# 34

# Pluralism

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Pluralist ideas and politics regard the diversity and autonomy of social groups not only as relevant but also as valuable. Pluralism, in its many ramifications, represents a particularly broad line of political and social thought as well as an approach to empirical analysis. The intellectual roots of the concept can be traced back over centuries. In modern political science, the term has been mostly associated with analyses of the influence of interest groups over executive political decision-making. As a paradigmatic theory and method, the approach was not fully elaborated until the mid 20th century. It then quickly developed into a classic, often dominant approach to the study of politics in the Western world. Originating from the American group school of political science (Bentley, 1908; Truman, 1951; Latham, 1952), pluralists of the 1950s and 1960s conceived of governmental policies as the result of countervailing pressures and lobbying exerted by a multiplicity of autonomous, more or less organized social groups competing for political influence.

## A SHORT HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT

A genealogy of pluralist thinking could begin with Greek philosophers and their teachings on how to live in groups side by side in tolerance and diversity, instead of on top of each other in a hierarchy. The image of a plurality of worlds, as it was taught and lived in ancient schools by Democritus, Epicurus, Herodotus and Xenophon, was curbed by Christian monotheism from late antiquity into the Age of Enlightenment. The concept was then revived during the early modern period. It influenced the American constitutional debate of the late 18th century, legal theories of corporate group personality of the 19th century, and political science theories of the 20th century in particular.

His work on associations in politics earned Johannes Althusius great recognition as the founder not only of federalism but also of early modern pluralistic thought. Althusius (1563–1638) was the first to formulate a comprehensive theory of what he called a

'consociationalist' (associationalist) constitution, and thereby rejected the arguments of his contemporaries in favor of monarchic monism and indivisible territorial sovereignty. The question of how to reconcile social groups' quest for autonomy with a government's claim for sovereignty continues to permeate the discourse on pluralism to this day. In this debate, taming the Leviathan can be regarded as the overarching goal of pluralist thinking past and present.

Since the early 20th century, pluralist thoughts and studies have contributed above all to justifying the role of interest groups in policy making. They were generally aimed against monism, autocracy, hierarchical statehood and elitist politics, and thus took center stage in many scholarly works on theories and operating principles of liberal democracy. From the very beginning, studies of pluralism focused on the power bases of governments, and modes of participation and equilibration – balancing of interests – in politics. Starting as a particularly North American political science approach, the modern notion of democratic pluralism spread globally. It influenced political science in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Simultaneously, its basic research theme stretched out into a number of subtopics. Since the 1960s, political systems based on party competition and institutional divisions of power have been referred to as 'pluralist democracies'. Today, pluralist thinking inspires debates on the limits of principled universalism and on concepts of moral and value pluralism, democratic elitism, legal pluralism, religious governance, up to controversies on identity politics and cultural pluralism worldwide.

## BASIC THEORIES AND CONCEPTUAL VARIATIONS

The many faces of pluralism correspond with variations in terminology. Different names and emphases of pluralistic thinking can be recognized over time. Common to all approaches is the association and action of individuals in groups as a starting point. The concept embraces terms such as interest group politics, associational governance and political power-sharing, advocacy, lobbying, pressure politics, collaborative governance, mutual partisan adjustment, corporate pluralism, consociationalism – from *consociatio*, the Latin word for association – societal interest intermediation, and corporativism and corporatism – from Latin *corpora*, meaning social organisms or corporate group personalities. Today advocacy has, in a way, replaced the former semantics of pluralism.

## Early Forerunners of Modern Pluralism

The universal commonwealth (*consociatio universalis*) proclaimed by Althusius is a polity based on autonomous manifold social groups, rather than a concept of sovereign statehood as embodied in the evolving European absolutism of his time. A state or polity has to be understood – in his own words – as 'an association inclusive of all other associations (families, collegia (i.e. guilds), cities, and provinces) within a determinate large area, and recognizing no superior to itself' (Althusius, 1964 [1603]: 12). In conceiving the social contract as a real pact among corporate legal entities – semi-autonomous associations that compose society – he set himself against his near contemporary Thomas Hobbes, who in his famous book *Leviathan* considered a single agreement entered into by individuals who commit themselves to absolute subjection under a common power. Johannes Althusius had a notion of shared sovereignty that stands in deep contrast not only to Hobbes' unitarism but also to Jean Bodin's doctrine of monarchical sovereignty. Due to his emphasis on associational autonomy, the subsidiarity principle and the multilevel character of his constitutional system, Althusius is now

considered an early modern protagonist and forerunner of both federalism and pluralism.

In Europe, the medieval notion of shared sovereignty became prominent again with the doctrine of the real personality of the association, as put forward by Otto von Gierke in his works on medieval law and political theory. In the second half of the 19th century, when he referred to and translated parts of Althusius' works – originally published in Latin – to a wider German audience, Gierke's pluralism played an important role in disputes between the Germanists and Romanists over what kind of law should be adopted in Germany. Pluralism, in addressing groups as legal personalities or semi-sovereign corporate bodies with their own will and capacity to act for their members and followers – as in medieval law – has had considerable significance in constitutional thought as well as for the political movements of the time (Dewey, 1926: 672).

