

Group theory and political culture: a review

Joseph La Palombara, *Interest Groups in Italian Politics*

SAMUEL H. BARNES

Department of Political Science, The University of Michigan

This study is one of the most important works on Italian politics in any language. It is also a major contribution to the literature of comparative politics and group theory. Consequently, it should be of interest not only to students of Italian politics but to all who are interested in systematic comparative analysis as well.

One of the deadly enemies of grand theory is empirical research. If the theory is sufficiently vague it runs no risk of being subjected to rigorous empirical testing. At the same time, if it is unlikely to be very useful to empirical researchers, it is almost certain to be ignored by them.

Grand theory or general explanations of politics rarely give rise to easily researched propositions. One of the attractions of re-discovered group theory was its empirical basis: here was grand theory that suggested hypotheses and could be operationalized. It brought into sharp focus the seemingly muddied contours of the political landscape by reducing political reality to the bare essentials. Here at last, for a few years, was a theory which promised to explain all. Coming as it did into a discipline grubby with unrelated facts and unsubstantiated theories, group theory made a tremendous impact.

Its heuristic value and penetrating simplicity have extended its effective life-span. When we are eventually able to view it from a better perspective, the lasting contribution of group theory will undoubtedly be impressive. The current attacks on it in the journals are evidence enough of its importance.

A second grand theory I want to mention—let us call it structural-functional analysis for short—is not strictly speaking a grand theory at all; rather, it is an approach to the study of politics, a way of looking at political systems, of overcoming the restrictiveness and ethnocentrism of traditional political analysis. For one of the shortcomings of American political science has been its tendency to erect American experiences into universals, to impose our categories on reluctant data. This can lead to distortions of reality when dealing with political systems not wholly dissimilar from ours, and in caricatures of others. While this type of analysis has by no means disappeared even from technical, not to mention popular, writings, it is no longer the only or even the dominant model of analysis available to the serious researcher. The structural-functional approach, inspired outside the discipline

and scarcely affected by traditional political analysis, has had a liberating, intoxicating impact on the field of comparative politics. Here was a tool for studying comparatively all polities, regardless of size, culture, or epoch, and for slipping the bonds of legal and formal analysis.

But it is a dull tool; fit to compare grossly disparate units at a macro level, it has proved less useful as a guide to research, a key as to what to look for. Making few statements about reality, it has given rise to few hypotheses and even fewer attempts at operationalization. And some critics find the study of the functions of political socialization, interest articulation, interest aggregation, rule making, application, and adjudication not so different after all from the study of civic education, interest groups, parties, legislatures, executives, and judiciaries. An even more serious problem has been the absence of empirical work actually inspired by the approach. This is probably due in large part to the relative poverty of the approach as a source of middle-range theory.

It is because of this, perhaps, that group theory reappears as middle-range theory, for it is full of suggestions for crucial areas on which to focus, the kinds of questions to ask, relationships to anticipate, and many others. Group theory did not exert the attraction on non-American scholars which it held for so many American political scientists. While this is in part due to rival ethnocentrism it also reflects some very real differences in political systems. Modern systems have specialized structures for articulating the demands of specific groups within the political system, even if some foreign scholars exhibited surprise at this self-discovery. But many foreign students of politics, especially Europeans, intuitively felt that somehow these notions which

seemed to explain so much about American politics were not as useful as guides for research in other countries; or, if useful, they needed to be employed in a circumspect and limited manner (for example, Meynaud, 1958, and his many other books on interest groups).

If little enough empirical work inspired by group theory was accomplished in the United States, much less was carried out in Europe. It was not until American scholars began extending the insights of group theory to foreign research that much empirical evidence for its general applicability could be accumulated. It is against this background that the work of Joseph La Palombara on Italian interest groups must be evaluated.

Professor La Palombara is eminently qualified for the work he has undertaken. A foremost student of Italian politics, he approaches its complexities with an admirable blend of sympathy and skepticism. He moves in different Italian political and intellectual milieux with a rare finesse. His understanding of recent Italian history and the deeply rooted behavioral characteristics of the population is evident in the essays which form the first four chapters of the book. These introductory chapters on the socioeconomic, political, cultural, and institutional context of group activity command the reader's attention and interest. They could only have been written by a close observer of great sensitivity. The documentation in these chapters reveals how little solid research exists on Italian politics. But Professor La Palombara has skillfully woven together in the introduction his own insights and those of others to provide us with the best existing interpretation of contemporary Italian politics (pp. 3-125).

In initiating his research on interest groups the author surveyed, in both the con-

ventional and the technical meaning of the term, Italian associational activities. Some 68 replies were received to questionnaires sent to a sample of 129 associations out of close to 2,400 identified, and considerable information about eighteen others was pieced together from published materials. Personal interviews were conducted with 81 group leaders and almost fifty party officials and, especially, high-level bureaucrats. Combined with general literature and detailed studies of Catholic Action and Confindustria (the peak association of industry), these provide the data on which his findings rest.

