

**A PROLEGOMENON TO A THEORY OF INTEREST POLITICS:
NEEDS, INTERESTS, CONCERNS, ACTION AND,
EVENTUALLY, ASSOCIABILITY**

Philippe C. Schmitter

Central European University, Budapest

&

European University Institute, Florence

January 2006

This chapter began some twenty years ago when Wolfgang Streeck and I were working together at the Wissenschaftszentrum-Berlin on the theoretical framework for our project on “The Organization of Business Interests.” Discussing and, sometimes, disagreeing on a daily basis with him about core concepts and assumptions made me more and more sensitive to the weakness of the foundations underlying the study of interest politics in general. We shared a perception that the pursuit of self-interest in response to perceived needs was **a**, if not **the** motivating drive behind the politics of liberal democracies and capitalist societies, but we had trouble specifying why that common motive resulted in such a wide diversity of organizational responses across different countries and across sectors of the same economy. I can remember entering Wolfgang’s office and depositing on his desk an essay by Friedrich Engels on “Why Capitalists have no Trade Unions.” We, of course, knew that Engels was wrong – that, in fact, capitalists had founded and sustained a quite extraordinary number and variety of associations to pursue their mutual interests – but we had difficulty agreeing on why he had been so wrong.¹

¹ Incidentally, contrary to what he was to write later, Engels did not argue that their lack of a need for associability was due to capitalist control over the state (that “standing committee for managing the common affairs of the bourgeoisie”), but because the market and society naturally organized them as a class. (source) For a much up-dated version of

This led me to write a quite long manuscript (144p.) while I was at the WZB in which I sought to explore and to defend the distinctive theoretical foundations of “interest politics.” I have brought it out of hibernation and used it on the occasions when I taught a course on this topic at Stanford University, the European University Institute and, last year, the Central European University, but I have never thought of publishing it. This chapter is but a segment of that effort. It does, however, lay out the substance of the broader argument that was stimulated by my prolonged exchanges with Wolfgang Streeck back in 1981-82. Needless to say, he should not be held responsible either for its content or its implications. In fact, if memory serves me correctly, Wolfgang found the original version excessively lengthy and obsessively detailed. I hope he will like this one better.

* * *

In the unlikely event anyone ever invents a physics of modern political activity, “interest” is likely to function as “motion” does for the physics of inanimate objects.² Its promotion or defense would provide the fundamental motive which, subject to specified constants, variable contexts and interaction effects, would explain who gets what, when, where and how out of politics. We are, of course, far from having such a scientific theory, but the ubiquity with which the term appears in the primitive paradigms or frameworks of the social sciences suggests that “interest,” as cause or reason,³ is already – if incoherently – performing that function. Despite or perhaps due to its centrality in political analysis, “interest” has proven quite elusive to define, much less to measure. It may never be missing as a motive and it may not lie once it has been found at the scene, but it has always been difficult to identify reliably, much less to count accurately. With the possible exceptions of “power” and “influence,” no concept in the social sciences has suffered more from terminological imprecision, multiple usages and naive presumptions. This, of course, is frequently the

Engel’s argument, see Claus Offe and Helmut Wiesenhal (). As I remember, one of the (many) things that Wolfgang and I did agree upon about business associability was its “logic” was no different. It was easier – as evidenced by the greater number, variety of organizational forms and more specialized nature – but much less consequential than worker associability. For a more complete argument along these lines, see Franz Traxler, ...

² Helvetius already suggested that interests in social (moral) life had the same theoretical status as motion in physics back in the 18th century. (source).

³ Terence Ball ().

case with words taken over from everyday language,⁴ but “interest” seems to have attracted more than the usual share of ambiguity in meaning, while bearing more than the usual burden for explaining behavior. Worse, differences in how the concept is defined have considerable practical as well as analytical importance for how political actions are perceived **and** evaluated. “Interest” is regarded as both a descriptive cause or as motive for acting --“He/she did it because it was in his/her interest to do so” -- and a normative reason or justification for having acted -- “He/she is entitled to have done so, because it is right that his/her interests should be satisfied.” The viable and good polity is seen as one in which all interests can be freely pursued and all justly satisfied within, of course, available physical constraints and acceptable moral standards.

Contradictory Tendencies in the Debate

All this is by now well known and has recently attracted rather considerable attention and scholarly debate. Unfortunately, two contradictory tendencies in the literature have conspired (unknowingly) to make the concept of interest un-enlightening for theoretical speculation or un-useful for empirical research.

The first seeks to avoid the conceptual problem of defining interests altogether by appealing simply to common sense or ordinary usage, thereby, concealing its meaning under a pile of alleged synonyms such as needs, demands, preferences and wants, and referring to observable behaviors or subjective statements as if they were self-evident proof of the existence and ubiquity of interests. Anything that anyone asks for must be an interest; hence, everything becomes an interest; no one can act disinterestedly or against one's

⁴ An etymological excursus on the meaning of the word “interest” in Latin would reveal that it comes from “inter” + “essere,” i.e. from being in between, and hence the basis for claiming damages over time for depriving someone of some asset. As one author has suggested, the history of the use of the concept of interest constitutes “a semantic documentation of the rise of bourgeois society”, Peichel (1977), p. 58.

interest; nothing can happen without some interest being attributed to it.⁵

The second tendency, on the contrary, seeks to explore the concept quite explicitly in all its details and implications by subjecting it to complex calculations involving careful specification of one's factual and counterfactual alternatives, weighted consideration of one's probable cost and consequence, lengthy assessment of one's possible future opportunities, enhanced or foreclosed, pondered clarification of one's order of preferences. Seen from this perspective, few things can be unambiguously claimed as an interest. One can often act disinterestedly and easily against one's interest. Not only can actions (or non-actions) occur without the logically requisite interest calculation, but in the real world they are likely to do so most of the time. The conclusion becomes inescapable that **it is not in one's interest to know, much less to act, in one's interest** because the time and effort required are so great that they impede the attainment of more immediate, tangible and attractive satisfaction based on a less perfectly rational, more impulsive or instinctual, calculation.

This paradox will be relevant in a moment to our discussion of the lengthy "conceptual chain" that links needs to interests to concerns to action to associability, but it can hardly provide a realistic (and hopefully operational) definition of how actors come to define and act on their interests. We know that, despite the logical complexity, "real-existing" actors do manage to find ways to pursue their interests -- regularly and frequently. Therefore, we need a definition of the process that acknowledges this complexity while placing it in a framework that respects the constraints and opportunities present in the real world. Moreover, this must be accomplished without yielding either to the positivistic temptation of deriving all interests exclusively from observable, subjectively guided behavior, or to the idealistic one of deducing them from imputed,

⁵ Or -- better put -- if nothing happens, no interest can be present or at stake.

objectively known “laws,” “situses” or “roles.” Needless to say, this is an exceedingly difficult task and what follows is only a first and tentative effort at its resolution.

