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978-0-521-27062-5 - Organizing Interests in Western Europe: Pluralism, Corporatism,
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Edited by Suzanne Berger

Excerpt

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Introduction

SUZANNE BERGER

These essays on interest groups in Western Europe are the product of a collective endeavor to reconsider certain fundamental premises about state and society in advanced industrial capitalist countries. The group of scholars that constitutes the Social Science Research Council–American Council of Learned Societies Joint Committee on Western Europe began its work in 1975. Our discussions started from a number of unresolved issues that each of the members identified in his or her own work and field of inquiry. Although the scholars came from different countries and disciplines and were of very diverse methodological and political persuasions, we were all by the early seventies experiencing certain common difficulties in carrying out research with the paradigms at hand. These troubles plagued both those who had been working within the framework of assumptions dominant in American social science of the sixties and those working along lines suggested by Marxist social analysis.

Societal problems and the problems of social science

The catalyst for the recognition of these theoretical problems was undoubtedly the series of social, economic, and political shocks experienced by all advanced industrial capitalist nations from the end of the sixties. As a result of this unanticipated break in a postwar period characterized by economic growth, prosperity, and low levels of social tension, the fundamental assumptions on which Western industrial societies had lived for twenty-five years were suddenly called into question. The energy crisis, the end of rapid growth, inflation, high unemployment, and rising social conflict challenged common conceptions of how industrial societies operated and of how they were evolving. The inability of social science to illuminate these new realities suggested the weakness of current theories.

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One possibility was that the explanatory power of the theories was limited to a specific and rather brief historical period: the postwar years. But another view was that we had all along been seriously mistaken in our analyses of the advanced industrial countries. As Gudmund Hernes put it at an early meeting of the committee: "We need to confront both a crisis in sociology and a sociology of crisis." In a statement of the group's task at the time of its founding, we wrote:

The old maps of state, society, and economy no longer work, and Western industrial societies feel themselves embarked without guideposts or compasses on journeys whose way stations and destinations are no longer familiar. The problem is a double one: the terrain has changed; and the maps, which had only a very rough and perhaps spurious fit with the old state of affairs, have not been redrawn to take account of the new shape of the landscape.¹

The difficulties that individual scholars faced in their research reopened debate on three great themes: the characteristics of the societies of advanced industrial, capitalist countries; the nature and role of the state in these countries; and the course of the trajectory along which these societies are moving. The committee began general discussion of these issues and of alternative paradigms for conceptualizing them in 1975 and soon came to focus on interest groups.

There were several reasons that interest groups moved to the center of the group's concerns. First, theory on the nature and role of groups that mediate between society and state has been critical to the development of several of the social sciences. In American political science, for example, debate over interest groups, pluralism, and sovereignty marks the beginnings of the modern discipline. Not only the empirical bases of American political science but also its normative views of the political process were shaped by reflection on the role of groups in a democratic state. Madison and de Tocqueville stand at the heart of American political thought about how to protect and enlarge the sphere of individual freedom in a democratic society. For political scientists, then, any "return" to fundamental questions about state and society in industrial countries is bound to reopen the conceptualizations of interest groups at the core of their discipline.

Even in fields like economics in which group theory had not been central, there have been recent attempts to append some account of the presence and significance of organized interests to the basic models of the discipline. And the problems of integrating these patches into more systematic views have become more and more vexing. Given the centrality or, at least, the troublesomeness, of interest groups for the main puzzles of contemporary social science, it was hardly surprising that every member of the committee had carried out research on some aspect or another of interest groups. The

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group's discussions pushed members to consider the theoretical implications of the difficulties they had experienced in accounting for the results of empirical research with the old paradigms of their disciplines. These essays thus reflect new questions posed to research that was initiated or even substantially completed before the group was constituted.

It was, however, not only the theoretical centrality of groups that mediate between society and state that turned discussion to the representation of interests. It was also the apparent relevance of these groups for understanding major new problems of "ungovernability," inflation, and economic stagnation. As Philippe Schmitter explains in this volume, organized groups in industrial societies have recently been singled out as the principal source of the declining authority of government as well as of the increasingly heavy burden of demands placed on it (see Chapter 10). Even those who reject this account of the apparent breakdown in governmental authority have to explain how transformations in the groups that mediate between society and the state affect the capabilities of government and the nature and intensity of social demands on government.

