



INTERESTS

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December 2006

“Interests” in Western European Politics – in practice or in the journal – purport to explain everything and, therefore, they do not explain anything. Scratch the surface of almost any WEP article and you will find that the answer to “why did he or she act politically?” will usually be “because it was in his or her interest to do so.” Ask “why did he or she have such an interest in the first place?” or, even worse, “why did he or she think that such an action or policy would eventually lead to the satisfaction of that interest?” and you will only rarely get a convincing answer.

Albert Hirschman has meticulously traced the origins of this concept and how it became such an omnipresent explanation for political action – despite the recentsness of its usage and the ambiguity of its meaning.¹ He argues that its rise in the political lexicon parallels the emergence of capitalism and, hence, has impregnated political thinking with analogies of market competition. It has become so commonplace that what used to be called “greed” and regarded as a despicable vice by the ancients has become a universally expected and even benevolent motive among the moderns – so much so that those who still seem to be acting in the name of its antithesis, i.e. “passions,” are usually regarded as idiosyncratic and dangerous. National patriotism, religious zeal, moral certainty, family honor, tribal loyalty, personal glory and so forth are considered atavistic and more likely to lead to irresolvable conflicts and perverse outcomes than good old, prosaic but dependable, “interests.”

Just because so many political analysts rely so much upon it does not mean that they agree on how to define it. Following Hirschman, there seem to be three elements in common:

1. Interests are **self-regarding** in the sense that their pursuit is expected – rightly or wrongly – to produce a differential and favorable net benefit to the actor involved, despite the fact that quite frequently arguments in favor of them are phrased exclusively in terms of the benefit they would bring to a wider collectivity, e.g. the community, the nation, the public or the planet.
2. Interests are **calculated by the actors** themselves – again, rightly or wrongly – to be of benefit rather than pursued instinctually or un-reflexively due to some prior and over-riding ethical indoctrination, social conditioning or cultural conformity, even though these same actors may include in their calculation the probability that others will react on such ethical, social or cultural grounds.
3. Interests are **consciously recognized**, which follows from the previous two elements, in the sense that actors are aware of their existence (if often anxious to disguise them behind collective labels) and sufficiently concerned about their satisfaction that they are willing to act politically to obtain them (if also aware that it makes sense to “free-ride” on the actions of others).ⁱⁱ

Up to this point, the presumption seems to have been that the actors involved are exclusively individual human beings and, therefore, that a political science founded primarily on the pursuit of interests and the conflict among them has to be based on “methodological” as well as “epistemological” individualism. Not at all! “Actors” as expressed above can just as well be collectivities – admittedly composed of individuals and dependent in varying degrees upon their contributions – but quite capable of regarding their own collective self-interests, making calculations about these interests and developing as well as inculcating interest consciousness in others. Indeed, one could argue that individuals would be incapable of recognizing and evaluating their interests on their own, without the assistance of various collectivities in the workplace, social setting, cultural milieu and political environment that provide them with the reference points and identities that they need prior to making such an assessment. An isolated individual would be helpless without groups based on functional, territorial and/or symbolic identities.

Actual research on “the politics of interests” as evidenced in the WEP and the political science literature on Western Europe in general has focused overwhelmingly on **organizations** -- permanently constituted and collectively governed – as its basic unit of observation and analysis.

Of course, there exists a parallel literature on public opinion as formed by individual citizens and as measured by mass surveys, focus groups and media reports that attempts to assess its impact upon policy choices and electoral outcomes, but it would appear to be only of tangential relevance to the study of interest politics. Indeed, one often hears the accusation that “special interests” have defeated or distorted some project that the public at large supports. What seems to count most when it comes to explaining “who gets what, when and how” out of the competitive struggle in democratic polities depends on organized interests: political parties & factions, trade unions, professional & business associations, neighborhood organizations, women’s groups, environmental movements, advocacy groups, and so forth. Moreover, these organizations form more comprehensive systems of interest intermediation such that the influence of any one of them depends on its relationship with others. In the WEP and elsewhere, this has often taken the form of a discussion of the implications of **pluralism** versus **corporatism** as contrasting “ideal-typical” configurations within European democracies.

