so alone, and thus pointlessly.

In other words, in such cases propaganda does *not* function by inducing irrationality. Rather, hard propaganda *co-opts* the population’s capacity to respond rationally to evidence and to engage in strategic thinking in order to destroy the preconditions for collective action. Propaganda gives the oppressed evidence that resistance is futile. It is precisely because beliefs about the feasibility of change affect whether or not change is feasible that oppressors put so much effort into trying to instil such pessimistic beliefs.

### **3. Yes We Can – Rational or Irrational Response?**

In the light of these arguments, we can see why *Yes We Can!* beliefs are so politically important, and so valuable. It is *because* oppressors so often co-opt individual rationality to get the populace to believe that resistance is futile, thus extinguishing sparks of resistance, that *refusing* to believe in the futility of resistance – perhaps even in the face of the evidence – is so politically powerful. If the Ukrainians had been more evidence-responsive, and had agreed with the majority of expert onlookers that Russian victory was all but assured, then perhaps a puppet government controlled by Putin would now be installed in Kyiv.

Now, we could just conclude that, although they may be systematically morally *useful*, it is nevertheless *irrational* to hold *Yes We Can!* beliefs. But I don’t think we should be so willing to accept an account of rationality that posits a gulf between what is rational and what is a reliably beneficial way for us to think. So I want to propose a model of rationality according to which

*Yes We Can!* beliefs are, indeed, rational. And I think we can distinguish them from the sorts of wishful thinking and credulity that political epistemologists have been so keen to warn against.

There are two aspects of *Yes We Can!* beliefs that appear to depart from an orthodox conception of rationality. First, as I have suggested, agents often appear to lack *evidence* for the contents of these beliefs. As such, we need to consider the prospects for departing from a strict evidentialist standard in evaluating these beliefs. Second, as I have argued, it is hard to see how *Yes We Can!* thinking is rational in a standard, individualistic sense of rationality – after all, the positive upshots of such beliefs require the participation of a large number of agents, and cannot be realised by any single agent alone. I propose to take these two questions in turn – first discussing self-fulfilling beliefs in the *individual* case, then discussing collective rationality in *practical* cases, before putting these two ideas together to develop a theory of collective self-fulfilling belief.

### **3.1. Self-Fulfilling Beliefs and Evidentialism**

A classical pragmatist view in the ethics of belief is generally understood to involve *any* case where moral or practical reasons are taken as reasons for belief. This is often derided as licencing wishful thinking or epistemic vice.

But I think there is a narrower class of cases in which belief is practically justified because there is a *causal or constitutive connection* between holding the belief and the desired content of the belief obtaining. These are cases of *self-fulfilling belief*. These are beliefs in propositions which will become true, conditional on being believed, even though they needn't have been true otherwise, or, less strongly, propositions whose probability, conditional on being believed, is higher than it would have been absent belief.

Such cases are not hard to find. Many studies suggest that belief that one will succeed in an athletic challenge often increases the chance that one *will* indeed succeed and that high estimates of one's own intellectual abilities improve performance in cognitive tests (Benedetti 2014; Davis *et al* 2020). Likewise, some aspects of the placebo effect suggest that a belief that one will recover from illness increases the chance that one will, indeed, recover. William James discusses a particularly vivid case in a little-noted passage in "The Will to Believe". In cases of romantic love, believing beyond our evidence that the other person loves you isn't just case of wishfully believing a pleasing proposition – it also *helps make the object of belief true*. By trustingly allowing ourselves to become emotionally vulnerable, we create the conditions for other people to fall in love with us. In these cases, James' much-derided dictum<sup>5</sup>, that our "faith creates the fact," seems hard to deny.

Let us consider the case of an agent who lacks independent evidence of the truth of a proposition that is a potentially-self-fulfilling belief. Izaak is into rock climbing, and for months has tried and failed repeatedly to climb a challenging V6 bouldering route. He has learned a ream of relevant techniques, and is at the peak of his physical fitness. But he just can't do it. He feels discouraged, increasingly convinced from the evidence of his past experience that he has reached the limit of his capabilities. A friend says to him "Izaak, you've got to *believe in yourself*." Izaak starts to visualise himself reaching the top hold, focuses on ways in which he has overcome challenges in the past, and prays to reach his goal – eventually, he convinces himself that he *can* climb a V6. And then, the next time he goes climbing, steeled by certitude, he does it.