One Process of Value Subtraction

My proposed solution is to conceptualize “interest” explicitly as a multi-sequential, iterative and continuous social process. Understanding what it is involves, not a once-and-for-all psychological transposition of wants into interests or a single rational conversion of preferences into appropriate behavior, but a repeated set of interrelated calculations and transformations. This sequence, I hypothesize, leads from **needs** to **interests** to **concerns** to **actions** to **associability**. Each of these will be defined and explicated above, but what is important is to recognize that the passage from one stage to another is contingent or problematic in the specific sense that whether needs become defined as interests, whether actors get concerned about their interests, whether concerns are sufficient to induce action, and whether such action takes the form of an associations depends on a dualistic process of **socially determined reflection** and **politically constrained choice**. Only if an “interested” actor is capable of defining the situation and identifying what is at stake, and only if he or she concludes that it is somehow feasible and desirable to proceed further will the interest problem pass, so-to-speak, to the succeeding stage. And then it will only do so subject to future contingencies. Associations may become inactive; previous actions can turn into passive concerns; manifestly intense concerns of the past wither into quiescent or latent interests of the present; interests previously sharply defined recede into irresolute and intractable needs; perhaps even needs themselves go away or become inconsequential. When historical factors are introduced into this politico-logical discussion, the course of events appears to run in the opposite direction, i.e. more and more needs are becoming

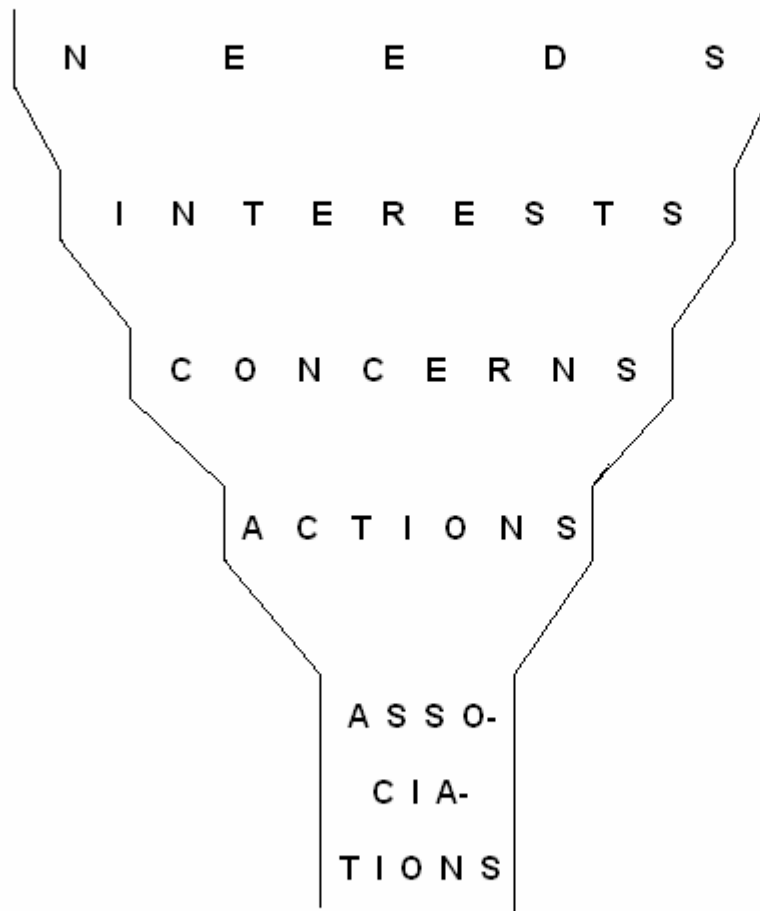
defined as interests, more and more interests are being transformed into concerns and so forth, but it is important to keep in mind the potential reversibility of these processes. In the abstract realm of speculation, **theory** (socially determined reflection) and **strategy** (politically constrained choice) operate continuously and repeatedly to modify all of the steps leading from needs to associability. In the real world, socialization and institutionalization intervene to rigidify and constrain the definitions and choices involved, thereby, reducing considerably the dynamism and uncertainty involved in the actual promotion of interests.⁶

(Place Figure I here)

⁶ Upon reflection, I now realize that what I was attempting to resolve in this essay was nothing less than the classic “agency-structure” dilemma. Agents/actors are both inhibited by structures (nature) and encouraged by other agents/actors (nurture) to theorize about their needs and, later, to act upon their concerns. Moving speculatively down the funnel involves a series of “value-reducing” strategic choices interactions between

FIGURE I

THE FUNNEL OF VALUE SUBTRACTION INVOLVED IN
THE CONVERSION OF NEED INTO ASSOCIATIVE ACTION



**Intermediation
of organizational
privileged interests**

My way of visualizing the theory is to use the image of a funnel. At its broad

opening lie an enormous, virtually unlimited, variety and volume of individual **needs** affecting all members of society. By theoretical reflection and strategic choice only some of these get defined as **interests** and only an even smaller number of the latter become consciously articulated as **concerns** of individuals and collectivities. In turn, these are narrowed down by structural and normative constraints to a more circumscribed set of **actions** intended to defend or promote concerns and, of these actions, only some lesser proportion find their collective expression in the form of **associations**.

The internal logic of the funnel is one of value subtraction or reduction.⁷ Of all the needs which could potentially become interests, some are selected in and others are shoved out. The same is true at each “conversion point” or bottleneck until only a few privileged needs-interests-concerns-actions emerge from the mouth of the funnel to be actively defended or promoted by specialized and permanent organization. Along the way, a great many of the initial needs/interests/concerns/actions are lost or are frustrated, and it is the function of a critical theory to specify what constraints and calculations are systematically involved in their inclusion or exclusion and, hence, in the eventual institutionalization of over- and under-representation. Some of these bottlenecks may be more intrinsically constrictive than others. Some may operate structurally and virtually unconsciously; others may depend on the deliberate (but not necessarily obvious) use of power, distortion, concealment, etc. Some rest on the autonomous strategic choice of interested actors themselves; others are produced by the actions and efforts of outside supporters and/or opponents.

The net result, however, is a very considerable reduction in the motives and reasons upon which the politics of interest is actually based, and a very substantial transformation in the mechanisms of interest intermediation

⁷ Cf. N. Smelser (). I have taken the basic notion from this work and inverted it. Smelser analyzed collective action – up and including revolution – as a value-added process.

themselves. Presumably in the short run, these processes of over- and under-representation contribute to the preservation of existing positions of power and privilege or, at the very least, to maintaining them within a relatively narrow range of behavior. The politics of interest would seem, therefore, to be intrinsically conservative. It excludes a vast number of potential needs/interests/concerns/actions on the grounds that they lack sufficient identifiability, feasibility, consciousness, salience, justifiability, resourcefulness, etc. Hence, it greatly reduces the confusion in communication and paralysis in decision-making which might ensue from their simultaneous defense or promotion. It includes only those which can overcome serious impediments at the level of both individual consciousness and collective articulation. And, it increasingly endows specialized, professionalized and in most cases, bureaucratized intermediary associations with a preponderant role, not merely in implementing action but in sorting out needs, identifying interests, stimulating concerns and channeling actions. These intermediaries themselves develop a vested interest in restraining the scope of interest politics by asserting a long-term calculus of their action and its consequences, by restricting the entry of new claimants into the political process and, otherwise, by enforcing existing rules and procedures.

