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ELITES AND DEMOCRATIC THEORY: INSIGHTS FROM THE SELF-ORGANIZING MODEL

The role of elites within democratic governments presents democratic theorists with one of their thorniest problems. On the one hand, democracies are based upon some type of political equality among citizens -- an equality which must be politically significant. On the other hand, wherever we look, we find political inequalities, sometimes great ones, within democracies. Democratic theorists have long held that there is a practical and theoretical problem concerning the place of elites within democratic polities. What is the relationship between political equality and political inequality within a democratic polity? I will argue that we cannot attain a balanced appreciation of the role elites play in political democracy until we appreciate the important distinction between democratic *organizations* and a democratic *polity*.

Concern with inequality in political power has a long history in the United States. The founders devoted considerable discussion analyzing the nature of a "natural aristocracy" of merit, frequently contrasting it to a corrupt aristocracy based upon political privilege. Defining this aristocracy of talent and determining its proper role in a democratic society turned out to be a thorny problem. John Adams, for example, initially wanted the natural aristocracy rendered harmless by being isolated in a Senate, where its talents could be safely exercised in the public interest (1954, 139).¹ Later, Adams suggested the natural aristocracy consisted of all who could influence the vote of at least one other person beyond themselves, which is casting a net with a very fine mesh indeed, and of no value to his initial project (1954, 202).

It appears to me that the ensuing 200 years of debate have done little to give us a more satisfactory understanding of the role political elites play in a democracy. Empirically they seem

¹ Adams was far from the only writer of the time who struggled with the problem of how this type of inequality could be harmonized with the principle of popular sovereignty. See also John Taylor, 1969, pp. 1-70, 472-496; Adams' response and the discussions of "A Federal Farmer" in Storing, 1985, 75-79 and Melancton Smith in Ketchum, 1986, 343-347.

inevitable. Theoretically they seem disreputable. Recent years have witnessed ongoing debates between pluralists and "elitists" concerning elites' role in contemporary democracies. Pluralists have argued that power is significantly decentralized, with opportunities reasonably available to organized groups seeking to influence policies of interest to them. "Elitists" have argued by contrast that most effectively organized interests represent the upper or ruling class, and that opportunities for others to influence public policy are generally open only to the degree they harmonize with upper class interests. This debate has continued interminably.

Some elitists argue for the desirability of elites tempering and molding an otherwise turbulent and intolerant democracy. Others bemoan the powerlessness of the mass of citizens. Both agree that there are those who rule and those who are ruled, as with other polities. Pluralists deny that things are so starkly defined, but generally have done little to examine at a theoretical level the role played by political inequalities as a necessary element in functioning democracies (but see Polsby, 1984). Pluralists cite empirical studies, elitists cite others and claim the pluralists' examples are unimportant.

This paper ventures into these hotly contested territories, hoping to provide a framework of analysis of interest both to pluralists and elitists. It argues that at least part of the reason this debate seems incapable of being settled is that democratic polities are improperly compared to other polities and to democratic organizations. I argue that democracies are self-organizing systems, quite different from other political and democratic orders. Using this model, I hope to show how elites play a constructive role within a democracy regardless of the character of the citizenry, and at the same time show how their presence can injure a polity. In short, I will demonstrate how elites are theoretically necessary and legitimate, as well as a source of danger, but a danger of a sort usually unappreciated by even the most critical elitists. In the process, egalitarian democratic theories will be shown to be fatally flawed.

Instrumental and Self-Organizing Orders

A basic distinction separates different kinds of social orders, including those with democratic

decision-making rules. Some social orders can be understood as varieties of instrumental organization. Others are better characterized as self-organizing systems, or spontaneous orders (Hayek, 1979, Dobuzinskis, 1987). Failure to grasp this distinction has vitiated a great deal of theorizing about political democracy.

An instrumental organization is established to do something specifiable. It may succeed or fail or change its goal, but instrumental organizations seek to use their human and nonhuman components to achieve some particular end. Consequently, its components can be considered to be resources, and these resources can be deployed with greater or lesser efficiency. Such organizations possess reasonably clear criteria for success or failure. A business fails or succeeds in turning a profit. A union does more or less well in its contract negotiations. A political party either wins elections and influences policies or it does not. An army successfully defends its territory, or suffers defeat. A research team succeeds in its research, or it fails. There are many types of instrumental organizations, and they vary widely in their capacity to attain their goals. Central to this paper is my contention that political democracies are *not* instrumental organizations except under rare and transient circumstances.

Self-organizing systems, or spontaneous orders, differ from instrumental organizations in that while they possess organized coherence and so are not chaotic, they do not exist to attain any particular concrete goal (Hayek, 1973, 38). Their components are not organized to achieve any particular end. Participants within such an order do not need to know anything about the order as a whole, and need only concentrate upon their own goals. Self-organizing systems provide a framework which tends to maximize the likelihood that participants will attain their own goals which are in harmony with the rules of that order. However, as we shall see, a self-organizing system cannot guarantee that any particular goal will be achieved, or even pursued. Nor can it guarantee any particular participant's success.

There are three self-organizing systems in contemporary liberal society which are important for understanding elites in political democracy. These are science, the market, and democracy itself. While it is important to understand that all three pursue "goals" of a sort, which therefore give us

criteria for understanding their functioning and how we might improve them, these "goals" differ from those characterizing instrumental organizations in that they are not specifiable in any concrete way. The specifics of a self-organizing system's "goal" need have *no* conscious relation to the goals of *any* of its members. Science facilitates the pursuit of scientific truth, but truth's particulars are unknown in advance. The market facilitates exchanges -- capitalist acts between consenting adults in Robert Nozick's terms -- but we cannot anticipate the particulars of those exchanges. In exactly the same sense, political democracy facilitates pursuit of the public good in a manner to become more clear below.

Just as the purpose served (not sought) by a self-organizing system is abstract, so are the rules participants follow within these orders also abstract. The rules constituting such orders are not concerned with specific circumstances or participants. The rules characterizing scientific work apply equally to all scientists but leave to each scientist how they will be employed and what will be investigated. So, too, in the market the rules of contract apply equally to all but leave it to each participant to decide how they will be employed, and to what end they will be devoted. The rules constituting a liberal democracy: freedom of speech, of organization, free elections, equality of the vote, and so forth, are of the same character. Freedom of speech, for example, does not tell citizens what to say or even whether or not to exercise it in a political context. Because the rules of self-organizing systems are abstract in this sense, applying equally to all participants, they are formally equalitarian. With respect to these rules all scientists are supposed to be equal, all consumers and producers equal, and all citizens equal.