Similarly, economists of both Keynesian and Marxist schools have had to introduce the role of organized interests into explanations of stagflation in the seventies. As Michele Salvati shows in analyzing the responses of French and Italian business and trade-union groups to widespread social unrest at the end of the sixties, the "same" groups in these two countries, facing the "same" problems and constraints responded very differently, with different consequences for subsequent growth rates and inflation (see Chapter 11). Other economists interpret the role of organized groups in the economic crisis of the seventies in another perspective from Salvati's.² But the significant fact is that virtually all (the monetarists excepted) these accounts of contemporary economic problems incorporate interest groups. Although not all the chapters in this volume analyze current issues, even those such as Feldman and Kocka who study interest groups in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries raise questions about them that reflect contemporary concerns with the ways in which different modes of interest intermediation and organization contribute to political stability or instability and to economic growth or stagnation.

Intellectual antecedents

Nothing makes clearer how far-reaching the implications of the views of interest groups that emerge from this collection of essays are for

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understanding advanced industrial states than a comparison of this effort with one carried out twenty years ago – also under the aegis of the Social Science Research Council. At the first research planning meeting of the Committee on Comparative Politics of the Social Science Research Council in 1957, the group decided on an investigation of the ways in which interests are articulated, aggregated, transmitted to government, and translated into policy in various countries. In that project as in our own, the purpose of looking at interest groups was to approach broader issues about societal functioning and change. As Gabriel Almond wrote in a report on the committee's work, it turned to interest groups with

the expectation that the systematic examination of interest groups in their complex interrelations with public opinion, political parties and formal governmental institutions will enable us to differentiate more accurately between political systems as *wholes*. [It is] a search for a more complete and systematic conception of the political process as a whole. . . .³

The research carried out did indeed constitute an approach to politics and society as a whole, as the committee had intended, and not simply a collection of case studies of interest groups in countries at various stages of political and economic development. With respect at least to the advanced industrial capitalist societies, the general outlines of the theory of politics and society that surfaces in these studies may be briefly sketched out. This summary oversimplifies and perhaps also overstates the elements of unity and theoretical coherence of this body of research. But it is precisely this consensus on a general theory of politics and society that stands in striking contrast to the partialness of the theories, the uncertainties, and the points of disagreement of this present collection of essays.

Society and interests

The view of civil society that emerges from the studies of the late fifties is one in which social structures and the economic system generate a set of demands and interests. These are essentially the same in all societies at the same stage of political and economic development. However different French farmers' associations may appear from American ones, the essential fact is that in both places they represent farmers. As from one industrial society to another the agricultural sector of the economy has broadly the same features, so too, farmers have broadly the same needs. As Henry Ehrmann put it in an essay that appeared in the same year as the first report of the Committee on Comparative Politics (1958),

The interests which groups defend in their respective countries are similar even where the political regime or the party system differ widely. The con-

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licts that arise between the various interests have an equal similarity, although the forms in which the conflicts are resolved will be shaped by the general socio-economic and political milieu.⁴

In this view, needs, demands, and interests are considered all as virtually synonymous. The number of interests in society is in principle unlimited and the relations among them are indeterminate. The theories of development that underpin this view of civil society identify some interests as systematically dominant: those that arise from the technologically advanced industrial segments of the economy as more powerful than those generated by backward sectors; those interests put forward by the modern strata of society as more weighty than those presented by traditional strata. But just as there is no systematic explanation of why certain interests emerge whereas others remain latent, so there is no general theory – as there is in Marxism – of the ranking, or relations of dominance and subordination, in the potentially infinite array of interests that industrial society generates. Indeed, the theories of pluralism that are integral to this perspective demonstrate why no single interest or set of interests can always triumph. Crosscutting cleavages in society, the overlapping memberships of groups, social mobility – all work to maintain a fluidity in the relations among various organized interests and to undermine the bases on which a situation of permanent domination could be constructed.

Interest groups form as spontaneous emanations of society. The boundaries between them correspond to what may be regarded as the “natural” divisions of society, that is, those generated by different roles in the economy and statuses in society. The claims that these groups make are, in Almond’s terms, the “raw materials” or “un-aggregated demands” which, at least in the Anglo-Saxon democracies that provide the model for the theory, are then “processed” or aggregated by political parties.⁵ In “raw form,” the interests present and organized in societies at the same stage of development are the same. Where the interest groups’ system is not independent of the political party system, the demands expressed by a socioeconomic group may be quite different from those expressed by the same groups elsewhere, for the parties have distorted them. As Almond writes of France and Italy: “When parties control interest groups they inhibit the capacity of interest groups to formulate pragmatic specific demands; they impart a political ideological content to interest group activity.”⁶ But in the most highly developed systems, that is, the United States and Britain, the two stages of the political process remain distinct, and organized groups are autonomous expressions of the interests of society. Their demands can be conceived as the essentially unmediated demands of socioeconomic groups

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themselves. The answer then to the questions of why different interests are present and organized in various societies and of why from country to country the same groups may conceive their interests quite differently lies in the greater or lesser autonomy of interest groups from parties and not in the process of interest formation itself.

