

## Nature and Prospects of Political Interest Groups

By ALFRED DE GRAZIA

ABSTRACT: All politiking is done by "interested" persons and the term "interest group" involves a truism, not a pathological condition. Interest groups are essential political aggregates whose form, functions, and power depend upon stated socio-political conditions. Interest groups have intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions. Group leaders usually possess the intensive perspectives of their group, whereas the rank and file usually have significantly varied and split involvements in their groups. The "individual" interest can be conceived in group theory terms, so can the "national interest." A strong antigroup ideology is found in nineteenth-century democratic and socialist movements, which tended to fluctuate between semi-anarchism and executive dictatorship. Group theory pictures the developing society more accurately in many ways than such other theories, while simultaneously interest groups are still treated as pests or threats to democracy. Political philosophy should seek to reconcile fact and value in this situation and has a variety of theories from the past to utilize. Interest groups, broadly regarded as instruments of pluralism and localism, are an especially American practical alternative to the program of communist centralism in ideology and government.

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also behavioral features of an age grouping; even unawares, the old may be conservative or some other thing by contrast with the young. This is still not a group. But if there is an awareness, then there is a group; if a young person says: "We young people are tired of the Democrats," he speaks as a member of a group, without proper name or organization but still a group, because he refers to it and acts in its role. Beyond this type of group come the more organized groups, the Youth for Christ, the Young Democrats, the Junior Chamber of Commerce, and many others. There are in some societies, especially "primitive" ones, formal orders or parliaments of the young that recognize and accord political responsibilities to them. So a trait such as age can lend itself to every shade of group-ism from least to most, and so can every other trait that distinguishes one person from another.

It is important to note that a very general bifurcation of theory in political science, sociology, and social psychology is being attacked here. For it is asserted or assumed by many that there is a politics of individuals that opposes a politics of groups. For instance, if a man votes for a general as President because he respects the special talents a military man may possess, he is said to act as an individual. This action is supposed to be theoretically different from the action of a Negro who votes for a friend of Negroes. Is it then true that political theory must be based upon the individual or upon both the group and the individual, but not upon the group alone? Perhaps contemporary theory does so, and therefore bumps along like a cart mounted on a wheel and a skid.

It is correct to say that a person almost never gives himself fully to any group to which he belongs, whether it be one of the formal governmental groups or one of the barely conscious groupings

such as age. Nor does he ever have an attitude that is completely determined by any group. A person is far too complicated for that to happen. It cannot be denied therefore that the sum of all groups and groupings is not "all." Indeed, excluded from the simplistic group theory of political behavior are most people as they behave most of the time.

Yet let us dissect our individual's non-group sentiments. Are they not in the last analysis a personal, private and, in an absolute sense, unique combination of his group roles? For instance, may not one man be, say, an "old-socialist-atheist-majoritarian" and another man a "young-Christian-socialist-pluralist," whereupon both share roles as socialists but never think and act socialist in the same way? Suppose that the two become involved in politics as members of two opposing factions of the socialist party that are based upon the issue of anticlericalism. Then we say, of course, that the groups accurately reflect the men; but they in turn are much more than these two traits. Each may hate everything else about his faction except the mode of representation accorded his opinion on religion. Hence we still have in the elaborate internal differentiation of our two men a great reservoir of potential reorganization, regrouping, and weakening or strengthening of the intensity of a view or an action on an issue. This fact is at once a political and a methodological warning: it tells the politically unwary that a group's bonds are rarely unbreakable and the student of politics that the actuality of individuals is not to be pictured by a simple group theory.

The proponents of group theory can correctly assert their perspective only by admitting two sets of facts. First, the group dissolves at its participant edges and also at its core in the individual person. Its existence is measured in the person by the intensity of his asso-

ciation with it and hence among an aggregate of persons by a frequency distribution of such measures. Secondly, group forces can combine within individuals to create an interest that is not within the scope and domain of any particular group that makes up the coalition. The behavior and opinions of a man who is both a localistic Chicagoan and an American are conditioned by both such identities even though he may be representing Chicago in negotiations with the United States government; that is, he might be internally compelled to ask for less for Chicago. The character of group alliances changes the meaning of the struggle although the particular groups rest unchanged. Athens alone against Persia may represent individualism against despotism; Athens and Sparta against Persia may represent Western Civilization against the East. Tariff-protected businesses working against low tariffs suggest selfishness, but high-tariff businessmen, labor leaders, and politicians all working against low tariffs would represent a conception of the national interest.