In the longer run, however, the impact of organized interest politics becomes less obvious. If, as this perspective has suggested, intrinsic selectivity and distortion reduce the polity's capability to recognize and respond to "real" needs/interests/ concerns, dissatisfaction with "real-existing" performance should eventually increase. By satisfying claims based on false or distorted needs/interests/concerns, the politics of organized interest undermines the regime's own viability (not to mention legitimacy). Misrepresented groups included within otherwise privileged interest associations may become aware of their "real" concerns. Underrepresented majorities systematically excluded from

associability may succeed in translating their “real” needs into actions, by raising the salience of their actual concerns and acquiring a novel conception of their interest in acting more independently or militantly.

Hence, interest associations, to the extent they capture the dominant motives for political action and control the main channels of political influence,⁸ are potentially both a conservative and a radical force. In normal times and for foreseeable futures, their institutionalized over-and under-representation is an important element in preserving positions of power and privilege, despite the noise and confusion they inevitably generate in the course of their activities. In abnormal situations and for unpredictable periods, their organizational structure may be ruptured by fragmentation from within or by mobilization from without -- becoming one of the most dynamic and unstable elements in political life.

Presumably, all this actual distortion and potential dynamism would disappear if the **funnel** were to become a **tube**, i.e., if only and all the real needs of individuals could become identifiable interests, salient concerns, appropriate actions and resourceful associations, all undergoing the same value-adding rather than value-subtracting process of transformation. This would produce the organizationally saturated polity that the Swedish sociologist, Gunnar Hechser, envisaged back in the 1940s.⁹ In it, all of the real needs would be collectively elaborated, freely articulated and rightfully satisfied. What this “utopia” ignores is the likelihood that many of them are objectively incompatible and jointly unrealizable -- at least within foreseeable limits of social and economic scarcity.¹⁰ Worse is the possibility that many needs are subjectively insatiable. The more they are satisfied, the greater they generate further dissatisfaction. Once existing

⁸ Interest associations do not by any means monopolize the channels of representation and intermediation in contemporary democratic polities, so that their selectivity and distortions may, to some extent, be compensated by other forms of individual and collective action, perhaps enabling these polities to respond satisfactorily to a wider range of authentic needs. Much of the literature on contemporary social movements seems to presume that their emergence is a response to the distorted and sclerotic conditions prevailing among interest associations.

¹⁰ Fred Hirsh ().

needs are effectively attended to, new ones will spontaneously emerge to take their place. If this were the case, the utopian “tube” channeling needs into associative action would just keep getting larger in diameter without pouring forth any greater proportionate volume of individual satisfaction.

But these are but idle speculations. The polities of Western Europe and North America may be some of the most thoroughly organized in the contemporary world and some of the most dedicated to interest satisfaction that history has ever known, but they still have funnel-shaped systems of intermediation. Admittedly, some may be more wide-mouthed in their attention to needs, more voluminous in their inclusion of interests, less restrictive in their recognition of concerns or less constrictive in their tolerance for associative action, but none of them can be said to be “tubular,” i.e. to translate real needs into effective policies by way of associative action in an unbiased manner.

Two Premises of a Thought Experiment

The reader who has managed to struggle through the preceding section has been drawn into a protracted “thought experiment”¹¹ or “mind game.”¹² He or she is likely to have found the exposition excessively abstract and insubstantial.¹³ It is not intended to provide a description or a prediction about the processes whereby human needs do or do not get transformed, *via* interests and concerns, into associative action in the real world. Its purpose is to explore, in a thorough and consistent manner, the logically possible rather than the empirically probable.¹⁴ It begins with certain *a priori* assumptions and a few concepts, explores their

¹¹ Kuhn (1977)

¹² Michael Laver (1981)

¹³ Wolfgang certainly did so in response to the original (and longer) version. All I can do is to offer Max Weber’s excuse: “The apparently gratuitous tediousness involved in the elaborate definition of the above concepts is an example of the fact that we often neglect to think out clearly what seems to be ‘obvious’ because it is intuitively familiar.” *Economic and Social Organization*, Vol. I, p. 140.

¹⁴ As Michael Laver has put it in the preface to his recent book on *The Politics of Private Desires* (1981): “Deductive theories ... attempt to provide us with ideas about what would go on in certain circumstances. Their primary function is to expand our understanding of the possibilities, rather than to explain events.” (p.11)

relationships logically and extracts from them some hopefully non-obvious and non-trivial conclusions about the politics of organized interests -- without reference to actual events, specific contexts, mitigating circumstances, peculiar individuals or particular time periods. In my view, such a critical approach must be deductive and speculative at its point of departure. Only then can it hope to explore, not just what happened, but what might have happened. Since it is the nature of the game of interest politics to "organize out" as well as "to organize in" and since these processes of systematic selectivity affect each stage in the translation of individual needs into collective action and, ultimately, the very viability of politics based on the pursuit of self-interest, a strictly positivistic-inductive approach would be inappropriate to the task – not to mention, to the task of proving *post-hoc* empirical explanations or *prompter-hoc* anticipations of change.

The basic premises of the "model" should by now be obvious, if not above contestation. **Methodological individualism** is perhaps the most fundamental. Only individual human beings can directly experience needs and articulate concerns, and ultimately only the satisfaction of these individual needs and concerns can guarantee some measure of stability to the polity and society. Nevertheless, interests and actions are almost always collective in nature. The former are rooted in unavoidable relations of dependence upon others. Moreover, their satisfaction necessarily involves translation through linguistic symbols into mutually intelligible labels and identities -- i.e. into **categories** of individuals who by imputation share common needs. The fact that most individuals haven't the time or skills to perform such translations independently and, therefore, must depend upon socially ascribed labels or upon the deliberate intellectual efforts of others adds yet another collective dimension to the process – and an important potential source of misidentification and manipulation.

Actions normally entail cooperative, as well as antagonistic, relations with

others -- if one leaves aside the rare instances of the isolated "heroic" effort of individuals. Under certain circumstances, this gives rise to the establishment of permanent and specialized organizations with their own resources, staff and ideology. However, the emergent properties inherent in this necessary reliance on such forms of interest representation also generate distinctive organizational needs/interests/concerns/actions and these inevitably introduce distortions into the lengthy circuit whereby individually experienced needs eventually become individually experienced satisfaction of needs.

Strictly speaking, the assumption of methodological individualism would require us to treat involvement in collective action as purely and merely instrumental. The concerned actors would participate in such efforts only for the rewards that they extrinsically value and can appropriate exclusively for their use -- without reference to the well-being of others or without valuing the experience itself. In the real world, individuals may not always be so "a-social and non-Tuist." They may even enjoy contributing to the satisfaction of the interests of others and acting as members of a community -- irrespective of the extrinsic rewards such activity might fail to produce or would be produced in the absence of their contribution. Such sentiments of communitarian altruism or solidaristic satisfaction are, however, exceptions to our basic premise -- however "realistic" they may seem.