According to the “WEP Model” (not exclusively of the journal but of the region as a whole), organized interests are especially crucial in this part of the world since they were historically and uniquely embedded in the civil societies of medieval city-states and since the later struggle for mass political democracy revolved around them. No other part of the world has such a dense network of class, sectoral and professional associations, such multiple sets of well-organized and disciplined political parties and such a historical legacy of social movements. The ‘standard-revised’ version of its politics as set out by Stein Rokkan and others presumes that these political organizations correspond to a varying set of social cleavages at the national level. Parties, associations and movements were composed of individuals who found themselves on different sides of these cleavages. The behavior of these individuals could be predicted by their respective structural positions and, moreover, this behavior of identity and loyalty tended to persist even after the original conflicts that generated them had weakened. Periodic compromises across these cleavages – often associated with war or depression – failed to dissolve their organizational expressions, precisely because they contributed so much to consolidating regimes of liberal democracy.

SOME DESCRIPTIVE GENERALIZATIONS

Since the mid-1970s, Western European Politics have undergone significant changes – and this has been particularly marked in the arena of “interest politics.” Below, I will list some apodictic

statements about these changes. I doubt that any of them has been sufficiently documented in the WEP (or any other scholarly journal for that matter). Please consider them, for the moment, as speculative observations that remain to be proven (or explained).

In presenting them, I will follow the conventional tripartite division into parties, movements and associations, even if the boundaries between them are fuzzy and changeable. Many political parties and interest associations had (and new ones continue to have) their origin in social movements. Many candidates nominated by parties have no chance of winning office or even participating in governing coalitions and are only on the ballot to attract attention to some corresponding movement. Associations make no overt attempt to nominate candidates or occupy elected positions and, thereby, to accept political responsibility for their actions, but they nevertheless may play a key role in the “after election” appointment process in order to place “their people” in these offices. The key distinction between interest associations and social movements is supposed to be the self-regarding-ness of the former as they struggle to obtain selective goods only for their members and the other-regarding-ness of the latter as they promote the production of public goods that affect everyone. Needless to say, this analytical distinction may be of more rhetorical than practical difference.

While it is not inconceivable that individuals alone or spontaneous aggregations of individuals can affect policies or even bring down governments and regimes, these three types of organizations have become – certainly in Western Europe – the effective “citizens” of their respective democracies. They offer the most reliable channels for influencing and holding accountable public authorities. The mix of their roles may differ across polities and over time, but together they constitute the civil societies that are so essential to the functioning of “real-existing democracies (REDs)” – despite the fact that they are only rarely mentioned as such in their constitutions. As we shall now speculate, there is evidence to suggest that these organizations for representing interests (and passions) have changed a great deal in the past 25 to 30 years.

I. Political Parties:

1. Decline in membership in and identification with political parties.
2. Decline in trust in parties and their politicians/leaders
3. Decline in the role of parties in the process of forming governments
4. Increase in collusion between major parties and convergence in their programs

5. Emergence of new parties at the fringe or take-over of pre-existing parties
6. Decrease in the margin of victory for winning parties or coalitions
7. Increase in the volatility of electoral choices by citizens
8. Increase in the rapidity of turn-over of parties in power
9. Rise in the importance of public funding
10. Shift in organizational form from 'mass' to 'cartel parties'

II. Social Movements:

11. Increase in the number, variety, resources and visibility of social movements
12. Attempts to convert some social movements into political parties, e.g. Greens
13. Some increased recognition and access of movements as 'stakeholders'
14. Increase in the role of contributors/subscribers over members/militants
15. Increase over time in the role of bureaucratic/professional staff
16. Cross-national subsidization of movements, especially from West to East
17. Some shift in strategy from influencing public authorities to affecting the behavior of private firms