By contrast, the rules of an instrumental organization are not intrinsically equalitarian. Egalitarian goals, for example, may require treating individual participants unequally in order to guarantee an equal outcome. Participants are resources, insofar as they are members of an instrumental organization. Resources must be differentiated in order to be used efficiently. Whatever an instrumental organization's rules may be, they apply to participants in terms of their capacity to help the organization attain its goals (see Kaufman, 1960, pp. 91-200). Different members will be subject to different sets of rules and directives. Organizational tasks tend to create status differences,

where different rules apply to different people, depending upon their position in the organization. Just as self-organizing systems at a formal level are equalitarian, instrumental organizations tend to be unequalitarian and hierarchical.

While an instrumental organization will tend to have well-defined leaders (except in cases of transition or leadership challenge), self-organizing systems are characterized by their *polycentricity* (Polanyi, 1956, 184). Participants pursue independently chosen ends, interacting through a system of mutual adjustments rather than specific centrally determined rules and commands oriented towards a specific outcome. Polycentricity can exist in an instrumental organization, but does so as a threat to central leadership. It is illegitimate. Michael Gorbachev's trouble with mid-level Party functionaries is an example of the problems arising in an instrumental organization afflicted with polycentric characteristics. Because the rules of an organization differ from those of a self-organizing system, polycentricity can lead to organizational disintegration whereas it is an essential feature of any self-organizing system.

Mutual adjustment within a self-organizing order requires participants to make decisions "spontaneously" which unintentionally serve to assist unknown others in the pursuit of their particular purposes. These others' purposes are also unknown. Consequently, the rules must serve to coordinate independently chosen actions of unknown people so as to harmonize their various goals as much as possible.

Self-organizing systems are characterized by complexity. That is, they generate more information potentially relevant to their coordinating task than any person or organization can directly comprehend. Different information will be relevant to different people, and no means exists by which we can determine in advance exactly what will be useful to whom. The problem of successful coordination therefore exceeds the powers of our conscious minds. Nevertheless, any orderliness in a self-organizing system depends upon its successfully being performed.

For the coordination problem to be solved, information needs to be differentiated. It must be filtered effectively, but different filters are relevant to different purposes. Consequently any self-organizing system will possess a very complex network of information transmitting

institutions, institutions not grasped in their whole by anyone, but which nevertheless serve to maximize the likelihood that the information most relevant to a participant's plans will be available to him or her while requiring that only a minimal amount of irrelevant information be assimilated.

There is no obvious limit to the diversity of such information filtering and transmitting institutions. So long as these institutions can continue developing, there is no limit to the complexity of information able to be utilized successfully within a self-organizing system. By contrast, an instrumental organization depends upon its leaders' ability to understand not only the "big picture," but also to devise specific rules for particular people in foreseeable circumstances so as to take advantage of opportunities to realize their central goal. Since this approach depends upon conscious planning for its overall direction, it is intrinsically more limited in its capacity than is a self-organizing system.

The ideal of the well-informed citizen is one of the most misleading in contemporary political science. Appropriate to small face-to-face societies, it is a never ending source of confusion when applied to large scale democracies. While it is true that the average citizen in a democracy knows very little about politics, it is also true that no citizen *can* know very much about most politically salient issues. Even Congressmen know little about much legislation for which they vote. Instead they rely upon cues from colleagues whose judgement they trust on the merits of some bill.

Within the market, successful coordination occurs through its equilibrating mechanisms. Perfect equilibrium in this conception is the perfect coordination of individual plans (Hayek, 1948). While general equilibrium is never attained, and indeed represents an always shifting set of relationships, it is the equilibrating tendencies which create order rather than chaos in market phenomena. The price system is an essential part of this process, as is entrepreneurship, wherein people seek to make profits through better allocation of resources (Kirzner, 1973). However, entrepreneurship can also be disequilibrating (Schumpeter, 1961). I shall return below to entrepreneurship's relationship to economic elites. Whether equilibrating mechanisms are stronger than disequilibrating mechanisms is ultimately an empirical question which cannot be foreseen in advance and may vary with differing circumstances (Lachmann, 1986).

In science the coordinating mechanisms are a variety of institutions and practices which subject scientific work to testing by scientific canons, and serve to organize existing information in ways useful to individual scientists' research interests. The equivalent of general market equilibrium in science is perfect agreement among scientists concerning the character of scientific reality (Ziman, 1968). In science, there is no simple equivalent to the price system as a means for coordinating "scientific entrepreneurship." Instead a complex network of journals, conferences, reputations, and the like exists which performs the same function in a scientific context. I shall return to the matter of scientific elites below.

In democracies the "public good" serves the same systemic function as general equilibrium in the market and perfect agreement in science. To the extent that political democracies serve the public good, the well being of all people in their capacity as citizens is served. As with equivalent concepts in the market and science, it implies *universal agreement*. It is no more likely to be fully attained than its scientific and economic equivalents.

We can be no more certain as to the public good's particular character than we can of the particular details of general equilibrium or generally assented scientific truth. Since we cannot know the public good in its specifics, many political scientists have concluded that it does not have any theoretical importance. Certainly it is true that any specific proposal as to the public good's character says more about the advocate's values than it does about the public good. In fact, the public good, if it ever were fully attained, would be no more accessible to our comprehension than universal scientific agreement or general equilibrium. But the self-organization model allows us to introduce the concept, indeed to give it central theoretical importance, without our needing to know its particular features.

The concept of public good developed here is in harmony with much traditional political theory. Both Aristotle and James Madison, for example, described the public good as what would be the case if citizens were free to come to free and uncoerced agreement concerning public policy. Political procedures and practices, including voting rules, are justified in terms of their capacity to promote this agreement (diZerega, 1984).

The public good, in Hayek's terms

will not be the interests of particular people but kinds of interests which we shall alone be able to balance against each other, and the classification for this purpose of interests into different kinds possessing different degrees of importance will not be based upon the importance of these interests to those directly concerned, but will be made according to the importance of the successful pursuit of certain kinds of interests for the preservation of the overall order (1973, p. 3)

Bernard Crick appears to refer to the same concept when he notes that "the political process is not tied to any particular doctrine. Genuine political doctrines, rather, are the attempt to find particular and workable solutions to this perpetual and shifting problem of conciliation"(1964, p. 22). An essential element of the public good is preserving and improving this conciliation process -- in other words, promoting political agreement. Prof. Crick also recognizes this process' similarity to the market and to science (pp. 23, 146, respectively). Obviously the political process at its best can only approximate perfect coordination in this sense. But, as with the market and science, what is important is the strength of practices and institutions promoting conciliation compared with those disrupting the process. As with economic and scientific elites, democratic elites play important roles in both instances.

