

Chapter 2

Pluralism

Texts

*Dunleavy, P. and O'Leary, B. *Theories of the State: The Politics of Liberal Democracy*. (Macmillan, 1987) [ISBN 0 333 38698 1] Chapters 2 and 6.

*Walzer, M. *Spheres of Justice: A Defence of Pluralism and Equality*. (Blackwell, 1985) [ISBN 0 631 14063 8] Chapter 1: 'Complex Equality' only.

* *Essential reading*

In one form or another pluralist ideas underpin the whole concept of liberal democracy as a merger of popular control and majority rule (the 'democracy' part of the political system) combined with strong safeguards of individual liberty (the 'liberal' part). Much of pluralist political science is concerned with studying how this combination can be made to work successfully and in a stable fashion.

The core ideas of pluralist political thought

A strong theme of the political thought from which pluralism derives has been the need to prevent tyrannical majority rule. Historical solutions emphasised embodying civil rights in the constitution and creating 'balanced' arrangements of institutions — such as the separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers; or creating decentralised or federal systems of government. All these ideas have a long background, being originally discussed by the ancient Greek philosophers.

The particular pluralist solution, however, originated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when a number of political philosophers set out to justify limited, constitutional government in reaction against the wave of absolute monarchies which grew up in Europe. Key thinkers included:

- the English philosopher John Locke, who rationalised the compromise between the monarchy and Parliament in Britain after the English civil war and the restoration of the monarchy
- the 'founding fathers' of the United States (especially James Maddison and Thomas Jefferson) who devised a new constitution in 1778 when most of Britain's North American colonies won their independence
- the two influential French commentators on limited government, Baron Montesquieu, writing in 1748 mainly about Britain, and then Alexis de Tocqueville who in the late 1830s summarised an influential view of American democracy in the early nineteenth century (which, of course, still embraced slavery for black people).

Their ideas link through strongly to the American-dominated political science of the early post-war period. These solutions stem directly from the core idea of pluralism, a belief in the value of social diversity, a variety of institutions, values, groups and ways of life. All forms of pluralism are opposed to 'monism' (the belief in a single value, a single centre of government or set of institutions, or a single way of life).

At this point, to see how this emphasis on diversity continues to illuminate contemporary pluralist thought, read the first chapter of Michael Walzer's book, *Spheres of Justice* (1985).

Walzer provides a clear justification of pluralism as a method of ensuring that social life is divided into different 'spheres', in which people gain access to different social goods on varying criteria. Walzer sees the main danger to a civilised, liberal society as coming from the existence of 'dominant goods': that is, resources which can secure advantages for people with no restrictions. For example, in the modern world where capitalism has become a global norm, there is an acute danger that money and ownership of wealth will become dominant goods — able to buy virtually anything. Yet if the wealthy can finance all winning election campaigns, corruptly influence public officials, automatically obtain social respect, or buy love, then the basis for a civilised, democratic society is destroyed.

Walzer argues that a pluralist society will also be an egalitarian one because it will have to create 'blocked exchanges', things that money cannot buy, as well as limiting the power of the state. Walzer is a left-leaning political philosopher, so his work captures very neatly the ways in which neo-pluralism since the late 1970s has become more of a centre-left position and less of a conservative position, than in the past. Nonetheless, his themes and arguments are very close to those of classical pluralism, especially the belief in the inherent value of social diversity and freely expressed choices, and yet the possibility and importance of achieving some sort of social consensus.¹

There have been two main waves or generations of twentieth century pluralist thought — classical pluralism which dominated political science until the end of the 1960s, and neo-pluralism which tries to adapt pluralist thought to more recent developments and criticisms.