Rationality is the second fundamental point of departure. According to the model, people get concerned about their interests and act collectively about their concerns not through instinctive reaction, traditional loyalty, sheer force of habit or socio-psychological desire to reduce tension, but through a set of deliberate calculations which adjust means to ends in the light of available knowledge about opportunities and consequences. Individuals are presumptively endowed with capacities for purposive goal-directed behavior, contemplation of

possible alternatives, projection of probable consequences, evaluation of ordinal preferences, adaptive learning from experience, choice among alternative courses of action (and inaction), and reasoned effort to maximize utilities.¹⁵ These where coupled with a persistent desire to improve upon nature and existing social conditions by taking advantage of opportunities and/or by exploiting others provide the basic motivation structure underlying modern interest politics,¹⁶ while individualism provides its predominant unit of reference.

Of course, individuals can act rationally only within constraints. Some of these are intrinsic to human nature itself, of which the most obvious is the limitation on available time. Others are social and structural, e.g. unequal endowments of physical and economic resources; unequal access to knowledge and education, unequal levels of self-esteem and social prestige. Still others are the product of deliberate political effort: e.g. censorship, indoctrination and repression. Many of these will be explored in greater detail above, but we have already introduced some modifications in the logical exposition below to account for "satisficing"¹⁷ in response to the bounded rationality inherently involved the pursuit of interests. Hence, individuals may rely on prevailing cultural linguistic conventions or the intellectual fabrications of others in translating their needs into interests, and may resort to calculations of relative deprivation or obedience to ideological principle in order to diminish the effort which would otherwise be necessary to select from their multiple potential interests those which should become priority concerns. What has been spared our modal actor -- for purposes of argumentation, of course -- are the personal and quite human failings of stupidity, impatience, self-

¹⁵ Anthony Downs has argued that one must at least presume such individually rationale calculation and behavior, if one is produce any predictable model of social action at all ([Economic Theory of Democracy](#), page 4). Actually, most existing models of "collective behavior" have been based on quite different "a-rational," functionalist or social psychological assumptions. Cf. Neil Smelsen, [Theory of Collective Behavior](#) (); Ted Gurr,

¹⁶ Actually, a complete philosophic anthropology of interest politics would have to go even deeper into the motivational structure of individuals to explain why such a persistent desire for improvement exists and why opportunism and exploitation are regarded as "natural" solutions. Sheer human curiosity, the competing pressures produced by society or even Adam Smith's "instinct to truck, barter and exchange" are all likely candidates for the job. Arnold Gehlen ().

¹⁷ Herbert Simon ().

deceit, romantic illusion and self-indulgence. He has not, however, been protected from such potential social distortions as ideological bias, deadline pressure, deceit by others, cultural manipulation and political control. These play an important role not just in limiting the rationality with which individuals can identify and pursue their interests, but also in systematically distorting the whole process of collective organization for these same ends.

Having endowed individuals in pursuit of their interests with rationality, adaptability and opportunism but left them a-social, a-moral and a-historical, the model then places them at the mouth of the funnel facing the formidable task of translating their virtually inexhaustible needs into some form of action which hopefully would satisfy at least some of them. It should hardly be necessary to stress that, despite the individual's dilemma of assessing and choosing among them, the interests themselves must not necessarily be "individualistic". Nor, despite the presumption of rationality in the translation process, must one assume that the end product of such efforts will be a rationally desirable social order -- quite to the contrary.

The approach I am advocating seeks to avoid the two presuppositions which have plagued most previous discussion about interest politics: (1) the **functionalist** one that because the system as a whole "needs" certain things, individuals will be required to assume corresponding identities with their ready-made interests and modes of action; and (2) the **structuralist** one that because social or economic arrangements are ordered in specific ways, individuals merely act as the bearers (*Träger*) of established roles. Both the liberal-pluralist theory of "group politics" and the Marxist analysis of "class conflict" failed to take adequately into account these crucial intervening questions of motivation and the related ones of consciousness, information, reason, choice, and collective action. Actors are individual agents, **neither** functional elements of a self-equilibrating

system **nor** structural bearers of pre-determined roles. The collectivities within which they act are **neither** required **nor** given, but must be created and deliberately sustained.

The Simple 'Gravity-fed Cloaca' of Interest Politics

To tackle the task of explaining how these individual agents eventually produce collective agencies I have relied on a metaphoric funnel. Its shape is determined by an interrelated set of socio-political processes that successively select in and select out which needs will get theoretically identified as interests, which interests will be worth getting concerned about, which concerns will be actively promoted and, finally, which actions will take the form of associability. At each stage in the transformation process, some needs/interests/concerns/actions are “promoted;” others are “demoted”. Hence, in addition to the traditional emphasis of the literature on interest inclusion, articulation and organization, this metaphor, at the least, serves to encourage the critical analyst to consider simultaneously interest exclusion, disarticulation and disorganization. Both are part of the same process¹⁸ -- at least, until the funnel has become a tube through which all individual needs become indiscriminately converted into collective actions.

In the following Figure II, an effort has been made to suggest what generic kinds of needs are not likely to be either empirically realizable or normatively admissible and, therefore, not to become likely subjects for the sort of theoretical definition which would promote them to the status of interests. Similar efforts were attempted for each of the transformation stages within the funnel. The best understood of these was that which linked concerns to actions – thanks to the work of Mancur Olsen on “the logic of collective action.”¹⁹

¹⁸ “The role of interest groups should not only be considered in terms of their articulation of interests but also in their capacity to suppress interests.” Mario Rainier Lepsius, p. 358, the only precedent I have found for this approach to the study of interest politics.

¹⁹ Mancur Olsen (19).

In Figure II, I have made a somewhat fanciful attempt to illustrate the “flow” of relationships from inarticulately and individually experienced needs to organizationally privileged associative action. Its value is doubtless more “heuristic” than scientific, but it does express graphically the logic of value-reduction which has been the theory’s principal theme, i.e. the coupled importance of empirical restrictions (“nature”) and normative constraints (“nurture”) in reducing and funneling the volume and variety of needs/interests/concerns/actions, and, most of all, the extent to which the “plumbing” of organized interest politics, even in its freest and most benevolent form, tends to produce systematically over- and under-represented action and, hence, distorted responses by public authorities.