While self-organizing systems are able to coordinate more information and knowledge than can instrumental organizations, they do so at the price of relenquishing control over the specific features of this process. Since each participant acts independently of knowledge of others' actions, the details of their various interactions are in principle uncontrollable. Professor Hayek's description of the market order could apply just as well to science and democracy (Hayek, 1973, p. 43)

The market order in particular will regularly secure only a certain probability that the expected relations will prevail, but it is, nevertheless, the only way in which so many activities depending on dispersed knowledge can be effectively integrated into a single order.

What distinguishes these three systems is the type of plans and knowledge which are coordinated and the specific values that each tends to maximize. Science maximizes our knowledge of scientific truth and the values it embodies. The market promotes projects compatible with contractually ordered instrumental rationality. Democracy promotes projects compatible with public values, values applying to us all as equal members of a polity.

Because they do not exist to achieve any specifiable goal, self-organizing systems may at any moment not be as well adapted as an instrumental organization to attain a particular ordered set of goals, but will nevertheless be superior to such organizations in their capability for pursuing many different ends. This characteristic sets democratic politics off from those which are oriented towards serving a particular interest. Alexis de Tocqueville described this characteristic when he wrote of American politics that:

The want of . . . regulations is severely felt, and is frequently observed by Europeans. The appearance of disorder which prevails upon the surface leads him at first to imagine that society is in a state of anarchy; nor does he perceive his mistake until he has gone deeper into the subject . . . (1961, pp. 89-90)

Democracies and Democratic Organizations

Many political scientists do not distinguish in any essential sense between democracies and democratic organizations. Their writings suggest that the two are similar enough so that studies of one can be very helpful in understanding the other (Dahl, 1956; Pateman, 1970; Mansbridge, 1983). I argue the opposite: equating democracies with democratic instrumental organizations such as cooperatives, political parties, and unions virtually guarantees misleading findings and confusions. This appears to be particularly the case when evaluating the nature of elites.

Robert Michels is perhaps the most important theorist concerned with political elites whose failure to distinguish political democracy from democratic organizations has sown confusion among many subsequent theorists (for example, Dye 1976, p. 5). Michels' study of turn of the century German Social Democrats led to his concluding that an "Iron Law of Oligarchy" existed which inevitably turned formally democratic organizations into undemocratic oligarchies. "It is

organization" Michels wrote, "which gives birth to the dominion of the elected over the electors, of the mandatories over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators. Who says organizations says oligarchy" (Michels, 1962, p. 365).

Insofar as he confined himself to democratic organizations, Michels' conclusions have generally held true. However, Michels generalized beyond democratic organizations to all types of large scale democratic institutions. Thus he concluded that "there is great scientific as well as practical value in establishing the fact that every system of leadership/rulership is incompatible with the most essential postulates of democracy" (quoted in Sartori, 1987, p. 149). To better evaluate Michels' reasoning, we need to grasp the differences between democracies and democratic instrumental organizations.

Like other instrumental organizations, democratic organizations exist to achieve specifiable ends. To be sure, as with cooperatives, very often maintaining democratic procedures is a part of that purpose. Nevertheless, a specific task also exists alongside the simple maintenance of democratic procedures. For example, in the case of producers' cooperatives, such as the Mondragon cooperatives of Spain, this purpose is successful marketing of products.

Most organizations appear unable to maintain both viable democratic procedures and successful pursuit of their substantive goals. Large organizations tend to provide incumbent leadership with decisive power over challengers. As a rule, rank and file members have no influence over their policies. In their study of democracy and American labor unions, S. M. Lipset, M. Trow, and J. Coleman point out that unions with very similar membership pursue widely varying policies. The crucial variable appears to be who is the leader, for that leader is virtually immune from successful internal challenge. West Coast longshoremen, for example, "instituted a rigid sharing of the work according to a numerical list, while the East Coast longshoremen have retained the shape-up system of hiring which permits hiring bosses to discriminate among the men." It took legal action by New York and New Jersey to abolish this practice (1956, p. 459).

Profs. Lipset, Trow, and Coleman principally analyzed one of the very few American unions which possessed significant internal democratic life. Nevertheless, for the most part, Michels' "Iron

Law" was found to hold true. Internal democracy seemed possible only in the rare instances where "the incumbent administration does not hold a monopoly over the resources of politics" (p. 464). They concluded that "the implications of our analysis for democratic organizational politics are almost as pessimistic as those postulated by Robert Michels" (p. 454). In Giovanni Sartori's words, the "Iron Law" is now a "Bronze Law" (1987, p. 149). The exceptions that do exist to organizational oligarchy are rare and interesting, such as the German Greens attempt to prevent the emergence of oligarchic leadership (Spretnak and Capra, 1986). As we shall see, many of the factors tending to promote organizational democracy are much more characteristic of political democracy than instrumental organizations. Just as interesting will be factors necessary for organizational democracy which are *not* found in political democracy.

Profs. Lipset, Trow, and Coleman discovered a number of features which they argued would promote successful union democracy. Three factors in particular influence how political resources are distributed within a labor union. First, the more opportunities members had to acquire political skills, the more likely the union was to be democratic. Second, the more independent channels for communication existed, and were available to the opposition, the more likely democratic procedures were to be effective. Third, the more leisure time and money members possessed, the greater the likelihood that democracy would flourish (p. 467). In addition, they argued that "one of the necessary conditions for a sustained democratic political system in an occupational group is that it be so homogeneous that only ideology and not the more potent spur of self-interest divides its members" (p. 347).

It should be readily apparent that most organizations do not meet Lipset, Trow, and Coleman's first three criteria very well, but that they are fairly widespread in political democracy. On the other hand, the requirement of homogeneity is not a characteristic of political democracy. Modern society's diversity, a diversity rooted in its unavoidable complexity, is antithetical to the values of economic and cultural homogeneity, except during wartime, and not always then. Further, on the basis of the authors' observations, we may infer that it is during wartime, when a high degree of homogeneity exists and the polity therefore most closely resembles an instrumental organization,

that the three other criteria making for viable organizational democracy are most threatened. Hence the sad treatment of those who "don't fit in" during wartime.

Homogeneity of interests helps an organization because while members may differ on other matters they agree as to its basic purpose. But in a liberal democracy, while the public good necessitates that a homogeneity of interests exist, it is often either fleeting in its specifics or abstract or both. It cannot be known in its specifics except as it manifests out of the political process. And even then its attainment, like equilibrium in the market and agreement in science will be partial and temporary. The complexity characterizing democratic polities usually precludes the conscious homogeneity of specific interests which help hold together the unity of a labor union or cooperative.