Is Izaak's self-belief justified? Is it rational? Is it *epistemically* rational?

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<sup>5</sup> A classic attack on James' view is Russell (1992).

W.K. Clifford presents an uncompromising form of evidentialism, claiming that “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.” (Clifford 1887 p5). Clifford’s claim, taken at face value, does not merely assert that it is always *epistemically unjustified*, or *irrational* to believe without evidence, but that it is *all-things-considered* wrong to believe in such cases. Whilst evidentialism remains popular as a theory of epistemic justification, few evidentialists today endorse Clifford’s view. Rather, the orthodox contemporary formulation of evidentialism has it that evidence is necessary for *epistemic justification*, while leaving it open that very weighty non-evidential considerations may be sufficient to render an agent all-things-considered justified in believing without, or against, her evidence. Surely few will insist that Izaak’s self-belief is *all-things-considered* unjustified.

But we may still ask whether this is *rational* in some more distinctively *structural* sense – whether his belief-formation is an instance of a generally acceptable or recommendable method for fixing belief. Again, it seems as though it is. Izaak’s case is not anomalous after all – believing that you can perform such tasks is a generally reliable way of increasing the probability that you *can* do so.

Now, those of a more internalist tendency might insist that forming self-fulfilling beliefs is only rational *if the agents know that they are self-fulfilling*. I don’t have a strong view about the debate here between externalists and internalists, and it doesn’t matter much for my purposes. After all, this internalist will have to grant that Izaak’s belief will be rational *if people point out to him that such optimistic beliefs are self-fulfilling*. Similarly, it doesn’t strike me as a problem for my view to concede that forming *Yes We Can!* beliefs is only rational *once* people know that such beliefs are self-fulfilling. After all, that just means that my publicising the theory presented in this paper *makes* it rational for people to engage in *Yes We Can!* thinking.



But there is another challenge that the evidentialist can mount. She might grant that Izaak's adoption of a self-fulfilling belief is both all-things-considered justified, and in some sense rational, but still insist that this is a case of *practical* or *strategic* rather than *theoretical* rationality, and that Izaak's belief is not *epistemically* justified. She might hold:

**Epistemic Evidentialism:** A is *epistemically rational* in forming a belief in P only if<sup>6</sup> A possesses sufficient evidence supporting P.

Indeed, whatever its merits as a purely theoretical claim, many philosophers have held that evidentialism is *particularly* plausible in the political domain, as a guard against what Fabienne Peter (2021) calls “recklessness”. Anti-evidentialism, and particularly Jamesian pragmatism, have been accused of giving succour to the wishful thinking and disregard for truth which, according to many, have spawned so many of the ills of our political era. Insofar as we are concerned for the epistemic health of our polity (what Joshi (2021) calls the “epistemic commons”) then we must insist that agents are not epistemically justified in holding beliefs just because it is pleasing or expedient to do so.

But it is possible to accept self-fulfilling beliefs whilst falling well shy of the kind of radical pragmatism which allows *any* practical benefits to count in the epistemic justification of a belief. After all, Izaak's belief is only practically valuable because it is *true*. In believing against his evidence, Izaak brings it about that *he gains a true belief*. This is arguably a theoretical or epistemic achievement, not just a practical one. Moreover, this achievement respects what Berker calls “the separateness of propositions”. The proposition that Izaak believes truly is *the very same* as the one he believed without evidence – it's not as though he has believed against his evidence

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<sup>6</sup> A stronger view would substitute a biconditional here, but this is not relevant for our purposes.

in order to gain a *distinct* true belief. So I see no reason to reject the limited pragmatist view that forming self-fulfilling beliefs is a case of specifically *epistemic* rationality.

Ironically, two of the most prominent recent treatments of self-fulfilling beliefs draw the opposite lesson. Berker (2013) and Carr (2017, ms), agree that self-fulfilling beliefs provide a case in which *responding to evidence* and *gaining true beliefs* pull in opposite directions. But they conclude that the goal of gaining true beliefs *does not* provide epistemic justification. Berker goes even further, and suggests that epistemic normativity should not be seen as goal-oriented *at all*.