III. Interest Associations:

18. Decline in membership of some traditional associations, especially trade unions
19. Severance of long standing connections between associations and 'sister' parties
20. Decline in the role/capacity of encompassing peak associations
21. Decline in resort to mechanisms of comprehensive policy concertation
22. Shift to lower levels of inter-associational bargaining, even to micro or firm level
23. Some increase in mergers between previously independent associations
24. Increase in the provision of services to members as key organizational activity
25. Steady level of membership in civil society organizations, but
26. Shift toward 'apolitical' forms of associability satisfying private interests and
27. Shift away from 'political' forms oriented to influencing public policy decisions
28. Challenges to well-established state practices of subsidization and official recognition

IV. All Forms of Representation of Interests or Passions:

29. Increase in trans-national connections between equivalent organizations
30. Strong increase in formation of European-level associations and movements, but
31. Only modest rise in party organization at the European or global level

32. Spread of ‘Western’ organizational forms to ‘Eastern’ neo-democracies
33. Increase in the role of professional staff/consultants and paid labor
34. Persistently high level of “interest in politics” (as measured by mass surveys) coupled with persistently declining level of participation in (electoral) politics

SOME POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS

Presuming that the observations are generally correct, what could have caused such numerous and significant changes? Even if only one half of them were found to be correct, that would still leave a lot to be explained. One is tempted to claim that national civil societies in Western Europe have undergone a ‘silent revolution’ since the mid-1970s which has affected both the attributes of individual organizations and the configuration of their respective systems of party competition, social mobilization and interest intermediation. And they have done this without regime discontinuity (except, of course, in Eastern Europe), widespread recourse to violence or enduring shift in the ideological orientation of governments.

Let us briefly examine the most likely suspects:ⁱⁱⁱ

1. **Impact of Exogenous Shocks:** The onset of the above-noted changes does correspond roughly with the two successive oil shocks of the mid-1970s. Together, they could have produced some major and lasting changes in the relations between economic sectors, but why would they have affected Left-Right party competition and capital-labor relations where most of the changes have taken place? The Southern and Northern enlargements of the EU were hardly very “shocking,” although the impact of the more recent (and much more significant) Eastern one has yet to be fully registered. The collapse of communist rule and the Soviet Empire at the very end of the 1980s was certainly both unexpected and consequential. It certainly helps to explain the convergence in programs and collusion in behavior of political parties (Item I-4) and may have something to do with the proliferation of new ‘fringe’ parties (Item I-5). But what might be the connection of this shock with organized interests and passions? Did it weaken the power of trade unions and of Social Democratic parties enough to bring about some of the observed transformations (Items III-18 &19)? Did the elimination of the “Communist Menace” indirectly encourage the formation of ‘radical’ social movements, by

freeing them of “guilt by association” with real-existing communism (Item-11) and open up spaces on the fringe for their attempted conversion into new parties (Item III-12)?