Attempts to combine democratic procedures with organizational goals are therefore intrinsically fragile, for their natural tendency is to support very different social institutions. In 1978, Robert Heilbroner wrote a provocative article illustrating this point. Asked what is meant by socialism, Heilbroner argued:

If socialism is to be a new socioeconomic formation -- I must hammer home this premise -- then it must depend for its economic direction on some form of planning, and for its culture on some form of commitment to the idea of a morally conscious collectivity . These two elements seem to me to be the only alternatives to the anarchic character and alienated culture of welfare capitalism."(1978, p. 343)

The political implications for a society explicitly predicated on instrumental organizational premises are interesting. Heilbroner raises an issue he believes "to be as deeply embedded in a true socialist culture, *once that culture is attained* , as the necessity for a command form of economic organization is embedded in its socioeconomic structure. This cultural problem is the difficulty that a socialist culture will experience in accepting the tolerant political and perhaps social attitudes of bourgeois life." Prof. Heilbroner explains that within "bourgeois society" there is a lack

of a *moral significance* attaching to most political or social acts or ideas. Dissenting thought appears within bourgeois society as a mere commodity in the "marketplace" of ideas, to use the common and illuminating phrase. Alternative life styles, departures in policies, new

directions for individual or national activity are considered as "options" yielding calculable costs and benefits, or as "propositions" that can be considered in a detached and pragmatic light . . .

Dissident political and social beliefs in bourgeois society may be considered as erroneous, foolish, shocking, deplorable, or dangerous, but *they are not thought of as blasphemous* .

Dissent is not intolerable because it does not breach a profound sense of what is good.

Yet, if a socialist society is to attain the culture of moral commitment to which it aspires, it must view its politics and its social mores as guided by the desire to be good, not merely expedient. Dissents, disagreements, and departures from norms then assume a far more threatening aspect than under bourgeois society . . . (1978, pp. 346-7). ²

This has been a lengthy citation. But a significant one, particularly because Heilbroner on balance *approves* of these sentiments and because it puts with exceptional clarity and bluntness the tension between conceiving of democracy as an organization and as a self-organizing system. They are antithetical. The problem Heilbroner describes does not effect only socialists.³ It applies with equal force to any attempt to amalgamate democratic procedures with organizational commitments. The antebellum South sought to maintain fairly democratic procedures for Whites while preventing slavery from becoming a major internal political issue. For example, South Carolina required its

² In fact the difference is not between morality and lack of morality, but between end state morality where a specific result is moral or not, and procedural morality wherein morality is not found in the result, but in the means for getting there. A case for procedural morality exists when we cannot agree on specific outcomes because a situation is too complex to control, precisely the case with self-organizing social institutions. For an alternative to Heilbroner's view of bourgeois society and ethics, see Martin Diamond, 1986.

³ Although it is particularly appropriate to them. For an excellent case study of the incompatibility of central direction with democratic politics, see Steinmo 1988. Recently Prof. Heilbroner has apparently repudiated his views for he has admitted capitalism's victory over socialism. We may all be grateful that he or like minded souls did not attain political power in 1978! See Heilbroner, 1989.

state representatives to possess five hundred acres of land and ten slaves or possess land of sufficient value that slave labor would be required for its cultivation to be rendered profitable (Anonymous, 1864, 21) More recently South Africa gradually whittled away its white population's political liberties to debate the merits of Apartheid. Although even more recent developments have reversed this, the result has been the weakening of its commitment to apartheid. Israel faces a similar dilemma, so long as she defines herself both Jewish and democratic.

Egalitarian democratic theorists face the same problem. Robert Dahl argues that citizens act "undemocratically" when they fail to support indefinite efforts to equalize political resources (Dahl, 1982, pp. 119-120) Since no democracy seeks this Dahl is in the odd position of arguing that all democracies (polyarchies, to use his term) possess majorities who act undemocratically by virtue of not agreeing with him! ⁴

To summarize, there are two basic types of social institutions which exemplify democratic principles in different ways: democratic instrumental organizations and political democracy, a self-organizing polity. They are fundamentally distinct because democratic instrumental organizations are systemically similar to other instrumental organizations whereas political democracy is similar to other self-organizing orders such as science and the market. Elites exist within both democratic organizations and in political democracy. In democratic organizations Michels' "Iron Law" is always a serious problem to democratic principles. I will argue now that this is not the case in democracies, and that elites within self-organizing systems have little in common with elites in instrumental organizations.

Elites and the Democratic Process: Hierarchies and Networks

The democratic coordination process must maximize the likelihood that any citizen can find useful information while having to deal with a minimum of information irrelevant to their interests (as they see them). Otherwise citizens would be inundated by too much information, and so be unable to utilize it effectively. Filtering, then, is an essential part of coordinating. A democratic filtering and coordinating process must provide means by which those desiring to engage in public

⁴ For an extended critique of egalitarian theories of democracy, see diZerega, 1988

debate have a reasonable opportunity to convince an ever increasing number of other citizens of their views.

This filtering and coordinating process more closely resembles analogous processes in science than it does that of the market. In science, as Stephen Toulmin observes, "the overall 'rationality' of the existing procedures or institutions depends on the scope that exists for criticizing and changing them from within the enterprise itself" (1972, p. 168). Such openness to public challenge is not characteristic of the market because the only agreements required for its functioning are the terms of private exchange. There is no need for general agreement. Public policies, Heilbroner to the contrary, more closely resemble scientific theories than market transactions because they last as long as they can command support from the relevant *community*.⁵

A democratic filtering and coordinating process has two specific informational requirements: everyone must have a reasonable opportunity to expand their political influence indefinitely so long as their arguments are found convincing, and policies should be adopted which have survived widespread debate by relevant publics. At a minimum, then, this process must: (1) make generally available knowledge that alternative perspectives exist over an issue; (2) make easily available representative alternative perspectives for those wishing to investigate further; and (3) provide a means by which political advocates can continue reaching interested others.

The coordination process within a democracy is much more complex than that existing in science or markets. Most information for coordinating action in the market can be put in terms of money prices. In politics this is not true. Further, it must encompass a community as a whole. But unlike the scientific community, the political community operates within significant time constraints. In a political context, doing nothing can be itself a policy. In science this is not so. Further, politics

⁵ In science, democracy, and the market the underlying moral principles are based upon respect for others and the need to obtain their free agreement. Respect is a procedural moral principle quite different from Prof. Heilbroner's "end-state" conception of morality. On the distinction between procedural and end-state morality, see Nozick, 1978.

is concerned with values even more fundamentally than with technique. Giovanni Sartori has developed a framework which helps us get a better grasp of the democratic coordination process. In doing so he starts with Karl Deutsch's organizational conception and in the process of developing it within a democratic context, turns it into that of a self-organizing system, although Sartori appears himself unaware of the distinction. His starting point is Deutsch's "cascade model" for public opinion formation wherein "opinions flow downward in a multi-step fashion, as in a cascade broken by a series of pools"(Sartori, 1987, p. 93) According to Deutsch, these pools consist, beginning at the top, of first the economic and social elites, second the political and governmental elites, next the mass media, then the opinion leaders and finally the mass public (Deutsch, 1968, pp. 101-110)

Sartori emphasizes two aspects of this model not developed by Deutsch. First, he argues that "each pool adversarially reshuffles, independently from the other basins and in its own peculiar manner, the messages that enter it." Second, he holds that it is "doubtful that trends of opinion are really conceived and originated by socio-economic and political elites, they are generally ignited by *idea groups* " (Sartori, 1987, p. 99). While idea groups are found throughout society, they are concentrated in institutions of higher education, think tanks, and the media (Derthick and Quirk, 1985, pp. 237-258; Polsby, 1984; Page, Shapiro and Dempsey, 1987). Thus, each "pool" of this "cascade" is capable of generating its own interpretation of politically relevant information, and of responding more or less independently from the others.