Gierke's writings – and through them Althusius' political philosophy – found a broad reception not only in the United States but also in Britain (Dreyer, 1993). His *Political Theories of the Middle Ages* (Gierke, 1900) paved the way for a newly emerging English school of academic and political pluralism, of which guild socialism had the most far-reaching impact. Frederic Maitland, George D. H. Cole, J. Neville Figgis and Harold Laski, the masterminds of English guild socialism (Glass, 1966), were greatly concerned with labor unions and self-government in industry. In search of a pluralist blueprint, they fought against the alienation of the individual under conditions of unrestrained capitalism. Their ideas moved toward a participatory democracy beyond individual citizens' voting rights. Functional representation in voluntary associations should integrate the individual into communities that would complement or even replace the society of market participants, with its deprivations and social uprooting, as well as the state as an institution of compulsory membership and coercion. Against this backdrop, the English guild socialists belong to the early theorists of a 'moral economy'.

In an attempt to diminish the discretionary exercise and unequal distribution of political and economic power, the proponents of socialist pluralism used the medieval structure of guilds, chartered cities, villages, monasteries and universities as a model for a worker-controlled economy. Their research and political activities came to an abrupt end soon after World War I. The ideas, however, continued to live on in Austromarxism and concepts of industrial democracy. They had a strong impact on Karl Polanyi's conception of a socially embedded economy free of centralist command and market dominance.

Early pluralists were focused on associational autonomy mostly in a legal and constitutional view. They rejected monistic theories of sovereignty endowing state institutions with supremacy over society. For them, sovereignty resides not exclusively with governments or parliaments but with many social, political, cultural and economic organizations in society. These community institutions are perceived as free and prior to state institutions.

## Pre-Classic American Theories of Pluralism

In the United States, the history of pluralist reasoning begins with the debates on the constitution of the Union from 1787 onwards. The American constitutionalists worked out an embryonic theory of pluralism in an attempt to combine the best features of John Locke's postulates of liberalism, Edmund Burke's social conservatism and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's thoughts on participation in politics (Connolly, 1969: 3). Among the founders, James Madison, in *Federalist Papers* No. 10 of 1787, states that the political mechanisms created by the new constitution were specifically designed to protect freedom of association and should simultaneously balance conflicts between factions and interests in domestic politics. The US Constitution stands out explicitly from the monistic traditions in Europe in this respect. Its social implications

were impressively described by Alexis de Tocqueville, who placed the activities of autonomous groups and their preeminence in public life at the center of his famous two volumes on *Democracy in America*, published in 1835 and still regarded as a groundbreaking contribution highly important to later academic works on pluralism (Tocqueville 2000). The American group school in political science, the beginnings of which go back to the 1920s, and its successors could draw on this national intellectual heritage.

But there was another, similarly important academic influence coming from Europe. Otto von Gierke's *Political Theories of the Middle Ages* attracted political scientists in the United States, among them Arthur Bentley, whose studies in Germany in 1893/4 are reflected in his later writings on the role of group associations in politics. Leading ideas from the work of Georg Simmel, whom he had met in Berlin, found expression in Bentley's pluralistic view on society and politics, namely Simmel's theory of 'cross-cutting social circles' according to which modern societies consist of groups that cut across each other in many directions and hence forbid any classification of diverse societies into stationary and sharply divided classes or status groups.

David Truman used this thought to great advantage in his path-breaking basic work on pluralism, *The Governmental Process*:

> As Arthur Bentley has put it: 'To say that a man belongs to two groups of men which are clashing with each other; to say that he reflects two seemingly irreconcilable aspects of the social life; to say that he is reasoning on a question of public policy, these all are but to state the same fact in three forms'. The phenomenon of the overlapping membership of social groups is thus a fundamental fact whose importance for the process of group politics, through its impact on the internal politics of interest groups, can scarcely be exaggerated. (Truman, 1951: 158)

Individual cross-pressures resulting from overlapping group affiliations in society became essential for pluralists, since they tend to mitigate conflicts, foster a rationally motivated open-mindedness toward various interests in society and, thus, promote the reconciliation of clashes between social groups. Individual conflicts of preference that result from multiple overlapping memberships form integrative forces that bring the general interest to bear at the level of individual citizens – this was a grandiose discovery and principle that gave the theory of pluralism a firm base and finally caused its breakthrough in the North American political science community (Czada, 1991: 278–81).

## Classic Empirical Theories of Pluralism

The proponents of classical pluralism widened the scope by searching for institutional power structures and channels of political influence in given societies. In this way, the concept developed into a regime type called pluralist democracy (Dahl, 1967). Robert Dahl, the first and most renowned proponent of the classic theory of pluralism, no longer conceived of civil society associations as a counterweight to a sovereign political majority, but insisted that a constitutional-cum-societal pluralism replaces rather than counters the sovereignty of the people or the majority of the people in a majoritarian democracy. Thus he returns to early modern approaches that are critical of sovereign supremacy:

> Instead of a single center there must be multiple centers of power, none wholly sovereign. Although the only legitimate sovereign in the perspective of American pluralism is the people, even the people ought never to be an absolute sovereign; consequently, no part of the people such as a majority, ought to be absolute sovereign.
>
> Why this axiom? The theory and practice of American pluralism tend to assume, as I see it, that the existence of multiple centers of power, none of which is wholly sovereign, will help (may indeed be necessary) to tame power, to secure the consent of all, and to settle conflicts peacefully:

- Because one center of power is set against another, power itself will be tamed, civilized, controlled, and limited to decent human purposes, while coercion, the most evil form of power, will be reduced to a minimum.
- Because even minorities are provided with opportunities to veto solutions they strongly object to, the consent of all will be won in the long run.
- Because constant negotiations among different centers of power are necessary in order to make decisions, citizens and leaders will perfect the precious art of dealing peacefully with their conflicts, and not merely to the benefit of one partisan. (Dahl, 1967: 24)

In this interpretation, the idea of pluralism turns from a theory of political influence into a political system type that Dahl (1971) himself called 'polyarchy' (lit. rule of the many). He points to the American presidency, Congress, the Supreme Court, the states and 'The Other Ninety Thousand Governments' as being policy makers in their own right. 'These territorial governments below the national level are of bewildering variety and complexity. The governments of the fifty states constitute a vast field of themselves. The thousands of towns and cities create a political tapestry even more complex' (Dahl, 1967: 171–2).

The benefits of such a horizontally and vertically differentiated political system, according to Dahl (1967: 172–3), are fourfold: (1) diversity in public governance reduces the workload of the national government and makes democracy more manageable; (2) it prevents conflicts accumulating at the national level and, thus, makes democracy more viable; (3) providing numerous semi-autonomous centers of power reinforces the principles of balanced authority and political pluralism; (4) facilitating self-government at the local level of administration creates opportunities for learning and practicing democracy.

In his most influential empirical study of community power dynamics in New Haven, Connecticut, Dahl (1961) showed that no one could effectively monopolize political power in a pluralist society of groups free from political control. Decision-making turned out to be shared instead among different groups and individuals in competition with each other. Dahl's method was not based on reputation or positions in power networks, as in most contemporary analyses of political power structures (Hoffmann-Lange, Chapter 30, this *Handbook*). Rather, he compiled a number of empirical policy analyses. In focusing on how political decisions were made on certain issues and areas of policy, various observational means had been employed, among them lists of persons who were involved to a measurable degree in decision-making. The study identified a series of elite groups who dominated areas of public policy such as education, nominations to public office, urban renewal, and so on. While there was some overlap of names, particularly when elected public officials were concerned, its extent was surprisingly small.

Empirical studies on pluralism did certainly not confirm the idea of equal opportunities for all groups to influence the political process. They rather showed a pluralist democracy without a single recognizable power elite. In concluding that there are 'multiple centers of power, none of which is wholly sovereign', Dahl (1967: 24) rejects the concept of parliamentary sovereignty based on majority rule, as enshrined in the British Westminster model of government. In its golden age of the 1960s, classical pluralism described an open, largely unpredictable competitive system of political power sharing with multifarious access routes to political decision-making. At the same time, the concept departed from earlier optimist assumptions of equilibration among a great number of political forces neutralizing each other.

## *Deficits and Critique of the Classic Pluralist Model*

Pluralism – societal, political and ethical – was not only the most prominent approach of the 20th century used to describe, understand

and explain the functioning of Western liberal democracies; it was also among the most criticized concepts. One finds numerous attempts of empirical refutation as well as some strong theoretical counterarguments. The strongest empirical critique could be seen on the streets of American cities in 1967, just as Robert Dahl's major work *Pluralist Democracy in the United States* was published. Riots struck 56 American cities, among them New Haven, the 'home of pluralism', where, in late August, four rebellious nights put the city in a state of terror.

Substantial areas of twelve great cities lay in ruins … How could this happen in a society of slack resources, in which any active and legitimate group can make itself heard effectively? […] There must have been something fundamentally wrong with the theory of pluralist democracy or the analysis would not have gone so wide off the mark. (Burtenshaw, 1968: 586–7)

### Neo-Pluralism and the Corporatist Turn

Concepts of neo-pluralism and neo-corporatism departed from the notion of social groups operating independently from and outside the sphere of government. Neo-pluralism 'is one of a class of research findings or social science models – such as elitism, pluralism, and corporatism – that refer to the structure of power and policy making in some domain of public policy' (McFarland, 2007: 45). The term refers to new concepts in the critique and succession of classic pluralist approaches, among them neo-corporatism, clientelism, consociationalism, advocacy coalitions, issue networks and policy niches. Theodore Lowi (1969) was among the first to reject Dahl's concept of interest group liberalism since – according to his research – associational elites put their resources on the table without any moral or rationalist meaning. They would only exchange with bureaucrats instead of establishing democratic links between people and government.

Neo-pluralist thinking can be divided at least into four strands of argument. First, the classical school has been expanded to the extent that some interests – for instance, those of big businesses – are now being recognized as having a privileged influence, if not over single political decisions then in terms of an overarching political agenda that, according to neo-pluralists, is ultimately biased toward business power. In this sense, neo-pluralists no longer regard governments as neutral mediators, but just as other players on the field who are in some ways connected to economic power holders.