FIGURE II

THE ‘GRAVITY-FED CLOACA’ OF INTEREST POLITICS

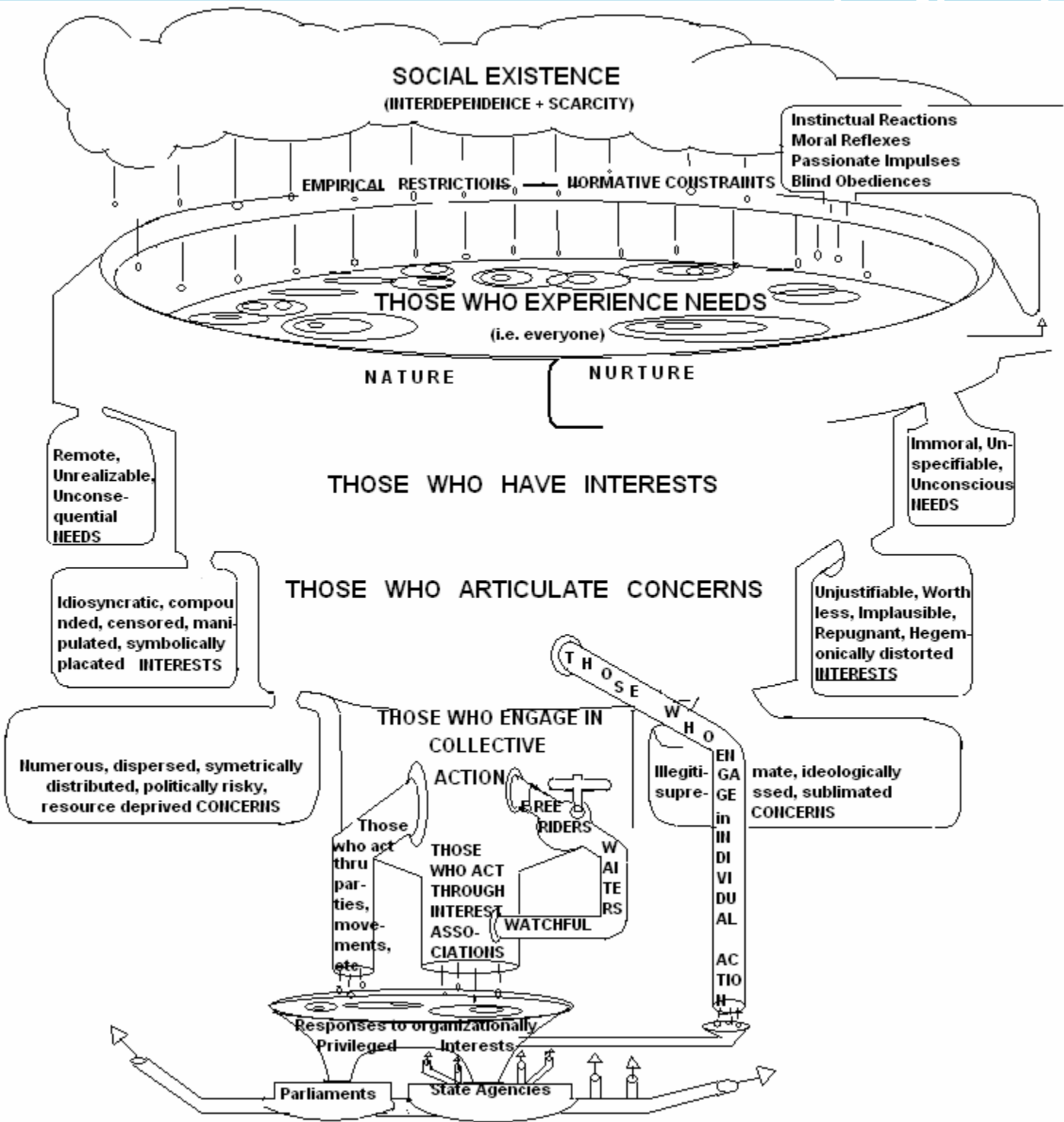


Figure II illustrates one of the most glaring weaknesses of the metaphor-cum-theory. The “pipes” at the bottom, presumably full of authoritative allocations and imperative co-ordinations, remain unconnected. Nor are the forms of collective action themselves depicted as having any prior impact on the funneling process. Now comes the time to connect up the system, so-to-speak, and to do away with its gravity-feed imagery. For, if nothing else, modern interest politics involves some very complex “hydraulic” circuitry that has made the old “liberal” Cloaca of independent private concerns seeping gradually (and reluctantly) downwards into the catch-basin of public policy quite obsolete.

An ‘Excursus’ on Power and Authority

To do this in any coherent and comprehensive way unfortunately requires the introduction of two other, very weighty and “essentially contested,”²⁰ concepts: **power** and **authority**. In its most generic sense, the former could be defined as the capacity²¹ of one actor to affect the behavior or thought of another actor.²² The latter would then be the capacity to do this “rightfully,” i.e. with the explicit or implicit support of “significant others” not directly part, or even indirectly affected by the power relationship. In other words, authority is legitimate power.²³ Whether the source of outside support is normative, i.e. some generally prevalent, socially inculcated standard for behavior, or empirical, i.e. some prudential calculation by the outsider that power, if exercised in a particular way, will eventually prove beneficial to him- or herself, is for the moment irrelevant

²⁰ S. Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (19), p. 9 where the origin of the phrase is given as W.B. Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 (1955-6), pp. 167-198.

²¹ Actually, it would be more accurate (if awkward) to add “and/or the estimate of the probable likelihood of the capacity,” since much power never involves the wielding of sanctions (i.e. coercion) or the testing of capacities (i.e. overt conflict), but acts through anticipated reaction whereby the actors estimate each other’s capacity to affect each other and respond accordingly.

²² It goes without saying that the behavior or thought is affected in ways or degrees which would not have otherwise occurred. Without this counterfactual specification, one risks attributing awesome power to the individual who commands the sun to rise in the morning.

²³ Although, *nota bene*, the “recipient” of power may not consent to its legitimate exercise. What counts is that outsiders regard the exercise as “rightful” and presumably would be called upon to assist the power-wielder in the event of a contestation over its use. Arthur Stinchcombe (19).

(although an “essentially contested” subject). The latter basis for authority is obviously closer to the presumptions of this “a-social” theory of interests.

As defined above, the concept of power does not *a priori* include a presumption about the “balance” prevailing among actors trying to affect each other’s behavior or thought. Presumably, they could be equally capable (or, better, think themselves equally capable) of doing so. In which case, something like a stalemate should ensue and no behavior or thought would be altered.²⁴ Normally, however, social relations involve asymmetrically distributed capabilities and one thinks of power as involving domination or super-ordination. One actor has power **over** another in situations in which the latter is unable to respond in kind or degree and, therefore, his or her behavior or thought is more affected than that of the former. It is this sort of vertical exchange among unequal players, rather than a horizontal stalemate or a pooling of capabilities among equals, that is presumed when introducing the “hydraulics” of the Cloaca in Figure III.

This definition of power and authority deliberately ignores the *Interessenlage*²⁵ of the actors involved. One, of course, presumes that the actors in a power/authority relation will each seek to use it to satisfy their respective needs in light of their conscious concerns, and that the more powerful will be in a more favorable position to realize that goal than the weak. But what about the payoff for the subordinate player? Must he or she be exploited, i.e. deprived of interest satisfaction that might otherwise have been forthcoming? So Steven Lukes has argued in an influential essay. In fact, he explicitly and exclusively defines power as involving a situation in which “A affects B in a manner **contrary to B’s interests**”.²⁶

²⁴ Unless, of course, they could consensually work out a formula for sharing their respective powers and the ensuing rewards to be gained by applying their pooled effort to outside parties or tasks.

²⁵ The concept comes from Max Weber and is much further explored and explicated in the original manuscript. Briefly, *Interessenlage* refers to the whole, multivariate context of theorized needs in which a person finds him or herself and from which he or she must select and assign a priority among a limited number of concerns.

²⁶ *Power: A Radical View*, p. 34 (my emphasis)

Leaving aside the fact that Luke's account leaves unclear what is an "interest,"²⁷ this conceptual coupling of power with exploitation could be quite misleading. While it is consistent with the liberal view that power is intrinsically "bad," it leaves out some of the most important "hydraulic" properties of modern interest politics.