In another important modification, Sartori notes that within contemporary democracies, the cascade has become "increasingly flattened." Indeed, "frequently enough, the cascade actually begins with the media" along with the "bubbling up of opinion from below."(Sartori, p. 99) There are many examples of such "bubbling up." In the United States the recent popular revolt against a Congressional pay raise sent solons scurrying for political cover. Here Sartori's metaphor is misleading, for this outburst was initiated by activists, only these activists were not usually associated with the political elite. State legislative initiatives are another such example. Again, often self-appointed activists are the force initially behind them. Among such examples are various "Toxic

Waste" initiatives which often overcome widespread economic elite opposition and "overwhelming" spending by their opponents, as has happened in California and Washington. English as the official language initiatives are another example, even being supported by 63% of the Hispanics who voted, despite nearly universal mainstream elite opposition. In European parliamentary systems the rise of Green parties provides a similar example. All are examples of "insurgent politics."

We have a very strange sort of "cascade" here. In fact, it is not a cascade at all. The metaphor's inappropriateness is due to its hierarchical character, which therefore cannot describe a process which is not hierarchical. What Sartori is describing is a *network* of enormous complexity. The democratic coordination process takes place within this network. No single node is adequate to coordinate or control politically relevant information so as to make it available to those who might find it important. The entire network is required for that.

Closer analysis indicates that many of these nodes are themselves highly differentiated. If we look at the media's influence, analysis of "the press" is inadequate to appreciate newspapers' coordination role within a democracy. A suggestive study analyzes press coverage during the 1984 New Hampshire presidential primary. The national press covered the primary like a horse race, constantly reporting who was ahead in the polls. Comparatively little attention was devoted to covering issues which separated the candidates. The local press, however, devoted considerable space to issue coverage, although by no means neglecting the entertainment value of horse race reporting. *Attentive local voters received different information than attentive audiences outside New Hampshire*. Information on issues went mostly to those who could vote (Buell, 1987). Moreover, voters are themselves differentiated, with "opinion leaders" again filtering information from the media to the public at large. These opinion leaders correspond to John Adams' most liberal definition of the "natural aristocracy." (On opinion leaders today, see Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1987, pp. 1197-1216; Mills, 1963, pp. 577-98).

Our two metaphors of "cascade" and "network" illustrate the distinction between instrumental organizational and a self-organizing systems view of political democracy. Egalitarian democratic theorists, conceiving contemporary democracies in organizational terms, distrust elites for they can

find no democratic legitimacy for cascades. But in writing of "the people," "the citizens," or worst of all, "the masses" what is obscured is the need for differentiation among the people if the polity is to be able to act at all. The complexity and volume of politically relevant information is simply too great for any other approach. Thus, egalitarian democratic theory is *utterly without value* as a tool for making sense of contemporary democratic reality (diZerega, 1988).

When we conceive of democracies as consisting of coordinating and filtering networks, we are not committed to the proposition that elites are harmless as well as necessary elements in the political landscape. Necessary -- yes. Harmless -- not necessarily. However, without making *a priori* generalizations about this issue, the perspective I am developing is compatible with Prof. Polsby's definition of "Pluralism 2." This is a state of affairs in which there exists

dispersion of power among many rather than a few participants in decision-making; competition or conflict among political leaders; specialization of leaders to relatively restricted sets of issue areas; bargaining rather than hierarchical decision-making; elections in which suffrage is relatively widespread as a major determinant of participation in key decisions; bases of influence over decisions relatively dispersed rather than closely held; and so on (1980, 154).

Two elaborations are important with regard to Prof. Polsby's formulation. First, to say that dispersion of power is among "many" decision-makers means that decision-making takes place under conditions of *complexity*. Second, and equally important, so long as conscious coordination is precluded and participation rules are abstract, *any* degree of inequality of influence can theoretically exist for any particular participant, from the minimal impact of simply casting a vote to that possessed by someone controlling a wide variety of political resources. Substantive equality can vary drastically. Indeed, as we will see, it *must* vary for the system to be able to work at all, although there are limits to this inequality if it is to work well. Not every node is equal. Indeed, it is hard to even know in what sense substantive "equality" will apply to these different nodes. They will control different resources, possess different interests, and act in different ways.

Elites in Self-Organizing Systems

It is misleading to rely on how elites operate in instrumental organizations as a guide to how they operate in democracies. We can gain a better perspective on how elites operate within democracies by examining their role in other self-organizing systems. Therefore I will briefly look at the role of elites in markets and science before returning to discuss their role in political democracy.

By economic elites, I refer to those with greatest access to market resources, particularly money. Money can buy all other market resources such as entrepreneurial and organizational ability. G. William Domhoff cites studies indicating that about .5 percent of families and individuals living alone own about 25 percent of the wealth in the United States (1983, p. 42). Such people could reasonably be considered America's economic elite. This economic status is fairly stable in the sense that once a family enters elite status it tends to maintain itself there. For example, Domhoff cites a study which concluded that 9 of 12 top wealth holding families in Detroit in 1892 and earlier still had members in the Detroit elite in 1970 (p. 36). But this and similar studies may be overstating the significance of these figures (Lebergott, 1975, pp. 161-175)

Much rests on how economic elites maintain their positions. There are two basic strategies. One is to *control* markets. The other is successful *adaptation* to changing circumstances. In the former case we see a market turned into an instrumental organization devoted to serving the interests of its leaders. In the latter nothing of the sort takes place.

While Domhoff writes frequently as if the organizational aspect of control is what counts, the evidence he cites usually points instead to successful adaptation as the most important strategy to perpetuate old money. (For an example of his organizational thinking, see p. 77.) The "Family Office," according to Domhoff, is established by many holders of inherited wealth to take over active management of the family's assets (p. 60). He refers to a study that ". . . most of all, family offices have served as a unifying force keeping the money intact as the families have moved out of the entrepreneurial risk-taking businesses that formed the basis of the wealth" (White 1978, p. 9). In a word, investment talent is hired.

