

# Pluralism in Comparative Perspective\*

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## ABSTRACT

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Pluralism is a polymorphous concept still in need of conceptual clarification. Two traditions of pluralism can be discerned: European and American pluralism. In Europe, historically pluralism is associated with the rise of the modern nation-state. Liberals criticized the totalitarian potential of a majoritarian democracy, Catholics and Conservatives reacted against the individualistic liberal state and progressive socialists saw in pluralism a possibility to organize society without private property or the bourgeois state. The American tradition sees pluralism as a mode of group representation. Pluralism takes the form of large-scale pressure-group politics, lobbying and sectional representation in Washington D.C. European and American pluralism are different in their view of the state. European pluralism aims at preserving a degree of autonomy from the state, while American pluralism works in cooperation with it. The success of American pluralism presents a challenge to democratic theory. Pressure-group politics is a success, but it does not guarantee equal representation. This fact should be dealt with in democratic theory, because if normative theory does not recognize the growth of sectional representation in decision-making, it may act as a delegitimizing force on democracy.

Pluralism is a polymorphous concept still in need of much conceptual clarification. We do not have a theory or theories of pluralism, no scheme with a degree of analytical precision comparable to, say, democratic theory. There are a number of reasons for this, including the uncertain status of interest representation in the democratic process, in contrast to the institutionalized channels which characterize electoral representation. Some of these problems will become clear as we proceed in our discussion. Also, throughout the history of

pluralist thought, which is well over a century old, we witness a broad variety of schools and approaches, ranging from doctrinal and political movements such as Guild Socialism to analytical frameworks as found in the 'group approach' to the study of politics.

In view of the complexity of the problem, one way to introduce the theme of the article is to mention some of the specific motivations which led to the choice of the topic.

The original motivation to revisit the notion of pluralism has come from events in Eastern Europe. The emergence of post-communist regimes trying to reroute their systems in a pluralistic direction squarely poses the problem of what pluralism among the many incarnations of the idea we are talking about. Post-communist politics is also posing dilemmas, including ethnic

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conflict and separatism, which as we shall see, go to the core of some of the conceptual ambiguities of pluralist thought.

A second motivation has to do with my own current research on lobbying in Washington D.C. Lobbying is quite obviously a successful method of representation, covering by now an amazingly broad spectrum of interests (economic and 'ideal' interests, associational and institutional goals of such institutions as universities, State governments etc.), including the panoply of 'citizen lobbies' which have multiplied in recent years. These methods are being apparently exported to other political realities such as Brussels, where according to one count some 4,000 lobbyists are currently at work. Why such success, while other versions of pluralism such as Guild Socialism or Durkheim's notion of a social order premised on professional groupings, are by now relics of intellectual history?

The article is then basically an exercise in conceptual clarification and deals with the meaning of the concept of pluralism both in European political thought (Part I) and in the United States (Part II). The study of the practical working of the American system of lobbying in Part II also helps to illustrate some of the dilemmas that group politics poses for the democratic process.

### I European Models and the Quest for Pluralism Today

Historically, modern pluralism is the pluralism of the voluntary association based on the free participation of its members, in contrast to what might be called, to borrow a celebrated distinction from democratic theory, »pluralism of the ancients» (Bobbio 1990, 790). The latter was premised on the compulsory corporation and other forms of traditional authority (family, local community, church), which determined the position and status of the individual in social and political life before 1789 and well after. Most of the discussion which accompanied the emergence of modern pluralism revolved around the professional group as the most important form of association. The existence of such groups, or rather the aspiration to create one, pointed to a peculiar contradiction in post-revolutionary Europe: the French Revolution and the regimes it engen-

dered gave full recognition to the freedom to work, that is, unrestricted access to the 'profession', while banishing all kinds of professional groups. Contemporary pluralism may be said to have originated from the quest for both rights: the right to work and the right to form professional associations (Paul-Boncour 1901).

In addition to social pluralism, political pluralism is also an offspring of the French Revolution, more precisely a reaction to the liberal conception of the State and its founding principle, national sovereignty *une et indivisible*. The reaction took different forms, setting the ground for different ideological traditions within European political thought. Tocqueville and others criticized the totalitarian potential of majoritarian democracy; Catholic social thought and conservative writers reacted against the individualistic base of the liberal state, a state inimical or unsupportive of some of the institutions which from immemorial times had shaped the moral personality of men and assured moral and public order (family, church, local community) (Nisbet 1953); finally, critics with progressive or socialist leanings saw in the pluralist reconstruction of society an antidote to the system of inequalities induced by the institution of private property and the bourgeois state (Guild Socialists, Fabians, syndicalists)(Hobson 1917; Cole 1920). We may then speak of European pluralism as consisting of three main ideological families: democratic pluralism of the Tocquevillian variety, Christian-Social pluralism and Socialist pluralism, respectively (Bobbio 1990).