For example, much of the relationship between interests and concerns, as defined here, hinges on something that might be called "intellectual power," i.e. the capacity of those endowed with superior time and training to explore the *Interessenlagen* for diverse classes, sectors, professions, sects, etc. and to persuade less endowed actors what their interests really are and why they should be concerned about them.²⁸ "Social power," or the prevailing bias in the arrangement of social institutions, cultural norms and linguistic conventions, has a strong and asymmetric effect on perceptions of individual needs and concerns, especially via its influence on moral admissibility and political justifiability, but does it always operate contrary to the interest of those subjected to them? Some groups, often quite unknowingly, can be substantially benefited by such arrangements. And these are not always those whose "positional power" is greatest. Think, for example, of the effect that the normative prescriptions of citizen equality and due process of law have had upon the power of otherwise deprived and subordinate groups to further or protect their interests. Even if the **net** effect of prevailing arrangements benefits those who already have a power advantage, the **particular** impact of an institution or norm may be quite the contrary. Must these "benevolent" effects upon the interested action of the weak be simply dismissed as inconsequential? Inversely, the "boost" that such arrangements give to the already powerful is conceptually overlooked by linking structural power

²⁷ Lukes at times seems to define it in a way roughly similar to this essay, namely as a theoretical specification of the objective conditions necessary to satisfy individually perceived needs, but flirts with the idea (which he attributes to Gramsci) that, not words, but "effective action" by "organic totalities" (!) produces "occasionally and in flashes" a purified and authentic version of a group's "own conception of the world" which constitutes its true *Interessenlage*. Amen!

²⁸ To be fair to Lukes, he does recognize the problem of "rational persuasion" but equivocates on its treatment. Ibid. p. 33

exclusively to exploitation. The only alternative, if one insists on defining it in such a “malevolent” way, would be to invent another term to describe such effects. I submit that the generic relation is identical, i.e. they all affect the probability that one actor can modify the behavior or thought of another, and, therefore, power is better defined in an “interest neutral” manner.

There is yet another reason for this which gets to the core of organized interest intermediation, namely, the twin processes of collective representation and control. It may be quite rational for an individual to delegate his or her own capacity for theorizing about interests and/or for pursuing them to some association.²⁹ On the one hand, limited time and resources can make individual thought and action about interests counterproductive, i.e., their marginal cost to a given person or institution, even the most resourceful, is likely to exceed any probable marginal benefit that could be derived. On the other, the Prisoner’s Dilemma aspect of the provision of public goods frequently results in situations in which the individual is encouraged to act in such a way, i.e. to defect, that everyone’s interests including his or her own will be negatively affected. It makes sense to allow oneself to be coerced into contributing and to refrain from autonomous action in such circumstances – even at the price of supporting efforts which do not perfectly correspond to one’s own immediate concerns.

Upon the basis of these economies of scale in political representation and longer-term assurances of benefit from social control, interest associations can acquire quite a bit of power to affect member behavior and even thought. They may also acquire authority although that usually depends on devolution from state

²⁹ We exclude the discussion of “paternalistic power” in which one actor affects the behavior of another who is declared to be (and accepts the status of) a civic or human incompetent, i.e. too young, too handicapped or too dependent to be able to exercise his or her independent will. Our presumptive “actors” have crossed these thresholds and are responsible “adult citizens” in the modern sense.

institutions, e.g. in corporatist systems. Even granted the distortion (and occasionally the outright corruption) which such organized representation and control can introduce into the game of interest politics, associational power is usually wielded on behalf of and not contrary to the interests of their members. Provided that these individuals can recuperate their autonomous capacity for thought and action (**exit**), and even more so if they retain some capacity to contest the association's activities (**voice**), it would seem quite misleading either to ignore this quite common phenomenon or to define it as "powerful," only when it negatively affects the member's (alleged) objective interest.³⁰ Ways of defining power such as Lukes (19) confuse methodological individualism with individualistic behavior and fail to take into account the dilemma of collective action and the role of organized classes, sectors, professions, etc. Ironically, Lukes himself castigates both the pluralists and their critics for ignoring the "socially structured and culturally patterned behavior of groups" and for focusing only on subjective concerns and manifest conflict, but then treats power in a very limited, "radically populist," manner that ignores the emergent properties of organized collective action. Hopefully, defining power in interest neutral terms will encourage the reader to recognize the potential importance of "contingent contracts" under which actors willingly and calculatedly give up their autonomy in order that associations may engage in collective action of their behalf and even exercise control over their behavior in their own longer-term and more comprehensive interest -- despite their immediate preferences and conscious concerns. Indeed, the "power" of organized interest intermediation in a free, voluntaristic and individualistically rational society depends on the emergence and consolidation of

³⁰ Actually, Lukes does seem aware of the lacunae -- if not their rather sizeable implications. He suggests either that such power is temporary once the subordinate has learned the "real" nature of his or her interests; or inadmissible since power exercised contrary to one's preferences, even if objectively beneficial, would nevertheless violate the subordinate's "real" interest in autonomy. Neither the "paternalistic" nor the "anarchist defense," as he calls them, addresses the objection raised above in my view. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

such implicit (or explicit) contracts.³¹

Having defined power, one must now proceed *per genus et differentiam* in order to make it more useful. One subspecies of it has so far been absent from the speculations of the model -- that which is exercised within the funnel, so-to-speak, in exchanges between individuals, groups and associations and that which eventually emerges from its mouth to affect public policy. **Influence** is the usual term for this and it has been the predominant, even the exclusive form of power that students of interest politics have addressed in a coherent (if inconclusive) fashion. While I am convinced that a theoretical approach such as this one will eventually contribute to a better understanding of how influence is exercised, i.e. that it is affected by what goes on within the funnel and as a consequence of its selective filtering -- primary concern at this moment is with the "shape" of the funnel itself and, hence, with the processes which affect the transformation of needs into interests, interests into concerns, and so forth -- in effect, making the funnel narrower or wider at different stages.

The Complex 'Hydraulically-Powered Cloaca' of Interest Politics

Again, to render the relations more visually striking and to economize on expositional space, I have summarized my thoughts in the form of an admittedly fanciful figure. Whereas in Figure II, the content of interest politics merely flowed off into imaginary catch-basins (which look suspiciously like bedpans); now, "hydraulic power" is actively siphoning off, pumping in and otherwise altering the form and substance of needs/interests/concerns/actions. From above, so-to-speak, pre-existing institutions and norms of civil society (some of them embedded in previously established interest associations and their ideologies) exercise a sort of **social power**. By their accepted, "natural," functioning they alter -- usually, without intentional effort -- either the material conditions within which needs are

³¹ And not on "populistic" action by autonomous individuals or independent associations *à la* Lukes or on complete arrogations of personal sovereignty *à la* Hobbes.

experienced, interests are defined, etc., or the normative standards with which they are evaluated and justified. So, for example, where civil society imposes conditions of great scarcity on certain individuals or groups, they will find their perception of needs focused on immediate physiological necessities and tend to ignore more remote and refined needs such as self-expression or personal development. Where social norms are heavily impregnated with moral inhibitions and/or highly skewed to reward certain personality types, different needs will be experienced and, hence, provide a more limited potential basis for explicit definition as interests. Further down the funnel such aspects as the varying “transparency” of social relations and the differential patterns of physical interaction will have a powerful, if often unintentional,³² effect on the likelihood that actors will be able to identify their *Interessenlage* or, if they do, will be able to articulate it as a conscious concern. Similarly, on the cognitive-evaluative side of the “Cloaca,” prevailing linguistic conventions and hegemonic conceptions of rightful or natural behavior will siphon off some potential interests and concerns, while “pumping up” the relevance and acceptability of others.