However, it is striking how hard it is to *argue* for this claim. Berker seems to take it for granted that such beliefs are unjustified – when discussing the case of Jane Doe, who forms the belief that she will survive an illness, which, presumably due to the placebo effect, is self-fulfilling, he says simply “I insist, Jane’s belief is not for that reason epistemically justified” (p376), and “I take it to be obvious that her belief is not thereby epistemically justified” (p377).<sup>7</sup> Berker’s argument strikes me as little more than an appeal to pro-evidentialist intuitions. Carr, indeed, appears to concede that this is what she is doing. She says:

If rationality requires aiming for true belief, then [my opponents think] we should abandon nonconsequentialist rules. But I tollens where they ponens. I think examples [of self-fulfilling beliefs] show that rationality doesn’t require us to aim for true belief. (Carr 2017 p13).

However, Carr proposes another argument against self-fulfilling beliefs. In a discussion primarily focussed on zetetic norms (norms of inquiry), she says:

There are two ways to end up with true beliefs: by discovering the truth, or by creating the truth. Inquiry, and epistemic rationality, don’t aim to create truths. Indeed...inquiry positively aims not

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<sup>7</sup> Berker suggests that this claim is “most obvious when we consider a version of the Jane case in which she is not aware of the fact that her belief increases the likelihood of its own truth,” (p376) and, as mentioned above, I’m happy to concede this point. But in the case where an agent *does* know that her belief is self-fulfilling, I don’t see why we must insist that she makes an epistemic mistake in forming it.

to create truths, at least in many cases. The aim of inquiry is to discover truth—truths already, in some sense, out there. (Carr ms, p8)

This has some plausibility when considering scientific inquiry and the epistemology of science. But it is inapt to the case of political belief and political inquiry (by which I mean the inquiries of political actors, which we might distinguish from political *science*). The point of politics precisely *is* to create truths, and so it should be no surprise if political-epistemic norms don't call upon us only to “conform our minds to the world” (Carr ms p9), but instead allows patterns of inquiry and belief-formation whose goal consists in “shaping the world to conform to our beliefs”. Social beliefs partially constitute social reality, and so it should be no surprise they admit of world-to-mind fit. To appropriate Marx's famous dictum, we might say that “Epistemic agents have only represented the world. The *point*, for political-epistemic agents, however, is to *change it*.”

Another objection would be to appeal to the old anti-voluntarist idea that it is impossible to form beliefs for practical reasons. But, again, I think it is more plausible to see the case of self-fulfilling beliefs as a *counter-example* to this doctrine, rather than taking anti-voluntarism as a reason to reject the possibility of deliberately getting ourselves to accept self-fulfilling beliefs. The very ubiquity of the political slogans that I mentioned at the start, and individual exhortations like Izaak's “believe in yourself” suggests that, at least over time, people really are able to get themselves to form such optimistic beliefs.

Finally, some might object that I am proposing only a very minor revision to evidentialism. Even if we lack evidence for the contents of these beliefs *before* we form them, we *do* have evidence *once we have formed them*. After all, in virtue of being self-fulfilling, the beliefs are evidence for themselves. So perhaps the only problem with evidentialism is that it says we must have

evidence before we *form* beliefs. Perhaps we can say instead that we are justified in forming beliefs if we know that, conditional on holding them, we will have evidence for their truth.

This is *not* the view that I am proposing. Indeed, I think that this view really would be politically dangerous in the way that Peter fears. The prospect that my future self will have evidence for a proposition, conditional on me believing that proposition, does not generally justify me in forming that belief. Suppose I am considering the conspiracy theory that the Deep State faked the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection in the USA. If I believe this, I will be accepted into the cultlike epistemic echosystem of MAGA truthers, and exposed to much more evidence that will support this view. Moreover, the belief itself, in the manner of conspiracy theories, is itself a defeater for all the counter-evidence I have for this view – if the Deep State really is running things, then *of course* my evidence against the conspiracy theory is untrustworthy.