Second, neo-pluralist approaches include so-called sub-governments consisting of networks of members of parliament, their staff, ministry officials, experts and representatives of interest associations and firms that are linked by close and lasting relationships. Some other labels relate to the sub-government phenomenon, such as 'iron triangles' and 'issue networks' (Heclo, 1978), or even state capture. Regardless of their differences, these concepts are all based on empirical observations indicating that there is no open competition among interest groups and that only those with clientelistic relations get access to administrative departments or agencies (Kitschelt, Chapter 29, this *Handbook*). This view is obviously different from the classic idea of competitive laissez faire pluralism.

Third, a variety of neo-pluralist approaches refer to the state – politics and administration – as a relative autonomous entity. They emphasize governments' capacity to withstand pressures exerted by powerful economic groups or companies in pursuing their own policy agenda backed by parliamentary majorities. At the same time, Fraenkel (1964) insists that the whole of society, and not just the state, needs to be viewed as a complex constitution. The state and civil society are linked through a compound of laws, practices and procedures that define the rights and roles of public and private institutions. The necessity for the state to counter the excessive influence of

oligopolistic, if not monopolistic, carriers of socio-economic power has been emphasized in this view. The democratic state must protect all those sections of the population that are unable to form and maintain sufficiently powerful associations to the end that their interests are not neglected. This normative variety of neo-pluralism is reminiscent of Paul Hirst's notion of an 'associative democracy' (Hirst, 1994) and its implicit assumption of a common good. It entails a paradigmatic turn, since classic pluralism abandoned any notion of a public interest or a common good. The modern classics replaced the search for the common good, which has shaped the history of political ideas over millennia, with a process of articulation, aggregation and integration of manifold interests to achieve a result that is subsequently considered to be in the public interest.

A fourth distinctive concept refers to neo-corporatist patterns of interest intermediation based on close relations between governments and producer groups, highly centralized top associations of labor and capital in particular (Lehmbruch and Schmitter, 1982), and arrangements of sectoral self-regulation up to semi-autonomous 'private interest governments' (Streeck and Schmitter, 1985). In its most basic meaning, corporatism refers to a political power structure and practice of consensus formation and self-government based on the functional representation of professional groups.

The corporatist paradigm has been deliberately placed against some central assumptions of mainstream pluralism. It overcomes the influence perspective that underlies all theories of pluralism and their empirical applications so far (Mattina, Chapter 32, this *Handbook*). Corporatist patterns of interest intermediation certainly do not comply with any conception of lobbying. The latter addresses one-directional relations of influence and impacts on the formulation of policies, whereas the concept of corporatist intermediation emphasizes ongoing 'exchange relationships' between governments and well organized interest associations representing important parts of the economy and society. Their participation and even integration concerns not only the formulation but also the implementation of policies.

Corporatist interest intermediation has been mainly a European phenomenon that applies to smaller countries such as Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Sweden in particular. Comparative public policy analyses indicate that policies coordinated between governments and top associations of labor and capital resulted in lower unemployment and inflation, enhanced industrial productivity and increased economic growth rates during the 1970s and 1980s (Calmfors and Driffill, 1988). The explanation lies in the comprehensive organization of interests: 'encompassing' functional groups who are organized in a centralized, hierarchical fashion have more incentives than small special interest groups to consider the common good (Olson, 1986).

Corporatist interest intermediation declined in the wake of a neo-liberal turn in economic policy and major shifts from social democratic to conservative governments in Europe. At the same time, a large number of advocacy groups, social movements and new forms of activism have emerged worldwide. These include manifold idealistic groups that pursue non-commercial purposes, such as civil and human rights, environmental protection, gender equality, gay rights, food safety, grassroots lobbying, animal rights, and so on.

## Advocacy and the Civil Rights Movement

Organizations that emerged from social and economic justice movements represent marginalized groups such as single mothers, racial minorities, gays and lesbians or the poor. They were born out of the 'advocacy explosion' (Andrews and Edwards, 2004: 479) of the late 1960s and 1970s. Civic activism has grown enormously since then.

Starting from worldwide political mass movements, student revolts and protests against the Vietnam War, civic initiatives, citizen groups and public interest groups established new methods of advocacy, lobbying and legal action. These civic activities seem so dissimilar from earlier forms of pluralist interest politics, as well as from corporatist concertation, that Tichenor and Harris (2005: 257) attested the older theories to 'be of little or no theoretical utility' in understanding policy making in such diverse activist pluralist democracies.

A look at social movements of the time reveals indeed some change. Citizens' initiatives mushroomed and contributed not only to the expansion but also to the differentiation of interest politics worldwide (della Porta, Chapter 39, this *Handbook*). Contrary to widespread expectations, however, this did not replace the still powerful old-fashioned interest-group lobbies, nor do these movements refute the basic thoughts of pluralism. On the contrary, the strong and continuous rise of advocacy groups is reminiscent of Truman's (1951) original theory according to which modern societies tend to generate more and more interest groups – all the more so if they are stimulated to organize because of dissatisfaction with governments and in view of social disturbances that alter their relationship with other groups or institutions. To the extent that latent groups associate in order to remedy grievances and discriminatory experiences, they contribute to pluralist power dynamics, and a new equilibrium may be reached.