One should add that a parallel revision was taking place in the realm of public law. Theorists like Duguit (1913) and later Laski (1933; 1935) came to see the state less as a supreme authority as in the past, than as a provider of services indispensable to the community. For such a state and the positive government it implies, the notion of sovereignty was of little use; in particular, it provided no guidance for the multitude of services now expected from the government in addition to the functions of peace-keeping and the administration of justice. The state is then redefined as a 'public service', and public service – not sovereignty – is made the central category of public law (Duguit 1913). In the new framework, state authority would largely depend on the degree of satisfaction of the users of its

services, many of which could be efficiently run only by securing the cooperation and expertise of the relevant groups in society. Thus, the functional conception of authority set the stage for a potentially much greater role of organized interests in public policy-making.

This clarified, let us turn briefly to the situation in Eastern Europe. It is quite obvious that pluralist trends there stem, at least in part, from a different matrix and pose different problems. A major difficulty, perhaps one of the greatest barriers to democratization, has to do with national minorities and the territorial integrity of the multinational state – and it is a measure of the ambiguity of pluralist schemes of thought that we are never quite sure whether it is appropriate to view the centrifugal tendencies at work in an number of countries as part of the trend towards a more pluralist universe. Much depends on our idea of the nation-state: one may recall Mazzini's somewhat self-serving principle which recognized the right to statehood only to nations of a certain size and potential for viability (Hobsbawm 1990), only to be reminded by members of small states that it is precisely when you are a tiny minority submerged in a hostile or sharply divided society that self-government and independence become inseparable.

Taking into account the logic of pluralism and its insistence on self-government for any group with a distinct purpose (see below), I see no reason to exclude national aspirations from the province of the concept. An important historical precedent would be Irish Home Rule, which was very much at the center of public debate and a sort of litmus test at a time when federalism, both functional and territorial, was the 'note of the hour', to use Sir Ernest Barker's (1915, 181) expression. Whatever the case, we stumble here on two major conceptual problems. One is what I would call the theoretical unity of pluralism and consists in the fact that it is rarely, if ever made clear what the congeries of units which make the pluralist system – families, professions, associations, institutions, etc. – have in common in terms of the properties of the system. The other difficulty, which is dramatized by inter-ethnic conflict, lies in the fact that pluralism does not simply consist in differentiation; it rather implies a particular dialectic between unity and diversity, one leading to the recognition of the *legitimacy* of

diversity. For this to occur, there must be bonds, trust and common rules, but such bonds are unlikely to result from purely sectional interests.

A number of factors do seem to push post-communist countries in a pluralist direction. One is the problematic re-legitimation of politics in countries where politics had come to mean repression, public corruption and other countless evils. A second and concomitant factor is the exaltation of the virtues of civil society, and of forms of public life independent from the state, especially associations (Cohen and Arato 1992). Here the pluralist tradition, with its highly critical view of the 'imperialist' jurisdiction (Duguit 1913) of the state, as well as of political parties and purely political forms of representation, has much to offer. One should not forget, however, that most theorists of pluralism in the past, in downplaying electoral participation as radically insufficient, were proceeding from the solid ground of established democracies such as France, Britain, the USA; they were dealing then with systems and problems quite different from that of countries which are at best democracies in the making.

From this perspective the interesting analytical question is the extent to which pluralist traits will come to characterize important aspects of social and political life in the various countries of Eastern Europe. The precondition for such development, however, is the emergence of national compacts in the crucial realm of national solidarity, not just pacts, as some authors seem to think (Di Palma 1990), limited to the procedural norms of democracy. The additional question is: which elements in the pluralist tradition and what combination of these will have the most impact on the emerging pattern of pluralism in Central-Eastern Europe? My guess is that with the decline of socialism, pluralism will essentially manifest itself as a reassertion of primary communities like the family and, above all, as interest group politics, to which I now turn.

## II Pluralism as Pressure Politics: The American Model

Not infrequently, pluralism is discussed as a distinctively American phenomenon, or at least as if the American variant were a paradigm for the

whole genre. This reductionist view embodies one important truth: no other country has been more thoroughly permeated by the new philosophy than the USA. Beginning in 1900, when group politics emerged as a salient component of American politics, pluralism has been gradually incorporated into the mainstream of American democracy, of which it represents today perhaps the single most important aspect.