Rather, my claim is that it is the prospective causal or constitutive connection to *truth*, not to future *evidence*, that justifies me in believing. I can rationally form the belief because my belief will *make* the content come true, *not* because it will provide me with *evidence* supporting the belief. What is important is that these beliefs are self-fulfilling, not that they are self-evidencing.

### **3.2. Collective Rationality**

Nevertheless, accepting the rationality of self-fulfilling beliefs doesn't take us all the way to making sense of *Yes We Can!* beliefs. For, in the medical, romantic or athletic cases that I've mentioned, the connection between one individual adopting a belief and that belief self-fulfilling is quite direct. However, *Yes We Can!* beliefs are *not* individually, directly self-fulfilling. They are only *collectively* self-fulfilling. *My* believing that we can change the world doesn't make it so – it is only if *many* people believe in the possibility of change that we collectively make

change possible. So it looks as though we need to enlist further resources if we want to vindicate the rationality of *Yes We Can!* thinking. Therefore I propose that we look to one of the most promising accounts of the rationality of collective action – the theory of *team-reasoning*.

When we face a situation that calls for action, the options that appear open to us depend in part on how we *frame* the situation. The standard decision-theoretical account of rational deliberation, typically appealed to by, for example, act-utilitarians, tells us to start by assigning probabilities to the various outcomes that might attend to the actions open to me. In cases where these outcomes depend in part on the decisions of other agents, this means that I should attempt to *predict* the decisions of others before determining what I myself should do. Then, I should select the action with the best expected outcome, using a standard expected-utility framework. I work out what is the best option open to me – what I *ought* to do – given what (I predict) everyone else is *going* to do.

But in collective action cases, simply attempting to *predict* the actions of others, as though they were implacable non-agential forces, doesn't seem sufficient (unless I happen to know a lot about how they are consistently or habitually disposed to behave). After all, the other actors upon whose choices my success depends are (often) *also* rational deliberators, trying to decide what they should do just as I am trying to decide what I should do. To put it another way, in order to predict what they *will* do, I need to work out what they *should*, rationally speaking, do.

In these cases, the appropriate way to think about the situation seems to be that suggested by game theory. Against the background of the probabilities that I assign to the *non-agential* features of the situation, I work out, for each action I can take, what the payoff will be for the other agent(s) relative to each action *they* can take. An action, for a given agent, is *dominant* if it

is the best choice relative to *every* choice the other agent can make. If there is a dominant option available to an agent, the other agents should assume that she will take this choice, and respond accordingly in order to ensure the best outcome consistent with this choice (and if more than one option is dominant, one should assume that the agent will take *one* of these). If there is a set of options such that no agent can improve her payoff without another agent changing her decision, then that option is a Nash Equilibrium. Rational agents will be expected to converge on Nash Equilibria. A decision problem may have multiple Nash Equilibria.

A Nash equilibrium need not represent *any* agent's best outcome. In games like the Prisoners' Dilemma, both players will rationally choose to betray one another, even though the situation in which they both betray one another is *worse* for each player than the situation in which both keep silent. This is because, for each player, betrayal is dominant – whatever the other person does, it's better to betray them.

Prisoners' Dilemma	Bob cooperates	Bob defects
Alfie cooperates	Alfie gets 1 year Bob gets 1 years	Alfie gets 6 years Bob goes free
Alfie defects	Alfie goes free Bob gets 6 years	Alfie gets 5 years Bob gets 5 years

But this is only true because each of the prisoners is fundamentally *selfish* – each one is indifferent to the gains or losses of the other. In such cases, it looks as though the problem could be alleviated if only the agents involved were more altruistic.

But as economists such as Bacharach have shown, agents can converge on suboptimal Nash Equilibria *even when they are not selfish*. In a set of games exemplified by the Hi-Lo game, agents must select between *two* Nash Equilibria.