The "interest of all" is the conscious involvement of the members of the largest aggregate in society. (Analogous logic may be used for the "national interest," the "general interest," the "interest of the greatest number.") Insofar as all may feel American, they are to that degree Americans and dependent upon their role as Americans. Insofar as all may think of themselves favorably as Americans, "pro-American" is the interest of all. Insofar as all are divided into two groups who dispute whether Hawaiians are Americans, the interest of all remains divorced from a position on this issue. The national government is supposed to represent the interest of all. But this interest conveys only a vague and limited agreement among nearly all Americans. It becomes an extremely strong interest when it does

unite a program to its sentiment, as when everyone wants peace when war is threatened. But such is rare.

So "the interest of all" generally consists of the acceptance of the symbols and behaviors of the government. It comes from the involvement that most or all feel in the group that is the nation. The "interest of all" is as conceivably measurable as any other group affiliation and should not, therefore, be regarded as a different species. If it does not suffice to represent all people all of the time, it merely exhibits the problem of all groups: their limited hold over their members and their restricted concord on particular issues introduced to group concern.

#### ORGANIZATION OF INTEREST AND POWER

The organization of political interest and political power, when viewed historically, takes a form that adheres to the theory of interest groups hitherto recited in its logical, psychological, and social aspects.

Every societal and political order is interest based. Important economic interests, for instance, are always to be found. Charles Beard, in his historical essay, *The Economic Basis of Politics*, thought he had discovered that the wealthy ran everything. But he merely affirmed and confused a monumental truism. The classical writers were careful to delineate the sources of power of the ruling classes in Greek states and later in Rome. The medieval estates allocated political rights and privileges, or denied them, to their members. Often the free-trade element, the Jewish element, and the foreign element might not aspire to legitimate power as groups, though they might act as pressure groups; and as individuals they might take on roles in the larger political spheres. The power of guilds in the medieval cities is well known. One medieval scholar has discovered an in-

triguing list of interest groups behind the legislation of a medieval English parliament. Local governments lobbied actively.

Throughout history, interest groups have been more or less visible and forceful from time to time. The principal factor in their visibility is ideology. It is ideology that legitimates power and political activity. Power without the legitimacy that is conferred by the ideology of the period is naked. When power is naked, it is ashamed and others are ashamed of it. Groups that lack legitimacy but possess political force represent naked power and are ashamed of themselves. Standing by our definition of interest groups as nongovernmental aggregates, we can observe one very large and long cycle of visibility, attributable in part to the relative legitimacy or disrepute of private associations. The cycle begins in the late medieval period when groups were strong, organized, and respected; descends into a period following the Enlightenment when groups were maligned and suppressed; and ends in an upswing of groupism in which we are presently found.

#### *The ideological fight against groups*

The victory of the proponents of free enterprise in the eighteenth century in England, France, and America, to be followed by the great parliamentary revolution of the nineteenth century in Europe, and to be hopelessly emulated in the constitutions of practically all other countries who lacked the essential ingredient of a vigorous free enterprise as the interest basis for the constitutional formal revolution, can be construed as the legitimizing of the pre-existing interest groups founded upon the commercial and industrial revolution. The shift of power from the House of Lords to the House of Commons in England, from the executives to

the legislatures there and elsewhere, occurred as the new interests sought housing in the state. At this age of history, the assembly or parliament offered itself as the housing; but, like the hermit crab, an interest can move into various types of shells.

Yet the legislative revolutions were only a part of the Enlightenment, which was a vast ideological revolution based upon the beliefs in equality and individualism, and the legislatures only temporarily controlled the great historical transformation. Incarnate in Enlightenment ideology was a reaction against interest groups that went far beyond the mere nonlegitimacy of the interests who sponsored and led the legislative revolutions in England, France, and America. Added to the typical distaste for other interest groups that the new ruling interests who were ensconced in the parliaments displayed, was the hostility against groups implied in the Enlightenment's beliefs in liberty, equality, and individualism. The age of rationalistic mass democracy was on hand, to be portrayed on the historical stage by the Jeffersonians and Jacksonians in America; by the suffragists, laborites, and intellectuals in England; and by the socialist-communist parties in Europe. Beginning in the nineteenth century there might be no interests apart from the interests of the mass of people, however cloudy such a concept might be. An equally accepted but opposite belief was that the individual, a solitary wayfarer in life and politics, could govern himself without belonging to any cohesive groups. The two beliefs might be simultaneously held, for they are psychologically, if not politically, consistent. In the individualism and utilitarianism of Benthamism all interests break down. Little thought goes to the mass authoritarianism or majoritarianism that was the inevitable denouement. Whereas the mass public had never be-