It is difficult to do justice to these findings in a brief summary. The panorama of groups is invaluable and suggests that group needs give rise to roughly similar associations in countries as diverse as Italy and the United States. Differences in political cultures and systems, however, cause the groups to function differently. There is nothing like the relatively open patterns to which we are accustomed in the United States. Labor, farm, and women's associations are fragmented along subcultural lines; the national structure of political conflict is reproduced in the group sector. In dealing with the bureaucracy some groups hold a *parentela* (kinship) relationship; other groups have a *clientela* relationship, one based on a communality of arena of activity; still others possess both these relationships. The two groups singled out for special attention, Catholic Action and Confindustria, are primarily representative of the first and second of these, respectively, although each seeks to achieve the other relationship where possible. While *clientela* intervention seems the more natural in a healthy pluralistic democracy, *parentela* relationships limit the range of groups with which the bureaucracy can interact and assure favored status to those of the same political hue. In such a

situation the bureaucracy is not a neutral servant of the "public" but in part an agent of the ruling party and in part an independent element in policy-making, often with its own conception of the public interest.

Legislative intervention likewise takes many forms. Numbers as well as money are significant, but control over information is perhaps the most important of all. The technical services provided by some high-status groups, combined with the poor facilities available to both the bureaucracy and the legislature, enhance the ability of groups such as Confindustria to secure a hearing despite meager electoral strength and surprisingly inept politicking. If Confindustria is less than all-powerful, the same is true of Catholic Action. These two groups have the reputation of being the real powers of Italian politics. But it seems that there are limits on the ability of each to work its will. The one envies the other: the grass always looks greener on the other side.

Professor La Palombara concludes that interest group activity does not contribute to democratic stability in Italy (p. 428). He lays most of the responsibility for this state of affairs at the door of the Church. Its drive for power, its need to dominate, contributes to the perpetuation of a system in which bureaucrats often cannot deal with their natural clientele and in which priestly connections displace rational sharing of information. Using the norms of a healthy democracy, Professor La Palombara undoubtedly is right. Compared with likely viable alternative arrangements in Italy, however, this may have been the best solution available until recently; but that is not really the point at issue. Professor La Palombara correctly shows how the fragmentation of Italian political culture results in patterns of interest group activity unlike those of the United States. He indicates

how this is so and goes far in explaining why. As a result we understand Italian politics far better than we did before.

Systematic theory in comparative politics has also made a step forward. Although not all of the propositions set forth in the introduction (pp. 22-23) are treated explicitly, throughout the book there is a recognition of the importance of general propositions, even if it sometimes is obscured by the author's immersion in the Italian situation. Turning to the methodological significance of this work, it is obvious that the author faced several dilemmas common to students of comparative politics.

It is extremely difficult to design and execute a flawless research project in the United States, despite our accumulated knowledge and experience in dealing with a familiar polity. It is almost impossible abroad, where the researcher is usually exploring new territory, both substantively and methodologically. The scholar doing field research abroad must make numerous choices between the desirable and the possible. Should he, for example, orient himself toward making the most out of the opportunities which confront him, following where the data and his intuitive feel for his material lead him; or should he limit himself to dealing with those problems which have an immediate relevance to significant empirical theory? If he chooses the former, his work is likely to tell us more about the immediate problem, to include more insights and knowledge about the particular case. On the other hand, work which is designed *ab initio* to be rigorously comparative, dealing systematically with questions of theoretical importance, may lack richness of detail; but it is more likely to advance our knowledge of comparative political behavior, because it more easily lends itself to replication and refinement. The researcher is con-

tinually faced with choices deriving from the above dilemma.

When interviewing Italian elite respondents it is not possible to specify in advance who will submit to the interviews and what questions they will answer. As a result, however, there is no way to estimate the amount or direction of bias. How representative were the individuals in the groups, in the parties, in the bureaucracy who granted interviews? Would others have given similar answers? Were it possible to draw a sample, at least some estimate of bias in the choice of respondents would have been possible.

The measurement of influence is another area where necessity led to some sacrifice of methodological rigor. This is indeed a sticky question, and the author cannot be criticized for not coming up with a ready operational measure of influence. No one has yet succeeded in doing so. But recent research in community power has indicated the dimensions of the problem. There are some similarities between the reputational approach in the study of community influence and that employed in the study under review. Would his conclusions have been the same if Professor La Palombara had studied a carefully selected number of cases involving group intervention in the political process? References to actual case histories are numerous and indicate that such an approach might have been possible. But given the slow-moving pace of Italian decision-making, a foreign scholar would find it difficult to follow through on an adequate range of cases because of time limitations. And case studies do not add up to science; while they might have provided more evidence concerning relative influence, it is doubtful that the importance of the study to research in comparative politics would have been greatly enhanced.

Professor La Palombara's contribution lies in between the poles of research on a particular country and systematic comparative analysis. His introductory chapters offer a brilliant interpretation of the Italian political system and his empirical work greatly extends our understanding of how it functions. And he has also tested in another political system some key theoretical propositions developed largely in the study of

American politics. This is what scholars in comparative politics ought to do and what few are doing, especially in Western Europe. He has greatly advanced our understanding of Italian politics and of group theory.

REFERENCES

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