The advocacy explosion exposes multiple, diffuse, interacting groups and factions resembling the original idea of pluralist interest politics as it was originally put forward by Bentley (1908) and Truman (1951). The rise of idealistic non-profit organizations posed new questions on the role, character and impact of groups in a society. They induced research and debates about the benefits of social capital and civic engagement (Putnam, 2000). This line of research directed attention to the local and regional level and sectoral dynamics, as well as cultural determinants of organizations and how they generate opportunities for and constraints on participation.

Jenkins, Wallace and Fullerton (2008) identified a general global shift toward a 'social movement society' in which protests have become a routine part of political bargaining. Environmental risks, postindustrial values, gender equality and affluence went along with the growth of the state, subgovernments and corporatism in causing popular opposition and unconventional group activities. This development has gone hand in hand with the fragmentation of parties and party systems. Some analysts fear that the rise of assertive advocacy gave rise to strong emotional, cultural, ideological and religious motivations and will eventually fragment polities, split societies, and lead to populism and crises of governability (Karolewski, Chapter 31, this *Handbook*). This could jeopardize pluralist democracies, understood as political and social systems of overlapping, mutually compensating cleavages among groups who leave passions and ideologies behind and focus mainly on material interests.

Strolovitch and Forrest (2010) found that, compared to group organizations in general, those representing marginalized groups are far less likely to use professional lobbyists, employ legal staff or mobilize party donations. They also stress that advocacy for identity groups shows much less interest homogeneity than, say, narrowly defined business associations. The former groups are characterized by less clear-cut interests that overlap between class, race, gender and ways of life, coming together in one single organization. Marginalized constituencies within these groups often receive the least active representation (Strolovitch and Forrest, 2010: 475f.).

## The Rational Choice Perspective

Pluralist group theories long neglected the rational motives of individuals to join and

become dues-paying members of interest associations. Mancur Olson (1965) revolutionized the earlier views on why individuals associate. According to Olson, it is not rational for an individual to voluntarily support an organization in pursuing a collective good that is indivisible so that everyone can benefit from being a member or not. The beneficiaries of collective goods will, therefore, tend to avoid paying membership fees and act as 'free-riders' instead. Olson demonstrates that the conditions for organizing interests vary by group size: there is little incentive to join large interest organizations, because they act independently from an individual's contribution. In small groups, however, individual membership may decide whether one can enjoy the fruits of lobbying or not. Thus, the organization of small groups is facilitated by their members' individual material interests, whereas large groups suffer from opportunism and free-riding. These arguments refute the pluralist belief in equal opportunities to associate resulting in a balanced system of representation.

Olson presents the most comprehensive critique of the pluralist group school so far. In pointing to problems of mobilization and internal maintenance, he posed a number of questions that the pluralists had wrongly taken for granted. His classic study (Olson, 1965) is based on six basic premises:

- The primary function of groups is to advance the interests of individuals.
- Groups seek to provide collective goods whose benefits can be limited to members only, or – if indivisible common goods are concerned – can be enjoyed by everyone in the field.
- As it will not be rational for self-interested individuals to contribute to the groups that deliver benefits to everyone, groups are facing a free-rider problem.
- In order to overcome the free-rider problem, groups will have to provide extra incentives or sanctions to get potential members to join.
- The larger the group, the smaller the value of participation by rational individuals.

- Non-material solidarity incentives are important only in small groups or sub-circles of large groups as long as interest trumps ideology.

'Interests trump ideology' has been a basic assumption of pluralist theories from Madisonian reflections on taming the moods and promoting a reasonable consensus through countervailing diversity up to the classic and neo-pluralist approaches to interest politics. James Q. Wilson (1995) casts doubt on this rationalistic view. He modified a widely held view on the role of material interests and their impact on the associability of individuals, as well as on their prospects of collective action. In maintaining an organization, political entrepreneurs may use different motivational resources. Groups can rely on any combination of four general types of associational incentives. Besides material incentives, which are at the heart of Olson's theory, Wilson (1995) distinguishes between specific solidarity incentives that can be withheld from individual group members (honors, prices, positions), collective solidarity incentives (friendship, fun, fellowship and conviviality) and purposive solidarity incentives (beliefs, ideological goals). These motivational forces vary in precision and goal specificity: material incentives can easily be decoupled from goals and directed in precise quantities, whereas purposive solidarity incentives are closely related to a group's stated goals. It follows that groups based on material interests are more adaptive and flexible in their internal organization as well as in relation to their organizational environment, whereas idealistic groups are less able to compromise.

Wilson's theory, in reaction to the material interest bias in Olson's rational choice approach, supports a widespread conviction that collective action is also motivated by ideals, without any expectation of material rewards. Even if one looks at all sorts of solidarity incentives as quasi-material payoffs from membership, such subjectively felt rewards cannot be calculated in a consistent and precise manner. In this respect, Olson's

critique of the classical school of pluralism has become somewhat attenuated.

## Cultural Pluralism

We find pluralistic diversity not only in conflicting interests and ideologies, but also in the area of group values, identities and cultural ways of life. Cultural pluralism and identity politics have been among the most flourishing research fields in the wake of minority and group rights discussions and as a result of increasing international migration movements. Especially with the end of the Cold War, there was a dramatic rise in the political significance of cultural pluralism and a change in scholars' understandings of what drives and shapes ethnic identification in established Western democracies as well as in the successor states of the former Eastern Bloc and in the Global South (Young, 1993). Diversity of culture and values includes differences in group identities and lifestyles marked by religious, linguistic, ethnic and regional affiliations or along the lines of skin color, ancestry, caste, gender and sexual orientation.