HI-LO Game	Basma chooses A	Basma chooses B
Ahmed chooses A	Ahmed gets 10 Basma gets 10	Ahmed gets nothing Basma gets nothing
Ahmed chooses B	Ahmed gets nothing Basma gets nothing	Ahmed gets 5 Basma gets 5

If Basma is going to take option A, it is (impartially) best for Ahmed choose A; but if Basma is going to play B, then Ahmed should also play B (and vice versa). But, of course, A-A is better (impartially or for both of them) than B-B. It might look just *obvious* that they should both choose A. But as Bacharach points out, there is no principle of orthodox game theory that delivers this result. Since both A-A and B-B are Nash Equilibria, all that game-theoretical reasoning predicts is that the other player will play A *or* B – but it doesn’t deliver the obvious verdict that it is rational for each of them to select A *rather than* B. As in the Dilemma of the Oppressed, there is an option that is best for everyone (jointly rising up and overthrowing the oppressors), but it only looks rational to choose it if we predict that others will do the same. Can we rationally make this prediction?

Real life is full of cases with this structure. And, unsurprisingly, people in real life routinely converge, in Hi-Lo cases, on the Hi-Hi options. If we were to revert to a decision-theoretical framework, then it seems easy to explain, in these everyday cases, why each agent should select the Hi-option (A-A, in the case above) – since she can predict, based on observed behaviour, that the other players will do so to. But, as Bacharach points out, this is unsatisfactory. It’s not enough to say that it is rational for each player to choose Hi *given that she predicts that the others will do the same*. This only delivers a conditional verdict of rationality, and hence creates a kind of

circularity. I shouldn't just predict that the other agents will *happen* to choose Hi, or think they will rationally choose Hi only because they predict that *I* will merely happen to choose Hi.<sup>8</sup>

Rather, it seems that, absent evidence that other people are pig-headed or uncooperative, each person should predict that the others will play Hi *because* that is the rational choice, rather than thinking that it is the rational choice *because* each person predicts that the others will choose it. After all, unless each person had some special reason to suppose that others were predisposed to play Lo, it would seem utterly irrational if each person were to predict that the others would play Lo and therefore chose Lo themselves. If each person had *no* inductive basis for predicting what the others would choose, beyond the mere fact that the others were rational, they should all converge upon Hi-Hi as the uniquely rational option.

As Bacharach argues, the fact that orthodox game theory fails to deliver this verdict – fails to explain why it is uniquely rational for groups of rational agents to converge upon the best option collectively open to them – is a reason to think that orthodox game theory is incomplete. Bacharach diagnoses the lacuna as arising in the *individualist* manner in which orthodox game theory tells us to frame our options. On an individualistic framing, each agent tries to work out what is best for her to do (whether we understand “best” impersonally or selfishly), *given what the others are going to do*.

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<sup>8</sup> Schelling's (1981) solution for choosing options in games with multiple Nash Equilibria appeals to the notion of *salience*. When trying to coordinate with other players choosing between multiple equilibrium options each player should assume that the others will select the option that *stands out*. But that doesn't solve the Hi-Lo problem. Both Hi-Hi and Lo-Lo have a special distinguishing feature – in the first case because it is the better outcome, in the second case, because it is the worse. More importantly, this again seems to give the wrong explanation for why Hi-Hi is the uniquely rational option – it makes each agent's choice conditional on the non-rational dispositions of others, rather than showing how the disposition to choose Hi in Hi-Lo cases *is* a rational response. If we imagine a simple version of the game, where options A and B are simply buttons the players can press, the fact that button B is flashing red doesn't make it rational to press B, if B-B is the Lo option (unless each agents know that one of them is irresistibly attracted to flashing lights).



Bacharach's proposal, instead, is that we frame our options differently, in the manner of what he calls *Team Reasoning*. We *start* by working out what is the best outcome that we, collectively, can bring about, and *then* work out what how we can each play our part in bringing about that result. Since, in Hi-Lo games, Hi-Hi is the best option that we, collectively, can bring about, and since each of us plays our part in bringing that about by playing Hi, Team Reasoning shows why it is uniquely rational for everyone to choose Hi.<sup>9</sup> And, as Colman and Gold (2018) have shown, there is good empirical evidence to suggest that this is, in fact, how agents frame their choices when they manage to converge upon collectively-best solutions.<sup>10</sup> Team Reasoning seems like a rational way to think, and a helpful and realistic resource for would-be revolutionaries.