2. **Change in Endogenous Values:** What about the inverse causality? Is it plausible to sustain that a prior and gradual ‘silent revolution’ in Western European mass public opinion toward so-called post-materialist values – as documented by Ronald Inglehart and others – could be responsible for at least some of the observed changes? Many of the new parties on the fringe (Item I-5) profess such values. Items II-11, 12 &13 all referring to the surge in social movement activity could be even more closely related to it – and, in a bit more stretched account, so could the decline in membership in ‘materialistic’ self-regarding trade unions and employer associations (Item III-18). But what about the shift toward services within associations and toward apolitical associations in general? Or the decline in the level at which bargaining between capital and labor takes place?
3. **Globalization/Liberalization:** This is everyone’s favorite suspect these days. The timing seems about right, although the process started long before the mid-1970s and gathered momentum during the 1990s. Removing political and technological barriers to the flow of goods, services, money, ideas and (to a lesser extent) people across previously more protected national or regional borders had a profound effect on the relative power of classes in the production system and the relative influence of ‘exposed’ as opposed to ‘sheltered’ sectors of the economy. Globalization’s “twin” – the liberalization of state ownership and regulation of private enterprises – has removed some highly contentious matters from the public agenda and even projected the image that no policy alternatives to it exist. This has repeatedly been credited with causing programmatic convergence between major parties (Item I-4). Dialectically speaking, it could also be credited with promoting the shift in strategy noted in Item II-17, not to mention the general rise in protest movements in response to the less regulated behavior of private businesses (Item II-11). Without a doubt, the demise of many macro-corporatist arrangements and the shift to lower level, even firm, bargaining was due to the defection of capitalists in larger multi-national firms who had become more confident of their capacity to act uni-laterally in defiance of trade unions (Item III-21&22). Item IV-21 on the increase in trans-national connections between associations and movements is a particularly direct result of globalization, but it may well be that the shift toward service provision within associations is linked to processes of adaptation to greater competition and less protection (Item III-23).

4. **Regional Integration:** Western Europe has been the site of the most successful attempt at not just eliminating national barriers to exchange, but also at generating common rules to regulate trans-national exchanges. Most observers have expressed surprise at its modest impact upon national political parties. My hunch is that much of the collusion among them (Item I-4) and activity at the fringe (Item I-5) can be attributed to the behavior of major parties which have deliberately avoided making issues of European integration salient because these issues tend to divide their traditional supporters. The acceleration given to this process during the mid-1980s by the Single European Act must have contributed something to Item III-28 since many practices of business and professional associations violated the liberalizing provisions of this treaty and subsequent EU directives. Item IV-30 on the formation of regional associations and movements was one clear and continuing impact of the EU. The number of business and professional interests with European representation in Brussels has reached the 1000s, although it should also be observed that direct representation of larger firms has increased even more proportionately – hinting at a process of circumvention of traditional “corporatist” channels. The increase of inter-organizational exchanges at the wider continental or global level (Item IV-29) may also have been promoted by this variable, as well as globalization. Much of the diffusion process whereby ‘Western’ practices moved East was closely linked to EU assistance programs and the imperatives of adjusting to the *acquis communautaire* upon entry into the club (Item IV-32).

5. **Trans-Continental Migration:** Another process that began to affect Western Europe as a whole during this period, accelerating to crisis levels in recent years, is a massive increase in population flows from outside the region. EU treaties and directives had surprisingly little impact on intra-European labor flows. In fact, Southern enlargement seems to have produced more return flow than outflow and Northern enlargement seems only to have affected top-level professionals. Needless to say, Eastern enlargement has just begun to take hold and is already having a much more substantial effect. But it is the flows from the Middle East, Africa and Asia that have captured the political agenda and certainly stimulated the emergence of xenophobic fringe parties (Item I-5). The manifest impotence (or unwillingness) of national governments to staunch these flows seems to be related to the decline in membership in governing parties and the prestige of governing politicians (Items I-1&2). It may even be related to electoral volatility and frequency of turn-over in power as citizens become more fickle in their perceptions of almost universally discredited politicians (Items 7&8). Presumably, the availability of low cost foreign labor has some effect on the “balance of class forces,” but the response at the associational level is by no means obvious – and probably differs from one

country to another. Macro-corporatism may be threatened (Items 20, 21 & 22) by such a shift in power, but not necessarily the other changes in associational structure and behavior.