Cultural pluralists share some premises with classic pluralism, namely that societies are by no means homogeneous, nor are they determined by distributive social class conflicts. The main difference lies in their special consideration of value conflicts and of cultural differences. Cultural pluralism entails a twofold critique of assimilationist concepts as they prevail in classic interest group pluralism. Culturalist approaches replaced the image of a 'melting pot' of culturally amalgamated citizens with the new metaphor of a 'salad bowl', suggesting that social belongings or identities determined by oneself or others do not melt away but combine like the ingredients of a salad. In addition, there is a functional distinction: cultural pluralism works in other ways than interest pluralism. In culturally segmented societies the amount of overlapping membership seems to be restricted, if not completely absent. One cannot be a Muslim, a Catholic, a Jew and a Hindu at the same time. Even if cultural communities maintain close

relationships, their members may not feel the same cross-pressures from overlap as, for example, a unionist and member of a shareholders' club, consumer, motorist and nature lover when it comes to conflicting interests in high wages, high profits, low prices and a clean environment or – more specific – members of a fishing club finding fisheries polluted by their workplace. The reassuring effects of overlapping membership – and thus of interest pluralism - appear to be less pronounced in culturally segmented social environments where identitary group loyalties outweigh interest. In societies characterized by strongly felt affiliations along ethnicity, skin colour, language or religion, the integrative functions of interest pluralism may  thus be weakened by cultural plurality (cf. Smits 2005).

Cultural pluralism is mostly a normative theory proposing protective group rights for minorities. Kymlicka (2003), for instance, argues that different groups within the same society should be eligible to receive different rights to protect their cultures, religions or worldviews against external pressures. This, however, should not support any attempts of organizational elites to limit their individual members' freedoms in the name of culture. The proposal obviously reveals a dilemma between protective policies for group rights and the liberalist concern for equal rights of individuals, among them defensive rights against political interventions into the private sphere (Deveaux, 2000). Moreover, proposing political valuations of different rights not only leads to legal pluralism, as opposed to the idea of legal unity; it also reflects a normative ranking of ideals that seems inappropriate for pluralist liberal democracies. Protective group rights could also contribute to the segmentation and division of societies. In this respect, multiculturalism as suggested by the proponents of cultural pluralism could intensify conflicts and would, thus, violate the ideal of social balance, peace and compromise to which the pluralistic idea was first and foremost committed. This seems particularly threatening if cultural, economic and social cleavages reinforce each other and this

eventually throws modern societies back to segmented tribal structures.

Some aspects of cultural pluralism resemble the concept of 'consociationalism' that Arend Lijphart has vehemently advocated since the 1960s (Lijphart, 1971). The key elements of consociational democracies are cultural groups forming relatively closed social 'pillars' that are integrated through cooperative relations among their highest representatives at the elite level of societal sectors such as public media, religions, education, administrations and political parties, in particular. Such systems, also known as 'Proporzdemokratie' (proportional democracy) or 'Konkordanzdemokratie' (concordance democracy), existed and still exist in somewhat looser versions in Austria, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Belgium. Initially, political camps were formed comprising parties that are linked with ideological (e.g. Austria, Switzerland), religious (e.g. the Netherlands) or language (e.g. Belgium) groups in those countries, resulting in a two-tier system of electoral and associational political participation (Lehmbruch, 1977). Such non-majoritarian democracies based on political power-sharing instead of majority rule are considered to solve conflicts in societies that are divided by deep cultural, ideological, religious or linguistic cleavages (Lijphart, 2004). They often occur together with corporatist interest intermediation and traditions of social partnership. In such cases, political camps are formed in which certain parties and the electoral channel of participation are linked with respective interest associations and subsystems of political interest bargaining. Political systems based on non-majoritarian consensual forms of political conflict regulation have also been labeled 'consensus democracy' or 'negotiation democracy'.

## REGIONAL VARIETIES OF PLURALISM

The United States is the homeland of pluralism. Pluralist politics is anchored in its constitutional history just as variants of liberal corporatism characterize policy making in some small European countries, whereas state corporatism prevails in parts of Latin America and in some states in Asia and Africa. This has to do with empirical realities, but also with traditions of political thought and regional academic legacies.

The many political science approaches dealing with pluralism still lack a coherent understanding of interest politics. The American perspective remains focused on lobby groups influencing governmental decision-making. Research on European state–group relations emphasized bi-directional exchange relations between governments and organized groups instead. In Latin America and newly industrialized countries in Asia, the view prevails that governments use state–group relations to structure and guide national economies and societies in a top-down process.

Pressure on governments, negotiations with governments and subordination to governments can be seen as three distinct major modes of interest politics. They differ in the direction of the influence and are known as pluralist pressure politics, liberal corporatism and state corporatism respectively.

American researchers' continuing and recently renewed obsession with one-directional lobbying is difficult to explain, as studies on sub-governments, issue networks and iron triangles have proven the existence of bi-directional collaborative relationships between state authorities and private interests in the United States. Most American studies on pluralism missed the realities of interest intermediation outside the United States. Similarly, after the 1970s, European researchers rarely took the North American perspective. Thus, theories as well as empirical work have been split along paradigms and continents so far.