Seen from below -- at least, in the imagery of Figure III -- a more deliberate form of power, often backed by a legitimate monopoly over the use of organized violence, i.e. **state authority**, shapes the form and content of interest politics. With the relative decline in censorship, civic indoctrination, publicly enforced morality, outright physical repression and restrictions on freedom of expression in contemporary political democracies, the distorted effects of public policy have changed. Authorities no longer so actively seek to discourage their subjects from experiencing “un-civic” or “utopian” **needs**, from defining their **interests** in “dangerous” and “system-subversive” ways and from articulating their **concerns** through “un-lawful” and “un-conventional” **actions**. Nowadays, citizen-actors are

³² Which is not to say that the effect is always un-intentional. For example, capitalists may deliberately recruit workers from differing ethnic groups to discourage social interaction, or locate their establishments in remote, small communities to be able to subordinate class exchanges to communitarian ones.

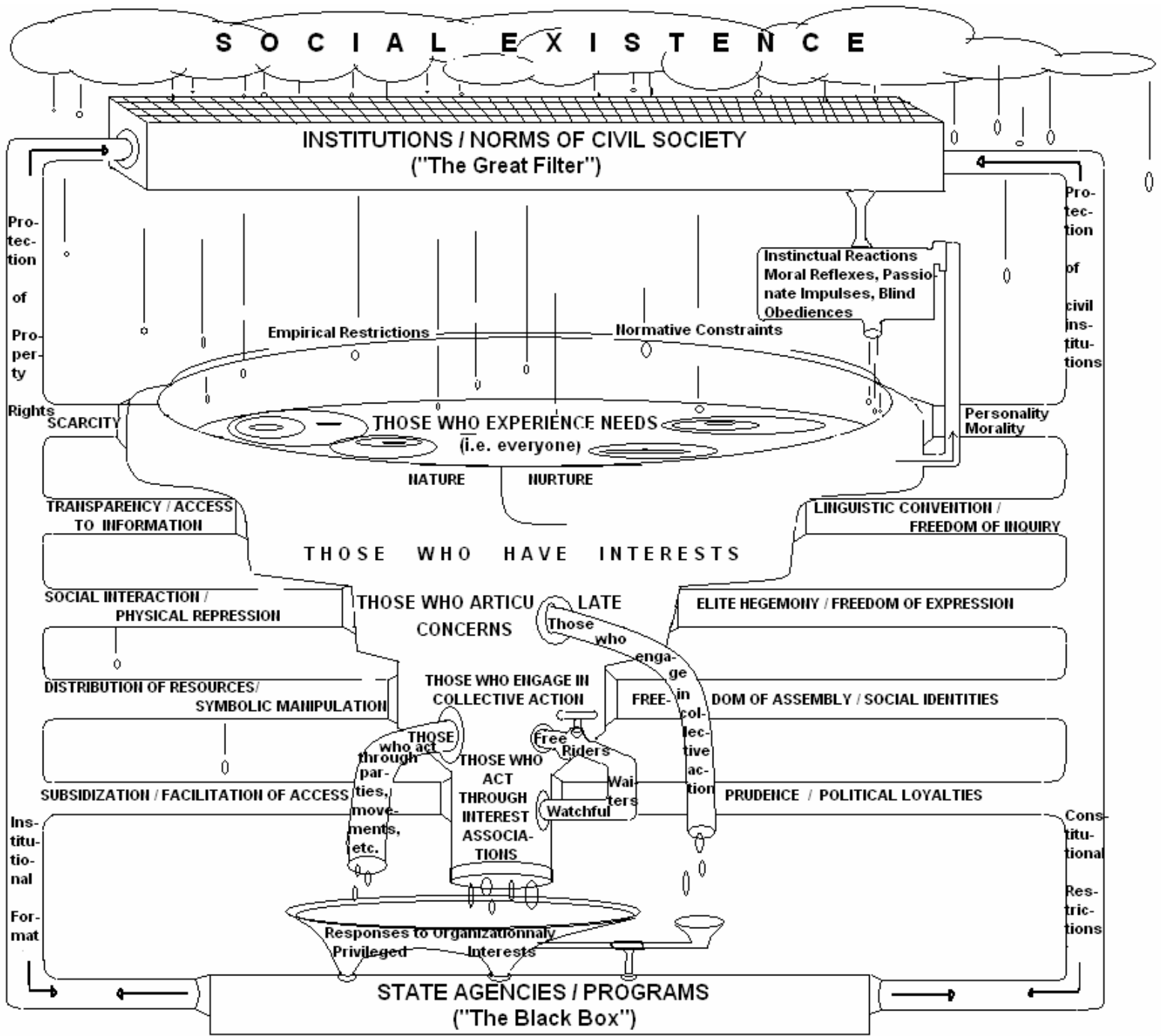
largely left to their own devices with regard to needs/

interests/concerns and actively encouraged to participate in “civil society” and to engage in “proper” forms of collective action where associations are helped (and even subsidized) to perform “worthy” tasks. State agents have been largely (but not completely) deprived by constitutional practice or political prudence of their cruder

FIGURE III

POWER AND AUTHORITY IN THE ‘CLOACA’ OF INTEREST POLITICS

instruments of control and manipulation. They have shifted their efforts to the more subtle **orchestration of consent** through reliance on national symbols and appeals to the public interest, **manipulation of opportunity structures** through differential



financial rewards, concessions of monopoly access and devolutions of authoritative competence to selected associations, and **regulation of organization behavior** by tax laws, incorporation provisions, anti-trust measures, check-off

arrangements, lobbying restrictions, conflict of interest legislation, reporting requirements and so forth.

While it is plausible to argue that both social power and state authority have diminished when seen from a long-term perspective and, therefore, that interest politics in the liberal democracies of contemporary advanced capitalist societies operates in a context of virtually unprecedented freedom and unrestricted opportunity; nevertheless, no adequate theory can afford to ignore the continual (if residual) distortions which power and authority introduce into the complex circuitry through which individual needs become organizationally privileged demands affecting policies which are inevitably biased in the satisfactions of needs they eventually produce. Whether this critical sensitivity to distortion can be translated into empirical observations and compelling generalizations that measure and interpret those distortions is, of course, another and far more contentious matter.