Team Reasoning is *not* a theory of Group Rationality of the kind often discussed by philosophers. Group Rationality typically posits the existence of super-agents, constituted by but distinct from individual people, and then applies an orthodox account of individual rationality to these group-agents. Team Reasoning dispenses with this inflationary metaphysics. More importantly, it doesn't apply only to the sort of structured groups with fixed decision-making procedures (such as corporations), that are the focus of traditional theories of group rationality. Team Reasoning is a theory of how *individuals* can make decisions, by *framing* their options in collective terms. As such, it explains how cooperation can arise in relatively amorphous collectives or pluralities of agents. A theory of Group Rationality might help us to

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<sup>9</sup> Evidential decision theorists might try to solve the Hi-Lo problem in the following way. Ahmed might reason that Basma is probably like him in various respects. Therefore, if he decides to play A, then that is evidence that Basma will also decide to play A. Thus, conditional on Ahmed having decided to play A, it looks as though he now has evidence that Basma will also play A, thus retroactively rationalising his prior decision to play A. This sort of solution is often dismissed as a form of magical thinking. More importantly, it would also justify Ahmed in selecting B, by precise parity of reasoning. Team-Reasoning does not generate this unpalatable conclusion – it *only* rationalises choosing the collectively best option.

<sup>10</sup> They also discuss other forms of strategic deliberation that can lead actors to converge on Hi-Hi, but these alternatives all involve aspects of magical thinking that seem problematic, or that require each agent to treat herself and others in an asymmetric fashion, and so these alternatives do not seem like good candidates for principles of rationality.

explain how a revolutionary movement ought to deliberate once it has formed and organised itself – Team Reasoning can explain why the oppressed should form the group in the first place.

But if team reasoning is rational, why not just urge resisters to engage in team reasoning, rather than calling on them to *believe* in one another? Why bother with faith in our fellows?

Here's the problem. Team Reasoning inherits a cousin of the problem that bedevils theories of Group Rationality. Group Rationality theories give us cases in which the option that is rational for the group – and thus that should be performed by each agent *qua* group member – departs from that which is rational for the agent *qua* individual. How should each individual who is a member of the group decide what to do? It's unclear. Similarly, the frame of Team-Reasoning is not presented as a *replacement* for the standard, individualistic way of framing options, but as an alternative that makes clear the rationality of certain kinds of cooperation. But if both the team-framing and the individualistic-framing *can* be rational, how are we to select between them when they diverge in the prescriptions they deliver? Once we introduce multiple, and potentially divergent, forms of rational thinking, we face a *higher-order* decision problem – a problem of deciding how to decide.

Theorists disagree about whether the higher-order decision of how to frame our choices can be rationally determined. Bacharach's canonical treatment of this problem holds that the framing problem cannot always be rationally solved. Rather, how we frame our choices is a brute psychological fact derived from group-identification. Smerilli (2012) develops a sophisticated model for deciding how to frame our choices rationally. However, even this allows that there are many cases in which it is simply ambiguous whether we should engage in team- or individualistic reasoning – and cases like the Dilemma of the Oppressed fall into this category.

So we face the worry that those we wish to work with as partners, *even if they are altruistic*, will *vacillate* between individualistic- and team- framings. And this is worrying. When we plan long-term strategies of resistance, we don't just need others to cooperate with us now – we need them to *continue to do so*. Frame-vacillation threatens this.

For this reason, supplementing team-reasoning with *Yes We Can!* beliefs allows for greater diachronic resolution. *Yes We Can!* beliefs promote group identification, priming us to think collectively. But they also ensure that, if we start to reason individualistically, we will *still* take cooperation to be our best option. After all, we will still predict that *other people* are going to engage in resistance, and so, assuming that we're not the selfish kind that prefers free-riding on the work of others, then we will also take resisting to be our best option. In other words, by forming *Yes We Can!* beliefs we solve the problem of frame-vacillation, the problem of working out whether we should deliberate as individuals or teams, by ensuring that what we would take to be our best option from *both* perspectives aligns.