6. **Aging Population:** Western Europeans have been getting proportionately older during the past three decades, as birth rates and mortality rates have plummeted. The effect of this on associations and movements has received relatively little attention, but two aspects seem obvious. Older people have sustained their habits of associability and, indeed, have come to dominate specific organizational segments. For example, many trade unions in Europe today have more retired than active members, and the former demand more services (Item III-24). They also have more time to participate in recreational activities (Item III-26). Moreover, associations catering to the aged have emerged and, in the East, one occasionally finds a Pensioners' Party or two. This may help to explain why youths entering the labor market find traditional trade unions less attractive (Item III-18) and tend to express their interests (or, in some cases, their passions) more through social movements (Item II-11).
7. **Lower Economic Growth:** Compared to "*Les Trente Glorieuses*" immediately after World War II, the last thirty years have been lean in terms of economic performance – and especially so for young people. The overall class and regional distribution of income in Western European democracies has been relatively constant, but job opportunities and salaries for those entering the labor market have been persistently lower than in the past. Since much of the reluctance to join established parties (Item I-1) and the increase in electoral abstention have occurred among youths, it is tempting to lay the blame here. Stretching a bit further, the failure of governments of any of the major competing parties to perform markedly better may have something to do with narrowing the margins of victory (Item I-6) and the subsequent consequences in terms of electoral volatility and turn-over in office. Social movements have probably been boosted, especially among young people, by the failure of parties to perform when in office and by the appeal of 'alternative' solutions (Items II-11, 12 & 17). High unemployment and downwardly flexible wages tend to reduce the incentives for capitalists to participate in policy concertation involving organized labor, especially at the macro-level (Items III-20 & 21). They also give additional power to individual firms in the labor market (Item III-22)
8. **Rapid Pace of Technological Innovation:** The diffusion of major innovations, especially in information and communication technology, has become massive, unpredictable and uncontrollable. Some have originated within Western Europe; most have been thrust upon it from abroad. By now, it seems safe to say that not a single organization in civil society has

been unaffected by it – positively or negatively. Some have tried to resist, but once competitors have adopted them, they may have no choice but to conform. My suspicion is that most of its effect on parties, associations and movements shows up in their internal organizational structures – feeding pre-existing trends toward professionalized management, fund-raising, influence-peddling and voter-appealing (Item IV-33). At the extreme (admittedly, yet to be reached in Europe), political parties become little more than massive data-banks manipulated by paid specialists promoting messages generated by survey research or focus groups. Already the costs of campaigning have gone up – beyond what is covered by public funding (Item I-8) – and this may have something to do with the replacement of voluntary with paid labor and the shift to cartel forms of organization (Item I-10). Social movements have also used ICT more extensively and this seems to be reflected in Items II-14 & 15: greater dependence on financial donors than upon active members and increased role for professional staff. Some use computerized schedules and professionally elaborated proposals to appeal for funds from individuals, corporations and foundations that share their cause, but never meet together – much less deliberate about the movement's goals and strategies. Those that have been recognized as bona fide 'stakeholders' (Item II-13) have become even more reliant on technical expertise and data-gathering. Interest associations increasingly become electronic purveyors of specialized information and "selective goods" to members who pay dues and fees but do not participate in their policy process (Item III-24).

9. **Mediatization:** No one doubts that mass media (and television, in particular) has become a much more important source of information and opinion about politics than civil society itself. The time when a citizen relied upon his or her party, trade union, neighborhood organization or 'social cause' to anchor their expectations about what public authorities should do seems foregone. Survey evidence shows that, however residual this may be among older citizens, these identities and loyalties are not being passing it on to sons and daughters. Each new generation seems to be starting with a blank slate – and filling it with the images and slogans it picks up from the media. Although it has emerged as a major force relatively late in the period we are considering, the use of the Internet as both a source of political information and a resource for coordinating political action has become pervasive. It is probably parties that have been most affected – negatively, in the sense in the sense of loss of members, trust and role in forming governments (Items I-1, 2, & 3), but also positively in terms of the rising importance of public funding, the role of professional managers and consultants and the shift towards cartel forms of internal organization (Items I-9 & 10, Item III-33). Social movements have also learned to exploit the media and to shift public attention away from "the main ring of the electoral circus" toward "the side rings of public corruption and private malfeasance." This has

not only increased their visibility (Item II-11) and served to discredit parties and politicians (Item I-2), but it has also helped them gain recognition (Item II-13) and to shift their strategy to direct attempts to influence the behavior of corporations. Interest associations typically operate in the shadow of public opinion and only rarely surface with “institutional advertising” to promote the image/interest of their category. It is not clear what is cause and effect, but the rupture between trade unions and their respective “sister parties” has often been accompanied by a great deal of media attention (Item III-19). Media promotion may also have had something to do with the shift towards more “private-regarding” organizations in civil society, just as well-publicized scandals may have discouraged membership and activism in more “political-regarding” ones (Items III-26 & 27).