During the 1960s a number of case studies appeared in an attempt to apply the American perspective to some European and Latin American countries. Skilling (1971) suggested that the 'group theory' might prove useful to examine Soviet politics, since he

found public manifestations of the influence of special interests on policy formulation in the post-Stalin phase. Apparently, even under authoritarian regimes in developing and communist countries, informal groups and various forms of pluralist pressure politics had been identified to drive the political process (Linz and Stepan, 1978). Up to the 1970s, international debates were dominated by an ethnocentric view, which treated political systems and processes as a variety of American pressure group lobbying. Implicit to this analysis was a functionalistic optimism which attributed the modernization of societies and the postwar economic boom to the beneficial consequences of democratic pluralism.

Many empirical analyses of political process in African or Asian countries have been shaped, if not dominated, by liberal pluralist thinking. In assuming Euro-American value terms and working conditions, most of them tended to downplay or screen out the diversity of cultural viewpoints and conflicts, which differ fundamentally from interest group pluralism. As a consequence, the pluralist approach often went hand in hand with an assimilationist thrust in favor of modernization and Westernization. This may have contributed to the rise of anti-pluralist attitudes of politics in the guise of cultural nationalism and populism, which have, in different ways, become a significant feature of contemporary politics in some Asian countries (Mobrand, 2018). As in most parts of Africa, majoritarian and exclusionary policies and agendas with a strong emphasis on public order and security form the core of the ruling elite orientation. The intersection of social conservatism and populism is a key feature of present anti-pluralist politics. Anti-pluralism often builds on legacies of 'authoritarian statism' that once pushed back representative institutions and strengthened the authority of bureaucratic agencies not directly accountable to the public.

Research on interest politics in the EU showed that its institutions and policies contribute to the transformation of interest intermediation in Europe (Streeck and Schmitter, 1991). Most research indicates that business associations do particularly well in promoting their agendas and preventing policies they do not want (Klüver, 2013). Others found that the EU's multiple tiers of government offer opportunities for citizen groups to defend and advance their interests (Dür et al., 2015). In addition, the EU Commission regards citizens' groups as allies in its efforts to improve its competences and legitimacy, and to establish a European public space. The European Parliament's receptiveness toward citizen groups additionally supports these efforts. Besides, the ability of activists to expand public debates and conflict exceeds that of established business associations who prefer to shape the policy process quietly, avoiding open conflict (Dür et al., 2015: 958, 967, 975).

## MAJOR ADVANCES, ONGOING DEBATES, CRITICAL ASSESSMENTS

Research on interest groups has made great progress over the past century. Much has been learned – how they emerge and organize, aggregate and articulate demands, interact among each other, influence the legislative and executive branches of governments, and how all this effects the outputs and outcomes of public policy-making in pluralist democracies. Following David Truman's (1951) extension of Bentley's (1908) seminal study on social pressures and their effects on governing, a bulk of interest group research appeared, a considerable part of which led to disillusionment. Early notions of balancing private interests serving the public interest have been continuously refuted. In most of the cases investigated, the forces of interest influence were found to be unevenly distributed. However, most studies also confirmed that powerful single interests were not able to monopolize political decision-making.

In this respect, the central thrust of pluralist theories could be confirmed: there is no single private interest, nor any sovereign power, in a pluralist democracy commanding the common good.

Olson's (1965) rational choice approach to the study of interest groups demystified some long established views on the functioning of pluralism. He could demonstrate that there is no level playing field in pressure politics. Moreover, what early pluralists saw as equilibration appeared to be more of a series of distributive struggles among small special interest groups exploiting the general interest: in other words, a sort of wrestling in a china shop, damaging the common good (Olson, 1986: 173).

Olson's theory exposed some serious flaws of the pluralist model but did not falsify the approach as such, nor replace it with a new one. On the contrary, Olson affirmed the idea of policy making being a multi-channel process of political influence. He even emphasized the key role of lobby groups for national welfare (Olson, 1986). Gary Becker, however, considered Olson's condemnation of small interest groups to be exaggerated 'because competition among these groups contributes to the survival of policies that raise output' (Becker, 1983: 344). Small interest groups may be more efficient in controlling the negative effects of free-riding, but they are handicapped in taking advantage of scale economies in the organization of pressure. Becker assumes that policies reducing social outputs stimulate more countervailing pressures from negatively afflicted groups than welfare-enhancing policies do. This is mainly because the potentials to compensate cost-bearers decrease owing to the dead-weight losses of collusive cartelization or redistributive policies. Therefore, in democratic states, the rising marginal costs of socially destructive lobbying should mark the limits of an excessively unbalanced growth of narrow interest groups (Czada, 1991: 272).

After the turn of the millennium, new approaches were largely inspired by attempts to take into account policy attributes and thematic factors that affect the course and outcomes of interest politics. It has been established that the issue context, in terms of number of actors involved and their public interest position, matters for the strategies used and for their political success (Mahoney, 2007). Baumgartner et al. (2009) found that groups defending the status quo usually do better in realizing their goals than groups seeking to change policies.