What kind of pluralism is it? And why has this particular version met with such success? Answering the question will take us a little bit closer to what may be called the heart of the pluralist project, which so far I have discussed only in its broadest contours.

The main project of pluralism is self-government. In all its manifestations, pluralism is a tireless indictment of the alienation of the citizen whenever he finds himself tied to the state through purely political rights and obligations. The critique of national sovereignty mentioned above, in addition to doctrinal disputes, reflects such dissatisfaction and alienation. The proposed remedy is functional representation, that is, the carving out of well defined areas of social and economic jurisdiction (one's commune, one's profession, etc.) closer to the citizen and amenable to some kind of direct control.

Within this common project, the various schools have focussed on different spheres of life thought to be essential for man's social and political fulfillment. As we have seen, Catholics and Conservatives have concentrated on primary communities as an antidote to atomistic society. Thus the Italian constitution, in the framing of which Christian-Social doctrine played a basic role, provides special protection to family and church as the communities in which and through which individuals develop their sense of dignity, freedom and personal responsibility (Rescigno 1996, 46). Socialists have looked at property, devising various schemes for its socialized control, including *autogestion* (Eisfeld 1976) and national guilds of producers and consumers (Hobson 1917; Cole 1920).

Beginning with Bentley, American pluralists have taken a broad view. Rather than setting out specific areas for special consideration, as the European Catholic and Conservative schools of pluralism and socialists have done, they have concentrated on the whole spectrum of individ-

ual and collective goals which manifest themselves in social life, and on the interest group as the real lever for meaningful participation. Just as there is no group without an interest (for Bentley such a distinction was meaningless), an interest may result from whatever orientation a person may choose to subscribe. Included here are material and 'ideal' interests, goals derived from self-interest, passion or ideology or whatever motivates purposeful action, including those propertied interests that in a capitalist society cannot but exercise great attraction on man's self-interest. When for the realization of its purpose a group is led to interact with the government, we refer to it as a political or pressure group.

In this context, self-government is the retention of a measure of control over one's sphere of social interest. Control depends in particular on two variables: specialization and political access. For one thing, the group must clearly circumscribe its purpose (which may be broad but should always be well defined), and concentrate all its efforts on its attainment. This will both stimulate its members into action and make the group visible as representative of a special constituency. It is crucial for an organization and its staff not to appear as an amateur or a generalist, as it is to appear competent and responsible. Group statements and actions must ideally cover all and nothing but matters affecting one's interest.

One reason for this is that an association cannot speak with equal authority on matters pertaining to areas in which it has no direct interest and expertise. The ideal for a political group is to exercise a tendentially monopolistic control over the area-constituency it purports to represent – either by itself or more frequently in conjunction with the other major groups that constitute a given 'policy community'<sup>1</sup>. This would make it unwise and inexpedient for lawmakers and administrators alike to devise new policies

<sup>1</sup> We see here at work monopolistic tendencies which seem to be typical of many forms of functional representation. Paul-Boncour (1901) has shown how unions tend to extend their 'economic sovereignty' to the whole field of industry in which they operate. He refers to this phenomenon as »syndicat obligatoire».

without prior consultation and negotiation with the relevant groups in society (which incidentally is also Laski's test for good legislation).

In addition to its broad definition of interest, American pluralism differs from its European counterparts in three other respects: view and role of the state, degree of political consensus required, and the role of conflict.

Taken as a whole, European pluralists tend to see group-state relationships largely as a zero-sum game. Thus, in the Catholic tradition space for the individual and his 'natural' communities is all the greater as the state plays a lesser part in his life, while for writers like G.D.H. Cole the realization of a society along the guild principle requires no less than the 'withering away' of the state. The American pluralist takes a different view: although no friend of the state, he has the state so to speak implanted in his theory. In an important sense an association qua lobby has no ontological reality of its own apart from the state. As Salisbury (1990, 5) has noted in his discussion on the notion of interest, quite often interests in politics directly derive from state action: *»It is the conjunction of private wants and public action – he writes – that constitutes the interest of an interest group»*. Perhaps the best way to describe such an interaction between private and public actors is to refer to it as 'antagonistic collaboration', a broad enough term to cover situations which may range from highly adversarial politics to outright complicity.