### **3.3. How *Yes We Can!* Beliefs Are Rational**

So here is the model that I propose. Team Reasoning says that we should work out what the best thing we-together can achieve is, and then play our part in bringing that about. I suggest that the best thing we can do, as agents facing the possibility of resistance to oppression, is not just to act together in the moment to resist. Rather, the best thing is to ensure that we will remain diachronically resolute in the face of our oppressors. And, often, this means *believing* in one another – having faith that our partners will join us in resistance. And so, we should play our part, and form such optimistic beliefs.

In saying this, I am *not* saying that we should be *blind* optimists. And, in critiquing evidentialism, I am not saying that evidence is irrelevant to this process. We need evidence to determine whether we are, indeed, in the sorts of cases that Basu describes – cases where the bulk of the oppressed really *could* win if they rose up in unison. If the regime has such overwhelming power that it could crush *even a mass uprising*, then we should not believe in the face of the evidence that we can win. That really would be deluded.

Moreover, we have to use evidence to identify potential partners. The goal of *Yes We Can!* slogans is to draw people into the movement by convincing them that the movement stands a good chance of victory. But that presupposes that these people *would* support the movement if they thought it could win. That might not be the case – it might be that the bulk of the populace is not sympathetic with the movement’s goals anyway, regardless of its chances of victory. It is quite common for political movements to overestimate their potential well of support, and imagine that there is a huge and hidden majority yearning for the destruction of capitalism or the dictatorship of the proletariat *if only such goals can be shown to be achievable*. Movements with unpopular goals don’t need an optimistic leap of faith, but a campaign to persuade people to change their goals and values.

Finally, we have to know that our potential partners are at least somewhat altruistic. I argued that *Yes We Can!* beliefs solve the problem of frame-vacillation by ensuring that members of the movement take resistance to be their best option *whether they view their situation individualistically or teamwise*. Teamwise, they will see resistance as the best thing they together can achieve, and play their part. Individualistically, they will predict that others will resist, and so conclude that it is worthwhile for them to resist too. But this latter point presupposes that agents are not inclined to exploit or freeride on others, letting them do the dirty work and reaping the spoils.

In other words, *Yes We Can!* beliefs are only an antidote to frame-vacillation when the individualistic agents involved are reasonably altruistic. This explains why joint action between egoists is so fragile. Internet speculators often engage in collective action to drive the price of assets and cryptocurrency upwards by shared enthusiasm and support. But their goals are selfish – each of them wishes to cash out when the price rises high enough, and most of them realise this about one another. When they switch to an individualistic framing, they will defect from joint action and boosterish belief. That is why *this* kind of optimistic collective belief doesn't lead to sustained change, but creates swiftly-bursting bubbles.

Put together, this means that the leap of faith I am proposing is a small one, and one that must always be informed by investigation and wise deliberation. When resistance requires collective action, we cannot all wait to see if others will move first – or else we would never rise up. But we should check that there *are* others who might work with us before rushing to the barricades. Optimism shouldn't be delusional, and faith needn't be blind.

Finally, I want to return to the point I made in Section 1, about the connection between strategic reasoning and deontic norms and aretaic aspirations. I argued that the duties and virtues of a would-be resistor are goal-directed in nature – the point of resistance is to win. But that doesn't mean that all activists, revolutionaries and protestors need to *engage* in the sort of strategic reasoning that I have described. Rather, what I have been aiming to do is to show the *convergence* between the dutiful and strategic perspective in resistance. I have been arguing that having faith in our fellows is strategically rational, but I don't mean to say that people should only adopt that faith *because* they understand its rationale. I just want to show that they do not deserve the contempt thrown at them by pessimistic cynics, who say that the faithful are deluded or thinking wishfully.

## **Conclusion**

Writing in 1924, Antonio Gramsci said that “the thick, dark cloud of pessimism which is oppressing the most able and responsible militants...is in itself is a great danger. It may in fact be the greatest danger we face at present, given that its consequences are political passivity, intellectual slumber, scepticism about the future.”

*Yes We Can!* beliefs look irrational, according to an orthodox view of rationality. But they are collectively self-fulfilling, an antidote to the enervating reasoned pessimism which counsils that resistance is futile. They can lead us to truth, and to victory. And so we should learn from the sloganeers, and count hope, or moral faith, as rational after all.

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