The various routes that Western nations followed to modernization and industrialization, the specificities of national traditions and values, have not created different interests from society to society. Rather, the interests of industrial societies at the same stage of development differ mainly insofar as conditions in some countries made it possible for interests to emerge and organize freely and in other countries to subordinate interest group formation to ideological politics, thereby deforming the expression of the pragmatic needs, the “real” interests, of society.

Representation and the definition of interests

In this view of interests as the unmediated reflection of fundamental properties of socioeconomic structures, questions about representation receded in importance. Previous traditions of social inquiry had raised two broad questions: how to define interests and how to structure relations within a group in order to produce a convergence between the purposes of members and organizational purposes. The literature on interest groups produced under the aegis of the Committee on Comparative Politics paid relatively little attention to these questions. First, the issue of what a group’s interests are, of how long-term and short-term objectives are reconciled, of how and by whom needs and solutions are interpreted tended to disappear from the structural-functionalist agenda, because the approach stressed the extent to which socioeconomic structures constrained the content of interest group demands, that is, determined interests.

But concurrently with the work of the Committee on Comparative Politics, another set of scholars produced a theory of group formation that did directly address the issue of the definition of collective goals by voluntary associations. It accounted for the presence or absence of organized interests by the rational calculations that a self-interested individual would make about the utility of associating with others to satisfy his or her own objectives. Whereas the perspective of the Committee on Comparative Politics suggested that all significant social and economic interests were potentially organizable and tended to treat unorganized “latent” interests as ones that had not *yet* organized, the second group of theorists distinguished between those interests that could and those that could not be organized. The most influential of this work was Mancur Olson’s *The Logic of Collective*

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Action, which systematically explored the conditions under which rational individuals would be most likely to form groups to pursue their utilities.⁷ The analysis focused on the nature of the objectives of collective action (whether divisible or indivisible; whether they could be denied to nonmembers or had to be universally extended); the number and weight of potential members (many members with few personal resources, few with substantial resources great enough to procure the good without association); and the incentives organizations could distribute to make membership “profitable” to those who otherwise would more rationally enjoy the benefits provided by the organization as free riders.

In this model of group formation, the initial assumptions virtually disposed of representation as a problem: An individual would form and join only such organizations as served his or her own interest. Only where individual and collective goods coincided would groups be formed at all. Because individual utilities exist prior to and independent of group formation, because individuals choose groups to advance private aims, only by error or misguided passion could a person find himself in an organization that did not represent his own best interests.

The problem of representation in social theory was, however, not only one of group formation and the identification of collective interests. It was also the question of whether relationships of power within groups were (or could be) organized to produce outcomes that served the interests of members – and not mainly the power seeking of leaders or the needs of the bureaucracy or the interests of contending factions. The research on interest groups carried out under the aegis of the Committee on Comparative Politics tended to give an optimistic answer to such questions. The notion that the sociology of organizations inherently posed problems for representation was dismissed via an attack on Michels’ “law of oligarchy.” As Samuel J. Eldersveld put it in a 1958 review of the American literature on interest groups: “[W]e have tended to regurgitate the oligarchical model without empirical verification, and without recognizing that certain components in the oligarchical concept and certain alleged effects of oligarchy may not be applicable to the American scene.”⁸ Seymour Martin Lipset’s study of the Typographical Union, which was carried out in the same period, was extremely important for the development of this line of thought, for it provided empirical evidence that, in some organizations at least, structures favored a competition among leaders, hence providing members with resources for controlling outcomes.⁹

But Lipset’s book was followed by little other research on the

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societal or intraorganizational factors that make it more or less likely that organizations represent members and not chiefly the ambitions of leaders or the needs of bureaucrats. The studies of interest groups in various countries that the committee sponsored devoted relatively little attention to relations between leaders and followers or to conflicts within the group over objectives. The convergence between the interests of the members and the policies of the organization was more taken for granted than questioned. And this literature tended to assume an identity of interests between those in a socioeconomic category who belong to an interest group and others in the same broad category who are unorganized. The question of representation was reformulated as a problem for survey research. Almond, for example, proposed to compare the attitudes of the general public with the views of organized interests.¹⁰ Thus surveys were to answer the questions of whom interest groups represented and of whether the interests defended by the organized were the same as those of the unorganized.