The second factor is consensus. As we have seen, European pluralism was born out of a reaction to bourgeois democracy which badly split the community along ideological lines. The historical reality out of which the American variant grew is different. As an increasingly dominant ideology, American pluralism emerged after the crucial elections of 1898, for many the watershed between 'party politics' and pragmatic politics, and the taming of the labor movement, which settled the class struggle within parameters of the capitalist compromise. After 1900 no major social force in America has questioned capitalism as the social foundation of democracy. Group politics in America is thoroughly pragmatic and most of its techniques and strategies (most conspicuously coalition politics) could not function without a radical divorce of politics from ideology.

A final element has to do with conflict. Group politics shares with liberalism a profound faith in conflict, and in equilibrium through conflict. It is through competition in a shifting game of adversarial politics and temporary coalitions that interests are deemed to be best pursued. There is no better proof of the strong belief in competition than its being embraced by organizations which are relatively penalized by the present balance of forces, such as liberal citizen's lobbies (Common Cause, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, etc.). Macfarland (1984) terms this ideology *»theory of civic balance»*, also a fitting description of the overall ideological orientation underlying American pluralism.

Conflict does not begin to play the same role in European pluralism. Not conflict but hierarchy and authority within an organic society are the hallmark of Christian-Social pluralism; and although class struggle is the foundation on which Guild Socialists built their view of society, their ultimate goal was cooperation: *»Our present problem – wrote G.D.H. Cole (1920, 46) in his discussion on production under Guild Socialism – is...to reintroduce into industry the communal spirit»*. Widespread admiration among most European pluralists for Medieval corporatism is further proof of such penchant for social harmony. The idea of the corporation was attractive because it united masters, workers and consumers into a single body performing both professional, religious and political functions (Paul-Boncour 1901), thus providing an organizational and moral antidote to modern, market-induced individualism and conflict.

To stress as I have done the affinity of pluralism with both liberalism and capitalism is not to say that its inclusion into the mainstream of American political life has been smooth and easy. The contrary has been the case. Daniel Rodgers (1988) has shown the degree to which the word *interest* evoked suspicion and hostility when it first appeared as an important term in American political discourse around 1900. In fact one may say that an assimilation of pluralism did not begin to occur on a large scale until the 1940's, in the course of a process of the conversion of the liberal ethos to the group phenomenon which the experience of the New Deal made possible and greatly quickened (Bell 1949).

One major reason for such resistance is that liberalism and constitutionalism are political theories of individual rights hardly applicable without major adaptations to a universe composed of groups. This difficult theoretical reconciliation also applies to the concept of 'majority rule', a concept hardly fit to describe the pattern of conflict-resolution predominant among groups and which has remained very much in the background in pluralists' writings (Schattschneider 1960).

On the other hand, other elements in American culture and legal traditions have worked in a different direction, helping rather than hindering the reception of the theory. One important factor has been the First Amendment and the right it stipulates to petition the government for a redress of grievances, in which many see nowadays a constitutional sanction for lobbying. Here the only necessary remark is that European experience, especially in continental Europe, has been premised on the opposite principle of a total separation of public administration from its citizens<sup>2</sup>. Society in this view knows no common interest; it is the purpose of the state to determine them.

The second beneficial influence has been Madison's pragmatic solution to the problem of factions, here again in radical opposition to the remedy worked out by Rousseau at about the same time with his theory of the »general will«. Madison's doctrine became an especially active force after Charles Beard (1913) drew renewed attention to some of his seminal essays on factions (essentially *The Federalist* Nos. 10 and 51).

The playing out of these contradictory forces has led to a situation characterized by the uncertain normative status of pressure politics in American political culture. There is a persistent duality which manifests itself in both language and behavior. Thus the Congressmen I interviewed seemed to make a distinction between representation and advocacy: the former is seen as a use-

ful, even essential channel for information, expertise and advice by trustworthy lobbyists, while advocacy, the heart of lobbying (Salisbury 1990), is viewed as an unwelcome pressing of sectional interests. Although groups often write bills, either the original text or relevant amendments or both, lawmakers are reluctant to recognize this fact – another indicator of the ambiguity which surrounds a widespread practice. A final example of such duality would be that of an officer of a federal agency (such as the National Science Foundation) meeting with members of the 'higher education community' in the headquarters of one of the associations, and reporting on delicate matters of policy and strategy, but with the whole exchange kept off the record.

Rather than adding to what cannot but be anecdotal evidence, I shall state the fact and very briefly suggest some of its underlying causes. There seems to be something peculiar to pressure politics that makes its normative incorporation into democratic theory and practice problematic. The concluding remarks of the article are devoted to this problem.