Research on the effects of interest group action on policy outputs still suffers from a lack of data. It is much more difficult to measure the political weight of interest groups than that of political parties. Except for simple cases, the relationship between the stakes of groups and their political strengths remains a mystery, largely because in nearly all studies neither stakes nor gains in regulation are directly measured. This is all the more lamentable as the relative power to influence served as a key explanatory variable. The causal impact of interest groups on outcomes is still unsolved. Theories of pluralism and most research contributions simply assume that groups have an influence on policy outcomes. In contrast, theories on corporatism turn the influence vectors around or are based on the assumption of bi-directional causation and repercussions of governmental policies on group strategies in particular. It seems at least reasonable to assume that redistributive policies in favor of certain groups make them stronger and more influential. Lehmbruch (1991), in an attempt to establish a developmental theory of interest systems, points to the fact that interactions between interest organizations and governments are shaped by long established national administrative cultures. Corporatist relations prevail in Scandinavian and some other small European countries. Lasting close relationships between administrations and associations were also found in Germany, but to a much lesser extent in the UK, and hardly at all in the United States. They are practically absent in France due to the pronounced claim of autonomy of the French bureaucratic elite.

The closest state–society networks could be found in Switzerland, where - at the end of the 19th century - the federal government began to subsidize the formation of representational monopolies of top associations due to the

> peculiar structure of the Swiss state. Because of its institutional decentralization and, at that time, its extremely weak administrative capacities, the government of the federation found itself not well equipped to reconcile the conflicting interests in foreign trade and conduct successful international negotiations on tariffs. Therefore, it proposed to the 'Vorort' (hitherto an association run by leading businessmen in a honorary capacity) and to the Swiss Union of Articrafts and Trades (small business) financial grants to employ full-time secretaries for the establishment of trade statistics and other documentation needed by the government. (Lehmbruch, 1991: 137)

To be sure, state-society links, sectoral sub-governments, issue networks and iron triangles have been part of the American research agenda. But close state–group interactions have been interpreted more as an expression of inadmissible state capture than as two-sided exchange relationships. This, however, is just another indication of how strongly the focus on group pressures and lobbying shapes the American tradition of research on pluralism. This is not just a blind spot on the research agenda. Rather, it points to a possible tautology that lies in assuming a clear causality to the ambiguous relationship between political pressure and public policy. Since most policies have redistributive effects, researchers have been tempted to identify winning groups as the most powerful. Such a backward conclusion would only apply if one interprets public policies solely as the result of group pressure. It turns into tautology when other explanatory factors, such as factual constraints, scientific expertise, institutional imperatives, policy routines or strategies of governments toward particular groups, are taken into account, to the point that governments exert pressure or ask interest groups to exert pressure on them in favor of a particular policy.

## CONCLUSION AND PROSPECTS

In summary, it can be said that pluralism research has gone through several stages of development and branched out in many ways, but without abandoning its reference to the impact of interest group politics on political decision-making. Leaving the early history of ideas aside, research on democratic pluralism began with the American group school and its assumption that public policy making was determined by the interaction of groups (Truman, 1951). The second stage focused on the concept of 'pluralist democracy' based on a decentralized, non-majoritarian political system called 'polyarchy' by Dahl (1967). Major contributions to the third stage denied former assumptions that all groups have equal opportunities to organize and to deal with conflicts. McFarland (2010: 40) describes this stage as one of 'multiple-elitism' because of its particular focus on special-interest coalitions, sub-governments and issue networks. The fourth stage of neo-pluralism and corporatist intermediation extended the thematic range by emphasizing the role of governments and administrations and their exchange relationships with interest groups.

In the course of this development, each subsequent variant of theory and research retained elements of earlier ones, but rejected others that were thought to be erroneous. This looks like an ideal case of cumulative research and discovery. However, it did not lead to a coherent theory of pluralism. On the contrary: in dealing with diversity, the research on pluralism has itself very much diversified. This is due to the fact that one finds a multitude of democratic models of interest intermediation over time, along policy fields and in a cross-national comparative perspective.

The conclusion drawn long ago that group influence is fundamentally biased in favor of business and professional interests is still generally correct. Nevertheless, many studies point to a much more diverse interest group

system in which weak groups are somewhat better represented now than in the 1970s and 1980s. Sustained distortions are mainly caused by barriers to collective action as explained by Olson (1965) and lacking resources on the part of underrepresented interest groups.

Most promising new avenues point to the effects of government policies on the structure and development of interest groups. Increasing government activities seemingly led to a massive shift in interest group activism, creating a more diverse and densely packed political environment. Moreover, attributes of state institutions go hand in hand with access opportunities for groups, and specific policies shape their choices, opportunities and strategies – an observation that Eckstein (1960) already made more than half a century ago with reference to the British case. This is reminiscent of two critical statements on pluralism research: first, Almond's (1983: 252) comment that research in pluralism reveals signs of 'professional amnesia … impairment of professional memory [that] has become common in political science and helps to explain its fragmented and faddish character'; second, LaPalombara's (1960: 29, 34) warning not to simply transfer American approaches elsewhere, but to take other countries' different traditions and structures of interest politics as a basis for cross-national comparisons. This task, suggested in a paper delivered at the 1959 Annual Meeting of the Midwest Conference of Political Scientists, is yet to be undertaken.

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