Further, Domhoff points out that "An analysis of the boards of major banks shows that they are more likely to include upper-class members than are boards in other sectors of the economy" (1983, p. 72). This is equally significant because, compared to most sectors of the economy, banks are heavily regulated and protected from market fluctuations by political privilege. They are safe because they do not fully pay for their mistakes. Being safe, they are natural havens for those wealthy who, in an uncertain environment, are no longer willing to run entrepreneurial risks. The present savings and loans crisis indicates just how little entrepreneurial ability many financial leaders possess, and how protected they are from their inadequacies, even when "deregulated."

These examples indicate that big money, once amassed, seeks not so much to control markets as either to adapt through hiring investment talent or insulate themselves by entering into those realms of the economy which are politically protected from competition and uncertainty.

An alternative perspective has been eloquently argued by John Kenneth Galbraith, among others. In 1967 Prof. Galbraith argued that the largest corporations had acquired so much market power that genuine competition had been substantially abolished. At the corporate level, he held, the economy was already a planned one. The choice was not planning or markets, but rather who would plan: private business or public officials. His favorite example of such power at the time was the Big Three in automobile manufacturing: General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler. Subsequent events have forced Prof. Galbraith to search for new examples, but unfortunately never to confront why he was so far off the mark in 1967.

Prof. Galbraith's error is a common one among those who fail to distinguish between instrumental organizations and self-organizing systems. In an instrumental organization those with superior resources will tend to be in control. If the market functioned like an instrumental organization, the Big Three's superior size and resources could have led to their substituting conscious planning for market processes. But in a self-organizing system success is rooted in adaptive responses to an environment largely independent of control.

Of course economic elites frequently seek to establish monopolies, a practice noticed at least as early as Adam Smith. But without politically derived privileges to provide barriers to entry, their

success has either been temporary or limited to cases where a resource is so limited that its sources could be purchased by a single organization. Perhaps the best example of this latter case in DeBeers' control of South African gem quality diamonds. But when a monopoly covers manufactured goods, the would be monopolists need to keep their prices low in order to discourage new entries.

In a market order the extent to which elites can create islands of privilege is limited. Each such island reduces the system's capacity to adapt to changing circumstances (Olson, 1982). Yet, as attempts at comprehensive planning have so frequently demonstrated, conscious direction is incapable of ordering complex economies. Consequently, while islands of privilege are by no means absent, in self-organizing systems such as the market they must remain secondary, on pain of risking general economic breakdown. Hence, adaptiveness is the major means by which the fabulously wealthy maintain their status, and in the process assist the coordination process which maintains the market.

Scientific elites play a similar coordinating role within the scientific community, so long as their elite status grows out of recognition of their purely scientific contributions. Like the market, scientific work generates more information than any person or group can comprehend. Unlike the market, scientific information cannot be reduced to a simplified system such as prices. Consequently, whereas standards for success in market terms are clear cut -- how much money have you made? -- in science standards are more complicated and contested.

In science, participants seek to reach uncoerced agreement as to the nature of physical reality. General agreement is not in sight, but there is an unending process of reaching agreement in more circumscribed areas which open up new areas for investigation or, sometimes, resurrect old questions thought laid to rest. From this perspective, scientific methodology has developed as a means for assessing scientific propositions. Mathematics' privileged role rests on the relative unambiguity of mathematical measurement, and consequently its capacity to compel assent. This is also the basis for the high status successful prediction tends to enjoy. Even so, as has frequently been shown, evaluation of a theory is anything but mechanical. It relies upon the individual

scientist's judgement. (Much of this analysis rests on the work of John Ziman, 1968, 1978.)

Scientific elites play a critically important role in the scientific community. Their judgement is relied upon by other scientists, largely because it has been found reliable in the past. Elite status arises through a person being recognized by his or her peers as having made valuable contributions in the scientific enterprise. Recognition can come from a scientist's creative development of an existing paradigm or, in the most spectacular cases, creation of new theories or paradigms. Elite status can be withdrawn if scientists no longer have confidence in the judgement of a leading scientist. Until then they disproportionately help coordinate research in their field.

The very complexity of the scientific enterprise makes for elites within different fields, and of elite representatives of competing schools within a given field. The controversy in physics between Einstein and Bohr is a famous example. Since elite status arises within one's own field, what keeps the different fields from flying apart into fundamentally different endeavors is common agreement as to means for testing propositions within fields and interdisciplinary work by a few. Thus the differences between astronomy and geology are far less than those between astronomy and astrology because the standards for evaluating the validity of an astronomical proposition is essentially similar to that in geology, but not for astrology.

Paul Feyerabend (1975) is a philosopher of science who appears to confuse organizational and self-organizing principles as they exist within the scientific community. He argues that not only does science present a very limited and partial picture of the world, a point with which I agree, but that its principles for maintaining a coherent scientific world view are nonrational, and based more upon organizational clout and rhetorical power than the systemic rationality of the self-organizing scientific community. While this can be true of research organizations and particular schools of thought, it is inappropriately applied to the scientific community as a whole. The self-organizing characteristics of this community limit, but do not eliminate, the damage caused by self-consciously organized elites using organizational resources to preserve their position. That "softer" sciences such as psychology and economics contain more competing schools and vaguer means for distinguishing which theories are superior is evidence for this.

Status differences pervade the scientific community. Journals, departments, theories, and individuals are differentiated by their reputations as conferred by the community's judgements, a judgement always open to challenge from within. Scientific elites thus maintain their stature by continually gaining the uncoerced support of their peers. Conferral of elite status plays an important role in coordinating scientific work, identifying promising areas for research, and in making mutually unintelligible fields scientific in the eyes of other scientists.

However, to some extent other avenues to elite status also exist within the scientific community. These alternate elites are not based upon the freely given consent of their peers, but upon extra-systemic factors, particularly politics and access to money.

In authoritarian and totalitarian systems, scientific status can be based upon political compulsion. The most famous example is that of T. D. Lysenko, who dominated Soviet agricultural science under Stalin's patronage. On a less threatening level, the efforts of "creation scientists" to gain scientific status through this nation's courts and legislatures exemplify the same appeal to extra-systemic authority by those unable to win the assent of their peers. To be sure, the scientific community is not always right in its judgement. The theory of continental drift, which is now accepted, was rejected for decades, and its originator died a discredited man. However, so long as reliance is upon the judgement of the scientific community, the uniquely scientific methodology for evaluating theories and exposing error *maximizes* the likelihood that past mistakes with regard to understanding the physical world will be uncovered. But, of course, it does not guarantee it.

There is a second source for alternative principles to create or maintain elites who otherwise would be unable to sustain their position within the scientific community. This is money's influence upon avenues of research. The tension between pure and applied research has often been discussed. Applied research is well funded by government and industry, but pure research generally suffers. Yet today's applied research is rooted in yesterday's pure research.