10. Declining Capacity of the National State: Objectively, in the context of globalization and regionalization, sovereign national states can no longer carry out effectively and autonomously the tasks assigned to them by their respective constitutions and expected of them by their respective citizens. Subjectively, the notion of sovereignty may still be comforting (and some even regard it as indispensable for RED),^{iv} but many interests and passions can only be realized through cooperation or integration with other polities. Parties are still among the most “national” of political organizations and even European integration has (so far) failed to affect them very much (Item IV-31). Both social movements and interest associations have “Europeanized” themselves with greater ease (Items II-16, IV-29 & 30). The fact that some, more specialized, class, sectoral and professional interests have found it easier to adapt to this trend has had a significant impact of the “balance of socio-economic forces” that has historically been closely connected with the scope and level of collective bargaining (Items III-20, 21 & 22).

11. Increased Sense of Insecurity: Much of the politics of immediate post-war Western Europe was rooted in the quest for regional security – first, in relation to potential armed conflict between Germany and France and, later, in relation to the threat of an invasion by the Soviet Union. By the mid-1970s, the region had become what Karl Deutsch called “a security community” in which none of its members anticipated using force to resolve conflicts or interests or passions. Presumably, this helps to explain the persistently lower level of military expenditures and higher level of social expenditures in this part of the world when compared to other advanced industrial polities – and this must have had an impact on all three forms of interest organizations (and, probably, diminished the importance of ‘passionate’ nationalist, religious, class and moralistic organizations. It is probably too early to judge how and how much the rise in collective insecurity since 9/11 has affected such causes. So far, contrary to

the United States, no specific political party has profited from this event, although it has given a boost to social movements advocating non-intervention in Iraq and resistance to limitations on civil rights.

12. **Individuation:** I have left this for last because I am convinced that it will have the longest-lasting and most profound impact on the politics of interests in the future. This somewhat obscure sociological term refers to the trend for individuals to acquire – due to changes in working conditions, living situations, family structures, personal mobility and cultural contexts – a set of interests (or passions) that is increasingly specific to him- or her-self. When and where this occurs (and the evidence for it is less than compelling, I admit), the citizen should find it increasingly difficult to identify with those large collective categories that went into structuring what I called above the ‘standard-revised WEP Model.’ Those cleavages between classes, sectors, religions, ethno-linguistic groups, regions and nationalities that “made” modern Europe do not go away – they still have left plenty of mental and organizational residues – but citizens find the identities attached to them by these cleavages much less convincing. Most importantly, they are reluctant to accept one of them as dominant and, hence, capable of exercising over-arching control over all other interests or passions. Nationality may still be the most significant “marker” in inter-state relations and class may predominate among all of the sources of intra-state conflict, but their invocation produces less predictable behavior at the individual level and the organizations built upon these cleavages have declined in salience.

Another way of putting this point is that, in the past, what counted in determining the outcome of political struggle was the cumulative or cross-cutting distribution of interests and passions, and the emergence of some overriding identity among those involved. In the future, what will count is less the pluralism prevailing **between** collectivities within the unit as a whole than the pluralism prevailing **within** individual citizens – citizens who may grow increasingly indifferent concerning the identity of the unit as a whole and, hence, willing to change one for another.^v These pluralistic individuals will find it more difficult to assess what their “real” interest or passion is in a given context – and they will be much less likely to rely on existing political parties, encompassing interest associations or comprehensive social movements to find out. They are going to change their view of politics frequently and shift their organizational allegiance more often. In the party arena, Europeans will finally act as Anthony Downs predicted long ago, switching indifferently around some “mean” position on a uni-modal distribution of preferences depending on marginal appeals to the center or the personality of candidates. In the arena of “special interests” and “passionate causes,” the apposite model is

pluralism. But the pending question is whether this will lead to moderation and compromise or, as I have suggested above, to populist mobilization and intransigence.