Interests and politics

The third pivot of this literature of the late fifties and sixties was the characterization of interest groups in terms of their specific functions within the political system. The central notion in this approach to comparative politics was that the differences in the politics of various societies may be understood as variations in the ways common functions are carried out. Of these functions, that of articulating and transmitting the specific demands of society into the political process was, in the most advanced societies, carried out by interest groups. In traditional societies, there exists the same need for channeling social demands into arenas of authoritative decision making, but other institutions (kinship ties or clientelism, for example) perform the functions that in modern societies are taken over by interest groups.

With respect to the industrial societies, the theoretical discussions in this literature focused primarily on distinguishing between the functions of interest groups and those of political parties. Various structural distinctions between these two types of political organization were noted – that parties run candidates for elections and interest groups do not; that constitutions formally sanction the existence of parties but not of interest groups; and others.¹¹ But the key to analyzing interest groups, this literature proclaimed, was not through the classification of structures but through differentiating the functions performed by parties and interest groups. The defining characteristic of interest groups is that they articulate the claims and needs of soci-

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ety and transmit them into the political process. In the most developed political systems the division of labor between interest groups, parties, and government is one in which interest groups transmit "pragmatic specific" demands to parties; parties aggregate these demands, integrate them into a general program, and mobilize support for them; and parliaments and bureaucracies enact them as policies and laws and implement them. As Ehrmann put it, "the political party stands between the special 'unaggregated' demands of the interest groups and the authoritative decision making of the parliament and bureaucracy."¹² The less developed the political system, the less differentiated these functions; but these accounts make clear that the process of political development brings about a specialization of functions in which the tasks of interest groups, parties, and government are progressively well specified.¹³ This division of labor in the developed countries is a stable one and, moreover, one that is stabilizing for the political system.

However similar the functions of interest groups are in this perspective, their structures are recognized to be variable. Societies at different stages of economic and political development are likely to have very dissimilar forms of interest representation. But even societies with the same socioeconomic structures may well have interest groups that differ significantly. These variations are largely accounted for in this literature by regime characteristics that shape the channels of access through which groups press their claims. Differences in institutional arrangements, in policies, in political and bureaucratic personnel, in national traditions and political cultures may all affect the *forms* of interest representation. But the substance remains essentially the same under all guises.

This analysis of the formation of interest groups, of representation, and of the political functions of interest groups nourished a fruitful theoretical and empirical literature. But by the seventies, serious doubts were emerging about the adequacy of this conception of interests, as the general theory of society and politics out of which this approach had been developed came under attack. The research problems that led to such questioning are laid out in the individual chapters of this volume. Despite all their differences, they have in common a particular kind of break with the premises of the previous literature.

First, none of the present essays take interests as givens. Even those authors such as Offe and Schmitter who assign a very heavy weight to the economic and social determinants of interests find it necessary to build models of interest group formation and behavior that systematically incorporate variables other than socioeconomic

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ones. Taken together, the chapters suggest that the impact of national historical experience, the weight of intraorganizational factors in defining interests, and the role of the state in structuring relations among interests are so significant for group formation that one cannot analytically define the “real” interest of a group, which would be given by socioeconomic structures, and distinguish it from the “forms” of these interests, which would be determined by national specificities and politics. The central question that runs through the volume is *how* socioeconomic, historical, organizational, and political processes shape interest. And the issue of organizational forms, far from being a matter of tactical adaptation to circumstances, here is analyzed as part of the process of the definition of interests.

Once the question of why a particular group emerges to organize a particular segment of society again becomes an intellectual puzzle that cannot be resolved by simple reference to socioeconomic factors or by an assumed coincidence between individual and collective utilities, the issue of representation inevitably reemerges. The relations between leaders and members, between the organized and the unorganized, between the defense of short-term and long-term interests, between contending interpretations of group interests – all of these classic problems of representation surface as central themes in these chapters.

Second, the question of what interest groups *do* – of their functions within the social system – to return to the structural-functionalist vocabulary – is reopened in these chapters. The notion of a common function of interest groups – transmitting and articulating the demands of society into the political process – has largely disappeared and in its stead there is description of a variety of different roles that interest groups fill in contemporary societies. Many of these are roles the previous literature assigned to political parties or to government: socializing citizens, organizing consensus, making policy, implementing laws, and so forth. There is no longer any conception of a stable division of labor among parties, interest groups, and government, but rather specification of the circumstances under which various configurations emerge. Thus the question of the forms of interest representation in various countries is reformulated here as a question about the possible “trade-offs” among parties, pressure groups, and government and about the consequences of different divisions of labor among these institutions.

Finally, several of the authors in the volume raise the question of the impact of interest groups – and of different patterns of interest organization – on the political and economic well-being of contemporary societies. The literature of the fifties and early sixties tended to