¹ If you would like to know a little more about the historical background to pluralism, and their theoretical ideas, you could also read sections 2.1 and 2.2 of Dunleavy and O'Leary (1987) 13-23

Classical pluralism in political science

The fundamental statement of pluralism as an approach to political science was developed mainly in the USA (and to a lesser degree in Britain) during the early twentieth century and the start of the post-war period. These two countries were widely seen as the most 'stable' liberal democracies, especially after the Second World War. The USA and Britain were also powerful world powers and the places where the idea of limited government had taken root longest — so much so that many liberal writers in these countries for a long time refused to even accept the concept of 'the state' as it developed in continental Europe. To stress their differences from state monism, pluralist writers focused on people organised into a wide variety of **interest groups** to influence government decisions and on the operations of political parties and diverse government institutions, all of which afforded access points for these social pressures to make themselves felt in policy-making.

The USA and Britain also originated pluralism because their intellectual traditions are dominated by **empiricism**, a strong belief in the value of empirical evidence in deciding issues, a concern for detailed accuracy in description and analysis and a relative disdain for the 'grand theory' popular in continental Europe. In the twentieth century American analysts in particular developed this empirical focus into a distinctive **political science**, conceived as the social science counterpart of the systems of laws and empirical regularities developed by physical science. The aim of political science should be to empirically uncover the 'laws of motion' of politics, especially the causal processes governing the development and operations of liberal democratic politics.

Although classical pluralism draws inspiration from normative political philosophy and is preoccupied with liberal democracy, this concern to be empirical meant that political scientists wanted to avoid getting involved with normative disputes about values and ideals. Thus the key pluralist writer, Robert Dahl, coined the empirical

concept of **polyarchy** to describe the system of government which operates in contemporary liberal democracies. Polyarchy means ‘the rule of the many’ and contrasts with oligarchy (‘the rule of the few’) in earlier societies. But polyarchy is also distinct from the normative ideal of democracy — the rule of **all** citizens. Dahl insists that, although political power is widely dispersed under polyarchy and easily accessible to most citizens capable of organising an interest group, still not all citizens do or can govern. Nor is political power distributed under polyarchy in the strictly equal way that liberal democratic ideals require.

At this point you need to read carefully Dunleavy and O’Leary (1987) 23-59, which analyses two key themes of classical pluralism’s empirical approach:

- **input politics**, the processes by which ordinary citizens can influence decisions affecting them by voting and group politics (section 2.3)
- **state organisation**, the ways in which policy-making processes operate inside liberal democracies’ government systems (section 2.4).

Checklist

After reading section 2.3 in *Theories of the State* you should:

- understand the concept of polyarchy
- be able to explain why pluralists insist that institutional arrangements alone cannot secure liberal democracy
- be able to summarise the reasons why some pluralists take a pessimistic view of voters’ abilities, while other pluralists see voters as rational actors
- understand the importance which pluralists attach to the interest group process
- be able to explain why pluralists see the mass media as a generally positive force in liberal democratic politics.

After reading section 2.4 in *Theories of the State* you should:

- be able to summarise the differences between pluralists who see the state as a weathervane, as partisan and as a broker
- understand how these pluralist views regard the roles of executives and legislatures and the place of bureaucracy, in liberal democratic government
- be able to explain ‘incrementalism’ and ‘partisan mutual adjustment’.

Neo-pluralism

This approach is literally just a ‘new’ wave of pluralism, a revised or modernised re-expression of its core ideas, but strongly adapted to fit late twentieth century conditions. Neo-pluralist authors reacted to twin pressures:

- the turbulence which surfaced in the mid-1960s, strengthening left-wing criticisms of the limited achievements of liberal democracy, and which dominated the political agenda for a decade
- the fierce critique of state growth in liberal democracy launched by the new right, which has loomed large in the domestic politics of some countries (especially Britain and the USA) since the 1980s.

Whereas classical pluralism had diverse sources but remained predominantly a centre-right position, neo-pluralism has accepted some previous left critiques and has become more of a centre-left position. In the 1990s, neo-pluralist themes of the decline of ideology and the privileged position of business under polyarchy have been strengthened by the end of the Cold War, the failure of Soviet Communism and the apparent triumph of capitalism as a global mode of production.²

² If you would like to know more about the theoretical background to neo-pluralism, then you should read Dunleavy and O’Leary (1987) 271-85. But don’t worry if some of the ideas here seem difficult

The distinguishing features of neo-pluralism (compared with earlier pluralist writings) are that:

- it assigns much less importance to input politics: to voting, political parties and interest groups
- it acknowledges that politics under polyarchy is much more unequal and flawed or unsatisfactory than conventional pluralism ever recognised
- it recognises that elite theory and Marxist criticisms of the political power of business under polyarchy are partly right and that business is not just another interest group, but a social interest which can block off some fundamental decisions which would threaten its interests.