More seriously, yet more subtly, the rising cost of pure research in many fields requires scientists to rely upon extra-scientific sources for their funding. Even when research monies are placed under the direction of leading scientists, the number of projects needing funding will always

exceed the amount of funding available. To the degree that funding is centralized, there is a heightened risk that maverick projects will not get the needed assistance. Competing views and lines of research may be stifled by starvation rather than suppression.

Elites in science serve science by using their judgement in promoting worthy projects. But each field has competing elites and their prestige is freely granted. Centralized funding under the control of a few can undermine the vitality of competing elites. Further, talents required for grantsmanship are not the same as those required for creative research. This alternate avenue to scientific status has the potential of retarding scientific advances by confining research funding to orthodox avenues.

In both science and the market, elites play essential roles in maintaining the systems' overall well being, even if they often also try and undermine it. Neither science nor the market can be comprehended within egalitarian terms. Any attempt to give all participants within a self-organizing system equal resources will seriously undermine its capacity to coordinate information for the overall well-being of all participants. Yet at the same time, both science and the market depend equally upon a formal equality among participants with regard to their subservience to the rules generating that order. So far as science and the market are concerned, the only resource distinctions between participants which are not a threat to the order are those arising and maintained *solely* out of people operating within the framework of rules which generate it.

Because elite status within these orders is always to some degree insecure, being constantly open to challenge, existing elites will be tempted to utilize extra-systemic factors to maintain their position. If they are successful, they will undermine the system's self-organizing capacity. The result will be either a more chaotic order or its conversion to an instrumental organization with a true ruling elite.

Systemically derived inequalities in resources generally assist in the coordination process, for they reward those who through skill and/or good fortune have acted successfully to meet others' plans, desires, or expectations. When resources are derived extra-systemically, they accrue to those who have not done this. As a result, the system's capacity to coordinate many people's plans, desires, and expectations is undermined. (This argument does not depend upon the necessary

superiority of equilibrating over disequilibrating tendencies within an order. It only holds that disequilibrating tendencies will be stronger than they otherwise would be.)

We can now formulate a balanced appreciation of the role elites play within a democratic polity. A self-organizing system generates far more information than any person or group can comprehend. This is particularly true in a democracy, for potentially any issue can become subject to political debate and action. Hence, politically relevant information includes all information which could influence social life. Somehow this incredible amount of information must be sorted and differentiated so that relevant information can be made reasonably available to politically interested citizens -- or even to citizens who might become politically interested.

We have here a sort of "political ecology" wherein issue supporters seek "political niches" within which to develop and grow in influence. Inequality in the distribution of political knowledge is therefore *presupposed*, with "issue entrepreneurs" seeking public support for promoting or maintaining their views. At this systemic level, issue entrepreneurs are akin to scientists arguing for new theories and explanations. Note also that, as in the market and to some degree in science, no guarantee exists that entrepreneurs will possess the resources needed effectively to pursue their ideas. Outside support may be necessary.

A viable democracy requires that political resources be widely distributed, but not that they be equally distributed. Since issue elites may not themselves possess the resources to spread their ideas and insights very far, they need political allies who can contribute resources they lack. Of course, the most generalizeable political resource is money, and thus *it is important that money be distributed among citizens with a wide variety of political perspectives* (See Polsby, 1989, pp. 268-269).

In a large complex polity if resources were evenly distributed, it would be almost impossible for new ideas to become widely enough known to challenge the *status quo*. Organization costs are high, too high for most people to bear. Rather like the old adage about not being able to get a job without job experience, in such a society the political entrepreneur could get no significant support unless s/he already had significant support.

We can never foresee who will become issue elites. Therefore, elites who are not issue entrepreneurs, but who control valuable political resources, are essential in order for new political ideas to find a hearing. They are akin to investors in the market or patrons of young innovative scientists.

While not everyone can be such an elite, there must nevertheless be many of them. They must be spread widely enough so that issue entrepreneurs have a decent chance for finding backers for their ideas. In the sciences a wide variety of journals and referees are a powerful protection against worthy theories being prematurely discarded because they conflict with dominant prejudices. In politics widely distributed financial elites protect against the same type of problem. A famous example is Friedrich Engels' bankrolling of Karl Marx. But it is hardly unusual. For example, public interest groups in the United States are also dependent upon the well heeled for their effectiveness. Unlike private interest groups seeking financial gain, public interest groups seek policy changes with little significant financial impact upon their members. Consequently, no financial inducement exists to support activism. Any inducement for member involvement is ideological. Prosperous ideological supporters are an *essential* element in the political effectiveness of public interest groups (Walker, 1983).

One of the most observed and least interesting facts about American democracy is that the wealthy are disproportionately represented in interest groups. We should *expect* such to be the case, and not be troubled by it. Lipset, Trow, and Coleman pointed out that both money and leisure are needed by workers if unions are to be democratic. The same is true in political democracy, except that with greater organizing costs, the financial and leisure requirements are also greater. Of course, not all wealthy elites use their money to promote political action. Some will be interested mostly in personal consumption or be uninterested in politics. But it is only by having significant amounts of wealth unevenly as well as widely distributed in a society that an independent basis for future political organization can be maintained.

So long as resources are widely distributed among different kinds of elites, it does not follow that only causes harmonious with the interests of the wealthy will find patrons. For example, those

who inherit wealth frequently have values quite different from their ancestors who made it. The argument that all who are wealthy share a common, overriding interest is crude reductionism, bad empiricism, and silly. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to believe that, on balance, those possessing wealth to donate will prefer to give it to causes which do not advocate their expropriation. But how politically significant is this?

The Evidence for a Democratic "Ruling Elite"

Domhoff, among others, thinks it very significant. Americans generally accept the role of profits in the economy. According to Domhoff, this is evidence of elites manipulating public opinion. Although the elite "has not been able to bring about active acceptance of all power elite policies and perspectives . . . it has been able to ensure that opposing opinions have remained isolated, suspect, and only partially developed" (1983, p. 104) Hence, the failure of socialist politics in the U.S. is supposedly due to the power of the "ruling class."

Let us suppose that somewhere a socialist society abolishes the profit system and raises the general standard of living to equal or surpass that of developed capitalist nations. Would such a development have an impact upon American politics? It seems to me that it would. But this has not happened. From Hong Kong to Sweden all prosperous economies are coordinated primarily by market transactions, albeit modified by political intervention. Sven Steinmo has documented how the Swedish Social Democrats came to protect big business as a necessary component of its welfare state, instituting a less disruptive tax system (from a business perspective) than that existing in the United States (Steinmo, 1988). But will any reasonable person suggest that the Swedish Social Democrats are more devoted to serving big business than American Republicans or Democrats?