While I am convinced that individuation (if it occurs on a significant scale) will have a major impact on interest politics, I am less capable of identifying the impact it has already had. One could blame it for decline in party membership and identification (Item I-1) and trust in parties and politicians (Item I-3) which, in turn, might be contributing to greater electoral volatility (Item I-7), narrower margins of victory (Item I-6) and greater turn-over (Item I-8). And why do parties depend increasingly on public funds? Because their traditional clienteles (*Stammwähler*) have declined and others are no longer willing to contribute voluntarily (Item I-9). The proliferation of types of social movements (Item II-11) and the shift in their source of funding (Item II-14) fits nicely within this line of reasoning. A lot of the movement among forms of organization within civil society could also be attributed to individuation (Items III-26&27), as could the increased resistance to semi-public status and funding for ‘classic’ corporatist associations (Item III-28). But all of these are highly speculative connections – and none of them can be traced exclusively to this variable.

[One major change listed above (Item I-10) has passed under-explained (and un-defined). Probably, this is the result of my not being an expert on the subject of internal party organization. Those who are – e.g. Peter Mair and Richard Katz – have argued convincingly that some significant changes in this condition have occurred during this period and they have labeled the outcome it the shift from mass to cartel parties. Given the novelty of the concept (and my ignorance of the field), I have found it difficult to distinguish its causes, characteristics and effects from the notes that I took at the recent EUI conference on this subject. I will only be able to fill the lacuna once I have digested the relevant literature better – and consulted with Peter.]

SOME ELEMENTS FOR A CONCLUSION

Interests furnish the primary raw materials for WEP, and that has not changed. Passions have not disappeared; indeed, there is some evidence that emotion-based other-regarding causes have contributed to a renewal in the traditional role that social movements have played in the region. Parties, associations and movements share the task of “processing” these materials in the REDs of Western Europe. Historically, parties with their capacity for aggregating a wide range of them into

comprehensive platforms have played the predominant role. Movements may have played a role in their formation; associations representing class, sectoral and professional interests may have been penetrated by their ideologies – but, according to the standard revised model of WEP, it was political parties that best represented the cleavages, that formed the governments, that made the compromises, that produced the states, that made the politics of Europe so distinctive.

If the descriptive generalizations in this article have some accuracy and if the potential explanations drawn from contextual trends have some validity, then, the hegemony of political parties is declining – which is not to say that they will be replaced by either associations or movements. The three forms of representation are not locked into a zero-sum game. In the past, they have grown together and supported each other. Nothing says that they cannot also decline together in the present.

This implies a generalized loosening of the links between interests and organizations. Emile Durkheim imagined something similar as a potential consequence of modernization/development and gave it a label: **anomie**. In his scenario, the division of labor would advance more rapidly than the capacity of existing organizations to integrate individuals and inculcate in them stable identities and conceptions of interest.^{vi} He envisaged serious consequences at the level of individual behavior (suicide being the most dramatic), but said very little about its potential political implications.

