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Politics in
Perspective

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Modern pluralist theory has been a significant intellectual force in the discipline of political science, and Robert Dahl has consistently been a major theorist of the tradition. In this new work, *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy*, Dahl delineates the strengths and weaknesses of "democratic pluralism." The study presents a theory of democracy inextricably bound up with the notion of group autonomy, which should surprise no one who has read Dahl's contributions over the years. Indeed, Dahl's definition of democracy assumes the presence of "relatively autonomous [independent] organizations [subsystems] within the domain of a state" (p. 5).

This is not the classical definition of democracy in the polis, but refers to the modern, large-scale nation-state. In such structures, democracy makes possible and itself depends on the existence of autonomous organizations.

Like Madison, Dahl sees the existence of autonomous groups as related to the degree of freedom found in the political arena. "Because it is in democratic countries that the existence of independent organizations is most fully protected by the institutions of the regime, it is in democratic countries that they flourish" (p. 38). Yet Dahl's commitment to his own theory of "polyarchy" as democracy leads him to confuse the issue to some degree. It is the liberty of the *liberal* regime that provides the fertile environment for the formation of voluntary associations. The lesson to be drawn from Tocqueville (and J. S. Mill, as well) is that democracy can inflict its own form of despotism on the individual (and group). But we can accept Dahl's point that the regime in which there are no autonomous organizations would have to be either completely homogeneous in all interests (a virtual impossibility) or else oppressively authoritarian. As Dahl shows, even the most authoritarian regimes will generally tolerate some degree of autonomous group formation—the cost of suppression not being worth the effort. Yet it is only in the stable democratic-liberal polity that individuals can freely organize to express their economic and political interests (witness the fate of Solidarity in Poland). These groups are the result of democratic-liberal politics, and they restrain governmental coercion by acting as a counterforce to the political power of the state.

The major criticisms of modern pluralist theory—offered by such writers as Lindblom, Lowi, Kariel, and McConnell—do not deny this, but focus instead on the ways in which autonomous organizations (interest groups and corporations) corrupt the fundamental principles of democratic government. It is argued that the individual as the primary focus of classical liberal theory is lost as organization becomes the prerequisite for political participation. Representation through groups means that in-

ROBERT A. DAHL. *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy: Autonomy vs. Control*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982. 229 pages.

MARVIN E. OLSEN. *Participatory Pluralism: Political Participation and Influence in the United States and Sweden*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1982. 318 pages.

Following Tocqueville, it is often asserted that Americans have a propensity to form voluntary associations to deal with questions of politics, economics, or social interests. In *Federalist #10*, Madison laid the foundation for a theory of pluralism that assumes a natural division of mankind into distinct "factions" or interest groups based on human nature and social and economic life. Liberty inevitably creates such divisions based on interest; the proper government accepts such "autonomous" groups and, through constitutional engineering, directs the influence of partial interests in favor of the public good. Traditional pluralist thought in America praised the voluntary association for its cultivation of social ties among the citizenry, but the distinction between the public realm and that of private partial interests was maintained. In this sense, pluralist theorists did not stray too far from classical liberal thought in their concern with checking both the tyranny of the state and of factions.

equalities related to organizational strengths are translated into political inequalities. The internal structure of organization is oligarchical; hence, representation is further distorted. Finally, different groups exert unequal influence because of the intrinsic inequality of different economic roles: hence, Lindholm's argument in *Politics and Markets* that business enjoys a special status vis-à-vis group/state relations. Obviously, in the world of pluralist democracy, not all groups will exert equal influence.

Although Dahl stresses the importance of autonomous organizations for democratic politics, he concedes the shortcomings of group politics. This is the dilemma of democratic pluralism—while autonomous groups are desirable, their very autonomy creates other problems for democratic government. “While necessary, desirable, and inevitable in a democratic order, organizational pluralism may also play a part in stabilizing inequalities, deforming civic consciousness, distorting the public agenda, and alienating final control over the public agenda by the citizen body” (p. 166). These are formidable problems, and Dahl considers such remedies as a more equitable distribution of income and resources and a “decentralization to socially owned or employee-owned firms, either of which might in principle be democratically controlled” (p. 199). Such remedies to equalize and democratize pluralist politics are a direct response to those critics who have simply argued that pluralist competition is unequal and undemocratic. Lowi and McConnell, however, stress the corruption of public authority through the destruction of formalistic modes of decision making as private interests intrude into the public arena. Dahl's emphasis on equalizing, democratizing, and decentralizing misses the major thrust of this critique. In the end, Dahl's theory further blurs the distinction between what is public and what is private—and hence subject to public authority.

Still, Dahl is sensitive to the charges made against autonomous groups and their undue influence on democratic politics. Marvin E. Olsen, in *Participatory Pluralism*, is much less concerned with the shortcomings of representation through groups. He does thoughtfully and accurately review the literature of two relevant schools of thought—pluralism and participatory democracy. Like Dahl, Olsen sees benefits in participation in politics through voluntary

associations. His overriding ideological concern is increasing citizen participation in politics. Pointing out the common theme of both schools—that is, the virtue of citizen participation in small-scale organizations, either the workplace or voluntary association—Olsen argues for an increase in citizen participation at this level in order to yield an increase in political participation. This argument involves a review of the literature on participation, which shows that most citizens simply are not actively involved in politics. Hence, their interest in participating in politics must be cultivated by encouraging involvement in voluntary associations (p. 179). Of course, this begs the question of why most citizens are not motivated to participate in politics in the first place. And exactly who will “encourage” citizens to participate in voluntary or workplace association? The state? The “party of participation”?

Olsen offers a hybrid of pluralism and participatory democracy: “participatory pluralism.” This remedy for the absence of mass citizen participation calls for the wholesale reorganization of social, economic, and political structures. Citizens would be organized into “functional” groups (à la G. D. H. Cole) that represent distinct economic or social interests. Participation through this corporatist structure would completely open the public arena to citizen (namely group) interests and input. Olsen sees this as the virtue of participatory pluralism: the state as an entity external to the individual would wither away as public authority is delegated to organized functional interests. “This eradication of the distinction between public and private organizations would be a fundamental feature of participatory pluralism, for it would enable all individuals and organizations to participate in public decision making within the contexts of other private activities” (p. 228). Olsen takes the most telling criticism of pluralistic corporatist politics and turns it into a virtue. The worst fears of such liberal pluralist theorists as Madison and Tocqueville are fulfilled in “participatory pluralism.”

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