fore been seriously regarded as the active agent in legislative processes, the People was now sculpted into a massive monolithic interest group. The older interests which could not be destroyed — aristocracy and Church — were stripped of formal and secular authority. The French, with rationalistic thoroughness, passed laws prohibiting the formation of religious and functional associations. Laws against labor unions were partly a logical development of the new ideology. Prohibitions against lobbying were also congruent. In early United States history the formal conditions of entering the legal and medical professions were scanty, and medical societies were forbidden to exercise professional power.

The envisioned society was a practical absurdity, but men have never successfully distinguished between a practical absurdity and a glorious and instructive ideal. No people tried as assiduously as the Americans to make the anti-interest ideology part of their political lives, and the great heat with which discussions of interest groups are conducted in the United States evidences our great internal fire on this question.

Yet, in a contradictory way, America is world-renowned for its hospitality to voluntary associations. It has been called a nation of joiners and, although this picture may be exaggerated—since about half the people belong to no formal voluntary group—we certainly do exceed all other nations in our penchant and ability to form new groups, many of which have political effect. Thus we are creating on the one hand what we consistently have opposed on the other.

### *The irrepressible groupism*

Consequently we have been accomplishing a fantastic feat of producing a new order of modern society while stoutly espousing the old society. More

than this, we have been creating the only society that can compete successfully with world communism, while espousing an ideology that has been shown to contribute, consciously or unwittingly, to dictatorship in the name of the masses.

Although most writings by American scholars are hostile to interest groups or accept them as an inevitable manifestation of *Realpolitik*, evidence of the transforming of American politics by such groups is abundant. Many legal specialists now practice administrative law on behalf of interests affected by the enlarging administrative establishment. Every industry of any consequence has its trade associations who are continuously engaged in setting forth the lowest common denominator of industrial policy and tactics. The Catholic Church, which has undergone a considerable revival of vigor and influence while separate from the government, now widely circulates and urges the principles of pluralism. If we were to have measures of extent and trend in the vocabulary and argumentation of everyday politics, civic work and welfare work in the thousands of local communities in America as well as at the seats of government, we should discover that an increasing and very heavy proportion of all references to support that is sought or held is described in the language of groups rather than of individuals. Whether in the economic sphere, the religious sphere, the recreational sphere, the political sphere, or the military sphere, the individual policy is rare and the collective policy is everywhere.

The technique of organizing new formal associations, usually by incorporating for profit or not-for-profit, is increasingly well known, and numbers of such groups are annually organized. Legislatures have a most perplexing task in prescribing rules for the political conduct of such organizations. It will not

be long before the laws in relation to their political conduct will break down insofar as they seek to prohibit that conduct. However, they will constantly increase in number and in detail as they seek to regulate behavior. Because the interest groups of today have risen as disreputable challenges to rationalistic, majoritarian, democratic structures, they have imitated the constitutionalism of those structures. The almost invariable oligarchy of the interest group is almost never manifest in the formal credentials that the group presents to the society. Or, if it is, it appears only in fine print that may provide for an officer to succeed himself, or for a system of weighted votes in accord with the actual power of the leadership, or for some other oligarchic device.

The popular nineteenth-century theory of democracy has never made room for a nondemocratic constituent element. It is as if the body had decided that it was working poorly as a mass of disconnected and specialized organs and cells and decreed that every cell would be like every other cell and every organ like every other one. So in its first surrender to the principle of the interest groups in modern life, rationalistic mass democracy decreed merely that interest groups might exist only if they were organized as replicas of the largest political configuration.