My hunch is that it is something that we often label (and condemn) as **populism**. Elsewhere, I have defined this as *a political movement that draws its support across or with disregard for the lines of cleavage that are embodied in existing political formations and does so by focusing on the person of its leader who claims to be able to resolve a package of issues previously believed to be unattainable, incompatible or excluded.*^{vii} Could this be the face of the future for WEP? Will individuated citizens find themselves adrift without clear hierarchies of interest or passion and, therefore, choose their elected officials and interest representatives on the basis of cross-cutting promises and candidate personalities? Will they do so erratically on the basis of seemingly minor shifts in context or momentary events? There are already abundant signs of its emerging in EEP (Eastern European Politics), but that could be dismissed as the product of a different point of departure where parties, associations and movements were either discredited or non-existent. Western Europe still has plenty of all three types of interest organization, but if they are evolving as I have suggested and if individuation is such an inexorable ‘developmental’ trend, then, populist

movement-parties-associations could very well fill in part of the gap between more anomie citizens and less legitimate authorities.

The clue concerning the future lies in the last Item (III-34). Survey research seems to indicate that in Europe overall “interest” in politics has not declined – even among those young citizens who are least connected with political organizations. Which raises the prospect, first suggested by Alexis de Tocqueville in his *L'Ancient Régime et la Révolution*, that the most vulnerable moment for any political regime exists when popular expectations increase or remain stable at the same time that regime performance (or, better, perception of regime performance) is in decline. Typically, this happens when political leaders attempt to introduce reforms that do not have immediate payoffs. This was later formalized by James Davies as the “J-Curve” and connected with the hypothesis that it would produce increasingly violent collective action and, eventually, revolution.^{viii} For contemporary Europe this projection seems highly exaggerated – either because the gap between expectations and performance is not (yet) so great or is too demographically concentrated, or because the capacity of social and economic institutions to absorb the disparity remains so great. My prognosis is, therefore, the periodic eruption of populist ‘incidents’ that do not threaten democracy as such and, in fact, may even have the benevolent effect of dissolving partisan collusions and oligarchic accumulations. As long as the electoral process remains ‘free and fair’ and basic political rights are constitutionally protected, the result of such incidents in Europe is quite predictable: the populists will be defeated eventually because they will have promised too much to too many – and failed to deliver even to those oppressed groups that they pretend to favor. They will exit peacefully (if noisily) from power probably leaving behind an economic mess and social confusion. It will be the task of a new (and hopefully rejuvenated) set of political interest organizations to re-connect citizens with their rulers and to hold them accountable for their exercise of legitimate authority.

ⁱ Passions and Interests

ⁱⁱ Actually, some ambiguity with regard to this element has re-emerged in recent years. Rational choice analysts prefer to talk about “preferences,” presumably mimicking economists who have long used the concept of “revealed preferences” in their theories. These are not expressions of conscious interests (“concerns”) that actors give when asked why they acted or what they would like to gain from political action. Quite the contrary! These are the motives for action that can be imputed to actors on the basis of prior assumptions by theorists – regardless of whether the actors involved choose them in surveys, respond to them in interviews or express them in the course of acting. Indeed, such consciously articulated preferences are intrinsically suspect because actors have ‘rational’ reasons for not admitting to their ‘true’ preferences – especially when it comes to public goods. All this reminds me of an earlier debate over “false consciousness,” when Marxists -- faced with identities and goals of proletarians that were not sufficiently revolutionary or even anti-capitalist -- dismissed them on the grounds that such underlings could not be expected to recognize what their ‘true’ interests were due to the deliberate manipulation or inherent hegemony of dominant classes.

ⁱⁱⁱ Except for the first two, the other variables come from an extensive list of trends in the external context in which “real-existing” European democracies have been functioning over the last thirty years to be found in Philippe C. Schmitter and Alexandre Trechsel (coord.), *The Future of Democracy in Europe* ...

^{iv} Linz and Stepan

^v NB what this could do to the so-called micro-foundations of the discipline. The individual no longer becomes the irreducible unit of action or analysis with a presumed fixed hierarchy of preferences. The individual is now a 'bundle' of interests (and passions) and the preference for any one of them depends on the context within which the choice is made.

^{vi} Durkheim reference

^{vii} Populist Article

^{viii} Davies, James C. 1962. "Towards a Theory of Revolution", *American Sociological Review*, Vol. XXVII. p. 5-18.