It is impossible to treat 'pressure politics' as one homogeneous game. Grassroots or indirect lobbying as it is also called, often involving thousands of people especially in the case of public interest groups, is by nature very different from the highly professionalized lobbying as practised in Washington D.C. by expert staff. Both forms must be distinguished from Political Action Committees (PACs), that is, voluntary contributions to candidates organized by groups in support of friendly politicians, which of all the manifestations of group politics pose perhaps the thorniest problems in terms of democratic legitimation.<sup>3</sup> Finally there are aspects of group politics that must be kept analytically separate from 'pressure politics'. Legal defence funds and so called public law firms would be one example.

Grassroots lobbying is clearly the form of 'pressure' closest to democratic participation. It fulfills in a practical way and to some degree that function of political education which John Stuart Mill viewed as the greatest merit of representative government. Briefed by their group's staff, citizens with no particular skill go and talk to

<sup>2</sup> In banishing all professional groupings as being contrary to the constitution, the so called *Loi Chapelier* (Law of June 1791, article 2) added: »Il est interdit a tous corps administratifs ou municipaux de recevoir aucunes adresses ou pétitions...., d'y faire réponse, il est adjoint de déclarer nulles les délibérations qui pourraient être prises de cette manière« (cited in Paul-Boncour 1901, 26).

<sup>3</sup> A balanced discussion of PACs is in Sorauf 1990.

their congressmen's aids, competently arguing their case. Even in this case, however, there are certain problems. One is centralized direction, a product of the intense professionalization which is the hallmark of lobbying in America<sup>4</sup>. Goals are largely set in Washington D.C., sometimes but not always in consultation with members. Tactics are also decided in Washington and it is the Washington staff which makes possible citizen involvement, suggesting what, when and to whom write, and which action to take. But the main problem has to do with the limited scope of the interest being represented. To the extent that direct interaction with the government performs an educational function – and its surely does –, it produces less citizens than group activists. The collective identity being fostered is group identity, just as the problems addressed are those included in the political agenda of each group, and nothing else.

When we come to the highly institutionalized game of lobbying as it is played in Washington D.C., difficulties multiply. 'Iron triangles', possibly the dominant mode of group-government interaction in a number of policy areas, exemplify the problem. A common language, a similar style of life and often personal friendship, and a common expertise in a given policy area may allow for greater affinity between public officers and group representatives. More importantly, a common normative commitment to the advancement of a service or branch of industry, and convergence of interest in strengthening all the actors and institutions which constitute the relevant 'policy community' – relevant agencies, associations and key committee members – all of these factors result in relationships which often border on complicity.

As in all highly technical and professionalized arenas, this partnership is inevitably a closed world. The very term 'iron triangle' suggests that much. It can be opened by 'intruders' such as critical sectors of public opinion, the press, or

unfriendly Congressmen; but left to itself this kind of network develops mechanisms and policies which reflect options of the inner players to the virtual exclusion of any other. The end result is a pattern of policy-making antithetical or at least hard to reconcile with democratic decision-making.

To conclude, group politics plays an increasingly important role in American politics and it is more visible than ever. The *Washington Representatives* (1992) lists some 14,000 names of association officers and independent lobbyists acting as official group representatives. Since most groups including those being studied by this writer employ many other officers as well in their dealings with the government, the mass of people involved amount to several dozens of thousand. They have become an indispensable and probably permanent part of the system, a new crucial component of the political class; yet normatively they are still very much on the borderline between state and society. The very designation of the phenomenon by metonymy – the place (lobby) for the function (representation) – testifies to such ambiguity.

We are thus confronted with a paradoxical situation and new theoretical tasks. By its very success, American pluralism has proved the correctness of the pluralist assumption: the more representation centers on spheres of life close to the citizen and his/her daily concerns, the more participation and citizenship acquire meaning and substance. It is, however, a highly uneven participation, since as we know from the literature social interests are amenable to organized political action in markedly different degrees. There is no built-in guarantee for equal representation. Hence the challenge for theorists of democracy. If pressure politics is here to stay and comes to play an increasingly important role both in the USA and in a growing number of other political arenas, theory must somehow be brought into line with facts. If not, democratic stability and legitimacy may suffer. As Sartori (1987) has shown in respect to a related problem – the role of elites in democratic systems – facts unrecognized by normative theory act as a powerful delegitimizing force on democracy and the democratic ethos.

<sup>4</sup> Centralization also applies to coalitions. See for instance the case of the campaign against the Bork nomination (Pertschuk and Schaezel 1989).

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