Prof. Domhoff, like Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, writes as if only the *success* of political movements devoted to overthrowing capitalism will count as evidence that a "ruling class" does not dominate (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962). This argument is seriously flawed. First, it assumes that the authors know what democracies must do in order to be democratic. But this ignores the problem of complexity - that no one can understand the full range of public issues and possible policies. We can only agree on general procedural rules by which those policies can be determined.

In addition, when insurgent groups do gather political support in a democratic system like our own, their programs will usually be co-opted. The major parties will incorporate many of their ideas, as did the 1950s Democrats with the pre-war Socialist Party. This may be unfortunate for the egos of insurgent politicians, but not for their *ideas*. Of course the stolen ideas are modified, but this is the normal fate for all proposals which ultimately become public policy.

This capacity of self-organizing polities to adapt to new issues without major upheavals causes dissatisfied radicals to term episodes such as the New Deal "conservative." This same capacity causes equally dissatisfied conservatives to term them "radical." From one perspective, successful political entrepreneurship serves to increase the coordination of political knowledge in society. In this respect it is conservative. From another perspective, successful political entrepreneurship disrupts the *status quo ante*. In this respect it can upset those who benefitted from the former way of doing things. Within any social self-organizing system, science, the market, and democracy alike, systemically generated change is *both* conserving and upsetting. The specific conditions of the present are upset better to maintain the order as a whole. In this respect circumstances are the same in science and the market as in democracy.⁶

Because democracies are not instrumental orders attempts to define political processes in instrumental terms lead to confusions. For example, Domhoff argues that "Domination does not mean total control, but the ability to set the terms under which other groups and classes must operate" (1983, p. 2). His attempt to illustrate such control contradicts his argument. According to him, Atlanta, Georgia, is "dominated" by a power elite. Nevertheless, he admits that in Atlanta, "new initiatives were often dropped if it seemed they would generate resistance within middle-level voluntary associations or the general public" (1983, p. 161). By his definition of "domination" this means that Atlanta is "dominated" by middle level voluntary associations and the general public. Or again, in discussing how the power elite shapes social legislation, Domhoff quotes Samuel Insull, an early utilities magnate, that it is better to "help *shape* the *right* kind of regulation than have the

⁶ For an extended discussion of this point, see diZerega, 1989.

wrong kind forced upon you."(1970, p. 158)

Domhoff's own examples demonstrate that different groups *mutually* set the terms under which they all must operate. Business may operate -- but only within the confines of reforms made all but inevitable (in the eyes of these businessmen) by the political power of non-business interests. Domhoff argues that today the policy planning process "begins in corporate board rooms, where problems are normally identified as 'issues' to be solved by new policies. It ends in government, where policies are enacted . . . In between, however, there is a complex network . . . policy groups, foundations, think tanks, and university research institutes" (1983, p. 84). This description sees initiatives as top down in character. Yet he holds that "policy groups" are a critical linch-pin in this process, for it is here that the corporate elite meets with representatives from the academic, media, and other elites. Further, Domhoff writes, "think tanks and university research institutes . . . are a major source of the new ideas that are discussed in the policy formation groups" (p. 85).

Further

No one type of organization within the network is more important than the others. Nor is any one organization or group the "inner sanctum" where final decisions are made. It is the network as a whole that shapes policy alternatives, with different organizations playing different roles on different issues(p. 85).

Nor is it the case that important issues necessarily originate in corporate boardrooms or think tanks. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* played a more significant role in bringing environmental issues to public awareness than did either (Fox, 1985, pp. 292-299).

In short, elites exist and too often do genuine harm, but the elite theorists' instrumental organizational framework leads to their misunderstanding what is going on. They recognize that illness exists, but misdiagnose the disease.

The Pluralist Framework Reconsidered

If elite theorists would gain from understanding the distinction between self-organizing systems and instrumental organizations, I think that their pluralist opponents would also gain.

Pluralism as used by its advocates is more a description of research findings than a model of political democracy. Perhaps some believe this to be a strength. But as a description, pluralism suffers a crucial vagueness. Let us return to Polsby's description of pluralism as power dispersed among "many" rather than "few" participants and elites are restricted to "relatively restricted" issue areas, and influence over issues is "relatively dispersed rather than closely held . . ." (1980, p. 154).

Terms such as "many," "few," and "relatively," are unavoidably vague. Compared to a leninist dictatorship virtually anyone would agree with the pluralists' judgements.⁷ But their opponents argue that the wrong issues are addressed and can always point to people who for one reason or another are left out of some portion of the political process, often to their detriment. Combined with the admitted preponderance of prosperous people among activists, the elitists' claims take on a superficial plausibility.

Additionally, since there is an orderliness to democratic politics, in the absence of a theory for how order can arise without central direction, it often appears as if *someone* is in charge. Consequently, while the pluralists' evidence and, as we have seen, even that of the elitists, suggests that there is not a power elite or ruling class or strata, that evidence tends to be evaluated within a conceptual framework biasing the observer to find a ruling elite. Elitists have a theoretical framework, albeit a bad one, but pluralists tend to have very little framework at all.

This theoretical lack makes pluralist arguments sometimes appear simply as defenses of the *status quo*. For example, Robert Dahl's work has been consistently misinterpreted in this regard by readers who misinterpreted his empirical findings for his normative recommendations (see my discussion in diZerega, 1988). As few pluralists would disagree that a pluralist description of competing elites is compatible with serious and sustained exploitation of the unorganized sectors of society. Because of insecurity, and greed, elites will seek to use the political process to acquire special privileges at the expense of the community as a whole, or of its weaker sectors. Issue

⁷ But see Jerry Hough who uses Robert Dahl's definition of pluralism to argue that it exists within pre-Gorbachev USSR! *The Soviet Union and Social Science Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970)

areas can be "captured" by particular elites, as with banking, public works, and agriculture (see Lowi, 1969; Reisner, 1986). This creates a theoretical problem for pluralist scholarship: what constitutes "exploitation?" Can it be addressed only on a piece-meal basis, or can systemic reforms also help? The self-organizing model provides a conception of the public good, and therefore of exploitation. It also suggests avenues for reform to weaken the exploitative power of elites (diZerega, 1984).

Conclusion

The language of self-organization is not well known in political science. Hopefully this paper has presented some reasons why it should be. If what has preceded is accurate, many analyses of democracy, however solid they may be in other respects, have been weakened by inappropriate theoretical understandings of their subject matter. When democracies are considered simply as variants of states or of democratic organizations, assumptions are imported into empirical analysis which undermine its clarity and distort its conclusions. By contrast, a framework which in important respects finds political democracy paradoxically having more in common with science and the market than with undemocratic governments or democratic organizations can shed important light on some of the most vexing disputes in the field.

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