The results have been pathetic. Myriad small tyrannies and oligarchies have formed in groups organized so as to mirror the larger constitution. These may be contributing to deterioration in the constitution of the larger democracy. It might benefit the morale of the governmental element of the modern state as well as that of the constituent elements if the state were to recognize a diversity of organizational forms. It would not necessarily credit one as better than the other, but would recognize that an oligarchy in a corporation, in a

military unit, or in a church may be continuously better than a democracy without prejudicing the value of democracy in another place and at another level. Although the intellectual terror of the human being at having to embrace several conflicting directives in different environments should be always feared, a type of man may be visualized, and indeed may be quite common, who can simultaneously play the rules of several different games which correspond to his different roles in life. He may so conduct himself without personal disorganization. Sebastian de Grazia, in his book, *The Political Community*, ascribes much civic disharmony to the conflict of religious and economic directives. Such conflict, however, is less deleterious to social harmony than is the more general condition of interpersonal hostility and lack of love for oneself and others, which, it must be said, he also asserts strongly.

#### A NEW KIND OF DEMOCRACY

I believe that in pluralism and a rational organization of interests can be discovered a new kind of democracy upon which a superior society may be founded. Such a society would derive its most desirable democratic elements from an initial equality of opportunity. It would teach groups to view themselves not as outlaws nor as the clubs of little boys imitating their big brother, the state, but as integral parts of a whole in which they pursue their useful and dignified way. So long as we suppress rather than educate the group formations of American life, we lower the quality of their membership and activities. We distort their operational code by forcing them to mold it absurdly to the main theory of the democratic state produced by the Enlightenment.

But then to preserve the maximum of individuality and to ward off the stulti-

fying rigidities of estate and corporative systems, we must prepare a vastly enlarged and much more sophisticated theory of organizations that views generously the free formation and dissolution of groups and permits movement of individuals from one group to another. Diverse evils must be combatted: the compulsive power of a church to hold its members, the keeping of classes or races "in their place" as subordinate estates, the compulsive domination of a cartel over the formation of new businesses, and the compulsive grip of a limited pension plan on a worker's free movement from job to job.

Despite the misadventures of syndicalism, fascism—whether political or clerical—and the pork-barrel of geographical or functional interests, an associational democracy is possible. In the new age, to respond keenly and poignantly to the dreams of Jefferson, Mazzini, and Trotsky is as natural as identifying with the troubadors and knights of old; yet those dreams, when they lead to action, move fatally toward bureaucratic, socialist, and communist statism. It appears to me that the future of the followers of Christ and of the heirs of the Renaissance moves along with the perfecting of ways of organizing and operating myriad interest and pressure groups and assembling them into a productive, free, and creative community. The philosophers of some form of pluralism have been so many and varied—federalists, Catholics, pragmatists, guild socialists, and fascists—that the mechanical liberalism or socialism of contemporary social scientists seems to be needlessly unimaginative and inadequate.

The fatal political deficiency of associational democracy to the present time has been the general conviction that it would be incapable of suppressing special pressures in accord with some general vision of the state or world com-

munity. I feel that political scientists who have presented the simplistic theory of associations have done a disservice, even when they have contributed much to our objective knowledge of politics and even when they described the positive benefits of group politics. They have made of politics a mere grab bag of organized groups. They have failed to see that our troubles are in ourselves and not in our groups. We should be able, by a social and civic education appropriate to the theory of the associational democracy, to raise a generation able to perceive and involve itself in a series of roles ranging from occupational and neighborhood associations to the functions of a national and world citizen. If we did so, we would naturally introduce sympathies that would constantly arbitrate the disputes between the special interests that arise and are resolved in the personality. We would induce a higher and more general level of integration in each individual's contribution to the policies of collective action. Groups would not then domineer their parochial membership; they would be understood and controlled within their members' bosoms. And group leaders, too, moderated by their followers and disciplined to the larger meanings of their roles, would turn less to piracy on the social main.

The transition from individualized to modern group political processes was not accompanied by a deterioration in political morality nor by a shift from a broad vision of political policy to a narrow one. The Association of American Railroads can compare itself favorably in these respects with the promoters of the great early railroads such as Leland Stanford. All the more remarkable, then, are the fervid efforts of the leaders of associations and groups to represent themselves as individuals of the old stripe. I suppose that the association leadership would say that they

are compelled to fight the government and its pernicious influences upon their members' rights and efficiency of operation, and that they must use the only rhetoric that conveys meaning to the public: the rhetoric of the state against the individual. That is only one of a thousand illustrations, regrettably, that a major task lies before political science, the task of creating an ideological cli-

mate able to assimilate the diverse justifications and descriptions of interest-group life into a new theory of associational democracy. Such theory, preceding an ideology and developing into a new ideology, may establish the only political order that in this century and that to come can compete successfully with socialism and communism, in America and in the world.