Neo-pluralism also takes a different view of government policy-making and the operations of the state apparatus:

- it argues that representative institutions (parliaments, cabinets or presidents) play a less important role than conventional pluralists suggested
- it accords a central role to professions and technical experts in making complex decisions
- it emphasises that some government decisions are so difficult that they can only be made by parcelling out or chunking-up the power to decide across many different agencies, asking each one to look after only one policy objective
- it sees public participation on an issue-by-issue basis as the most important and 'rational' way of allowing citizens to influence decisions.

At this point you need to read carefully Dunleavy and O'Leary (1987) 288-315, which analyse two key themes of neo-pluralism's empirical approach:

- **input politics:** the shift away from class politics, the development of 'post-industrial' politics marked by less intense ideological conflicts, the decline of representative institutions and the privileged position of business under polyarchy (section 6.3)
- **state organisation:** the professionalisation of government, efforts to solve complex policy problems by setting up interactive policy systems where different agencies handle different aspects of the decision and the creation of new forms of public participation (section 6.4).

Checklist

After reading section 6.3 in *Theories of the State* you should:

- be able to explain why neo-pluralists see 'post-industrial' politics as less ideological than in the early post-war period
- understand arguments that business influence 'deforms' polyarchy, and be able to critically discuss them.

After reading section 6.4 in *Theories of the State* you should:

- appreciate why neo-pluralists believe that the importance of professions in deciding issues and delivering government services reduces the need for the government apparatus to be controlled in detail by politicians
- recognise the connection between the neo-pluralist stress on fragmenting complex decisions between different agencies and the classical pluralist idea of incrementalism.

Pluralists and the problems of liberal democracy

'Democracy', wrote the contemporary English political theorist John Dunn, 'is the name for what we cannot have, but cannot cease to want.' Pluralists strongly identify with liberal democracy, regarding it almost as a touchstone of modernity and development. But they also recognise that liberal democracy has been a fragile flower, easily cut off. In the 1920s and '30s, for example, the major European countries — Germany, Italy and Spain — all shifted 'backwards' from liberal democratic systems to fascist dictatorships (see Table 1.1). And in Europe, Latin America, Asia and Africa more fragile or less developed countries have often failed to maintain liberal democratic systems against the challenges of military coups or other forms of authoritarian leadership. The current flowering of liberal democracy in the post-Cold War era is an exceptional period, as Table 1.1 above clearly shows. So pluralism does have accounts of the crises that can challenge the stability of polyarchy, setting up strains and tensions.

Undoubtedly, the area where pluralist thought has proved most accurate is in its optimistic foretelling of the collapse of Soviet Communism after 1989 and the 'convergence' of east European and Russian societies on western-style political systems and market economies. But equally pluralists considerably underestimated the strength of nationalist, ethnic, racial and linguistic identities, and the extent to which they have created deep, non-tradeable conflicts which have severely tested existing liberal democracies internally.³

³See Chapter 7 below

At this point you need to read carefully Dunleavy and O'Leary (1987) 59-70, which set out the main problems foreseen in classical pluralism.

Checklist

After reading pages 59-70 in *Theories of the State* you should:

- be able to explain: 'cumulative cleavages' and 'cross-cutting cleavages', and 'overload'
- appreciate a range of pluralist diagnoses of defects in polyarchy.

Sample examination questions

1. Outline the main differences between pluralist and neo-pluralist thinking about the state.
2. Is classical pluralist political science realistic or over-optimistic in its view of liberal democracy?
3. What is new about neo-pluralism?
4. Discuss the view that concepts like 'incrementalism' and 'partisan mutual adjustment' show that pluralism is inherently conservative.