The problem obviously lies with the counterfactual basis of supposition. As long as the analyst of interest politics remained, so-to-speak, within the funnel, his or her task was easier. "Non-behavior" could be inferred, if not observed directly, for example, when individuals concerned about some interest chose not to act collectively because they could free ride on the efforts of others. Presumably through interviews or detailed contextual comparisons, the analyst could establish the existence of the concern and measure the parameters that affected the choice not to join or cooperate. What is more difficult is to determine when inaction occurred due to fear or prudence, or to more diffuse feelings of non-entitlement or un-justifiability. But even that seems minor compared to the problem of assessing why certain needs do not get experienced by particular categories of actors, why certain "objectively-correct" theories about *Interessenlagen* are not accepted by those affected, why some peoples' concerns seem so trivial

compared to those issues which they should be getting worked up about, and so forth throughout the funnel. The orthodox behaviorist has no reason to be dismayed. He or she can always refer to “national peculiarities,” “political culture” or, if pressed, throw in some *ad hoc* dummy variables to explain away the variance. The radical critic’s reaction is to reach immediately for distortion, manipulation, “false consciousness,” “the ideological apparatus of the State,” etc. -- especially when it is his or her theory of interests which is not being accepted and even more so when those imputed interests are alleged to be “progressive.”³³ Not only is this a reaction filled with intellectual arrogance and fraught with autocratic danger -- it implies that only an enlightened vanguard can know and act collectively to advance the “real” interests of a class whose consciousness has been manipulated -- but, it clearly overestimates (in my view) the impact of social power and state authority in relatively open, competitive and free societies and underestimates the capacity of individuals for critical thought and rational behavior. Surely some of the non-happenings outside the funnel: “un-experienced needs,” “ignored interests,” “irrelevant concerns,” “strategic inactions,” and so forth, are quite calculated and understandable actor responses given the uncertainty of alternative outcomes, the reluctance to give up acquired goods, the attachment to existing loyalties, the security of established cultural symbols, and/or the belief in prevailing normative standards. They are not all necessarily the product of mindless indoctrination, passive obedience, systematic distortion, intentional falsification, or simple fear. Ironically, this attribution to power and authority of omniscience and omnipresence in social life robs radical theory of its most fundamental critical element: faith in the capacity of human beings for rational, adaptable and opportunistic action purposively intended to improve their existence. It takes Marx’s famous dictum that “Men make their own history” and

³³ For an interesting discussion of “the paradox of emancipation” inherent in the contradiction between the goal of a socialist, “collectively self-emancipated” order and the critique of the established order for systematically manipulating, distorting and falsifying the consciousness of those who should desire their self-emancipation, see T. Benton, “‘Objective’ Interests and the Sociology of Power”, *Sociology*, Vol. , . (1981), pp. 161-183.

then effectively suppresses it with the caveat he appended to it: “but not under conditions of their own choosing.”

Power and authority certainly belong in any comprehensive and critical understanding of interest politics -- and not just as attempts to exert influence or to control behavior through coercion. The established institutions and norms of civil society and the existing agencies and programs of the state have a very pervasive (if often imperceptible) effect on the shape and content of its funnel of value reduction. Nevertheless, we must guard against the temptation to attribute to the machinations of social power and state authority everything that doesn't happen as it should or doesn't happen at all. On the level of theory, this would mean overlooking significant behavior by autonomous and purposive actors doing not what they have been induced, manipulated, indoctrinated, inhibited or compelled to do, but what they freely and rationally choose to do. On the level of practice, this implies underestimating the opportunities for rational, purposive action to improve social conditions and political processes. As we have seen above, the dilemma of associative action is serious enough, especially for large, dispersed and symmetrically endowed groups. Let us not make it virtually impossible by depriving most individuals of their capacity for criticism and resistance. This would leave the field of interest politics to privileged conformists and ineffectual visionaries -- hardly a pleasant, nor even a realistic vision.

Concluding with What is Missing

This excursion into the “hydraulics” of power and authority has not only done some violence to our initial assumptions about the nature of modal actors. It has also taken us some way from my principal and specific explanatory objective: **How do the needs, interests and concerns actually experienced in a given society get established in a set of more-or-less permanent and more-or-less specialized**

associations. It is all well and good -- indeed, necessary -- to speculate about the probable existence of suppressed needs, undefined interests, manipulated concerns, anticipated in-actions and potential associations, presumably caused by the often invisible existence of social power or exercise of state authority, but ultimately the task demands a return to measurable behavior and observable structures.

This is also the task chosen by (or sometimes imposed upon) varied groups of citizens in a liberal society and democratic polity. After all the theoretical speculation, normative reflection and strategic calculation, some will choose to act by founding, joining or supporting associations. They may procrastinate and experiment for a while with varying degrees of success, but at some point they should settle into a regular and avowed institutional response. In so doing, they will tend to "freeze" the system of interest politics in a given society. Perceptions of need, definitions of interest, and expressions of concern will inevitably get reinforced by habit, as well as by the conscious efforts of those already acting through associations to convince and recruit others with putatively similar interests. Moreover, the organizations entrenched within the funnel will begin to interject interests of their own into the process of interest politics. Boundaries will become established between categories to fit organizational convenience or historical precedence; symbols and identities will evolve and crystallize around the new patterns of interaction; definitions of interests will be altered in content and time-perspective to suit the needs of those with commitments and careers in existing organizations; horizontal alliances and vertical hierarchies will emerge to coordinate relations between associations; established units will invest their resources in sponsoring the formation of supportive groups and/or in preventing the formation of competing ones; stable patterns of domination will develop within associations and tend to displace member goals or suborn member concerns.

The core of my metaphoric funnel has consisted in the autonomous and rational calculations of “a-social, a-moral and a-historical” individuals attempting to identify their interests, select their concerns and choose an appropriate form of action to satisfy their needs. The capacity to do this is naturally (one is tempted to say, inevitably) distributed unequally among groups in society. Hence, even where actors are completely free and knowledgeable, the resultant product -- the “real-existing” configuration of organized interest politics -- will always be skewed to over-represent some classes, sectors and professions, and to under-represent others. It is further skewed (one is almost tempted to say, bent out of recognizable shape) by the habitual and intentional efforts of those social powers and state authorities outside the funnel that seek to control, inhibit and/or promote these transformation processes in ways they think will guarantee their own structural reproduction and prevailing public order. Moreover, the emergence from these intra-funnel calculations and extra-funnel constraints of permanent, specialized intermediary organizations contributes new elements of vested immobility and dynamic mobilization to interest politics -- further distorting it from the pattern it might otherwise have taken. When one adds the possibility that, under certain circumstances, social powers and political authorities may collude with organized intermediaries to disregard member preferences and foreclose member options -- often in the name of “the public interest” -- then the whole voluntaristic, purposively rational logic of the funnel may become empirically inappropriate -- useful only as a basis for counterfactual speculation or critical evaluation.

By now it should be clear to the reader that it is necessary to complement its “a-social, a-moral and a-historical” assumptions with more inductively derived and realistically compromised ones. Actors pursuing their self-interests (and, occasionally, their other-regarding interests) must be endowed with memories **and** routines -- for not only, as Marx put it in another of his pithy maxims, does “the tradition of all dead generations weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living,”

but so does “the practice of all surviving institutions act like a straightjacket on the brawn of the living.”