

**Dangerous Strategy: How The Politics of Social Control  
Stifles Creativity and Impedes Progress**

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**Presented at the 2003 Urban Affairs Association Annual Meeting  
March, 27, 2003 Cleveland, Ohio**

## **Dangerous Strategy: How The Politics of Social Control Stifles Creativity and Impedes Progress**

Politics lies at the crossroads of ideas and action. Full appreciation of this prompts us to alter slightly, but in an important way, our understanding of political science. Typically we think of the discipline as offering models that describe the world as we find it. The models are neutral with respect to the world, as are models in the natural sciences. In the best case, the model allows us to explain and even predict future outcomes with some degree of accuracy. However, if ideas have consequences, it could be that the way we study politics actually effects our subject matter. That is, perhaps a model claiming merely to *describe* behavior in policymaking actually *teaches actors to exhibit that behavior*. What was at first a model is now a strategy. In short, thinking it may make it so. This would mean that models can not—and should not—be value free as political scientists normally claim them to be.

A model will always contain some normative component. This means it is important to identify the normative component of any model and note the degree to which it is either in harmony or tension with the fundamental principles of a regime. This may reveal a serious problem: To the extent that a model is in normative tension with these principles, it will encourage behavior that is potentially dangerous to regime stability.

However, if politics is not merely about outcomes, then the study of politics can not merely focus on “who gets what, when, and how.” Since politics also involves procedure, political science must examine the impact different procedures has on those outcomes—it becomes a study in the art of the possible. This implies that political science can never be simply descriptive. It must also be prescriptive. But this means that

the methods used for mere description of a city will not be appropriate for research that seeks to move beyond. The coming of age of social science, driven by the methodological revolution, brought about a rift between normative and empirical research. The problem, as Ed Banfield stated well, is that “it is one thing to predict how people will behave; it is another to say how they would have to behave in order to get from life what they really want; and it is still something else to say how they ought to behave. A model of analysis well suited for positive studies may be inadequate for conditionally normative ones and pernicious for normative ones” (1991, 379). This gives us reason to reevaluate the dominant model of urban politics: pluralism.

### **Progressivism, Pragmatism and the Logic of Crisis.**

Pluralism may have entered the academy in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, but its real origins lie in political and philosophical movements that took place somewhat earlier. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Progressive Movement focused on the separation of politics from administration and secondarily, but importantly, on the creation of a professional class of administrators, highly skilled in the emerging field of scientific management. Basically, Progressivism sought to rid the city of ideology. The politics of old, associated with the corruption and waste of the machine, was to blame for the city’s social ills. Thus, the driving force of Progressivism was that rational principles could be used to bring efficiency to the city. A city run with business-like efficiency would rid itself of poverty, crime, and ignorance. This idea fit well as a counterpart to the philosophy of Pragmatism and its emphasis on specialization, reductionism, efficiency, and expediency. Ideas came to be seen as stumbling blocks to progress since they led to disagreements and protracted negotiations. Ideas also filled people’s heads with

impossible standards that could never be met. There was no reason to judge a course of action based on its relation to founding principles such as natural right. Ideological debates only stood in the way of progress.

Thinking about the relationship between ideas and politics, and taking issue with Pragmatism and Progressivism gives birth to the two main assumptions that drive the present study: The first assumption is that ideas have consequences. Big ideas—comprehensive theories about human nature and its relationship to political society—have a way of dissipating into the culture at large. This is also a point made by Banfield, explaining that:

Philosophical ideas somehow make their way directly and via the intuitions of great literary and other artists to lesser lights—professors, journalists, and others—whose writings convey them to politicians, lawyers, businessmen, and other managers of affairs, until finally the ideas (by this time much diluted and otherwise altered) become widely, even generally accepted as the views and standards—when verbalized, the cant—of the middle class. (1973, 12).

These ideas also help to define rights and responsibilities, which is to say what citizens expect from the regime and what they are willing to give to give it, and each other, in return.

The second assumption is that politics matters. Politics matters in two senses: In the narrow sense, the decisions made in the political process effect the conditions of society. The decision to use restrictive zoning changed the geography of the city immensely. Likewise, decisions regarding tax policy, land use, and social policy impact the city's physical features as well as the citizens' political, economic, and social behavior. These are inherently *political* decisions as they, by definition, show preference to one alternative way of life over another (Kelman, 1987).

Yet politics matters in a broader sense. The way we talk about issues and the people involved in the process (and not involved in the process) may effect the actual decisions that are made. That is, politics is not merely about outcomes, but also about the process that leads to outcomes. Even the most sensible or well intentioned outcomes may, therefore, be undermined if they are not reached via the appropriate procedure. This reveals a connection between ideas and politics. Ideas establish a normative foundation for the regime. Politics, to be effective, must operate within that foundation. As tension develops between a regime's political process and its normative foundation, there will be resistance to its policy decisions.

This leads to the heart of the problem: we have departed from the original normative foundation of the regime. The original normative basis of the regime is liberalism. These ideas lay a particular foundation and for a particular kind of politics, based on the notion that human beings possess natural right, are primarily motivated by rational self-interest, that government derives its legitimate power from the consent of the governed, and that its primary purpose is the protection of property and should otherwise be limited so as to maximize individual freedom to pursue happiness as one understands it. These ideas have been challenged, and sometimes abandoned, by the new pragmatists. Consequently, there has emerged a shift, or a fundamental tension between the original normative foundation of the regime and the present. This tension, I submit, is largely to account for the problems that challenge our regime in general and urban America in particular. The city's wholeness has been fragmented because of our abandonment of the normative lessons of the founders.

What has happened is this: Liberalism, from its inception, faced one great challenge—the need to manage self-interested people without sacrificing freedom and equality. By this very nature this means that the liberal regime can never be perfectly whole. It also means that the natural tendency of the liberal regime may be toward fragmentation. With fragmentation, the key problem is that some will be better equipped to deal with it than others. The strong, the wise, and the wealthy may be able to live an adequate existence in a fragmented world. But others cannot. They will be cut off from the benefits that were promised at the beginning of the regime and they will be ill equipped to participate in the regime. Thus, fragmentation leads to the existence of two classes of citizens: the privileged whose interests dominate public life and the underclass whose interests are effectively shut out of public life. The result: after being shut off for a long period of time, they will, as the founders of liberalism warned, reject the legitimacy of the regime and rebel. In sum, these conditions are bad for all, but they are worse for the most vulnerable.

Less attention has been paid to the normative implications of the political models. In taking note of this, we realize that policy makers may learn from the models in ways that academics do not necessarily intend. What was intended to be a value free descriptive model turns, in the hands of policy makers, into a strategy. If the policy process invites groups to compete against one another, there arises a need for a referee to determine the winners and losers at the end of the competition. Government fills this role. Once able to control the policy debate, elected officials are able to become, in the literal sense, agents of social control, framing policy in such a way as to pit interests

against each other.<sup>1</sup> This allows for manipulation of the rules, and therefore of the political agenda, so as to favor certain groups at expense of others. That is, once in control of the agenda, elected officials may dictate outcomes without appearing to be undemocratic to the casual observer (possibly picking winners who can return favors). This is a point positive theorists such as Willaim H. Riker (1986) have made.<sup>2</sup> As a result of government assuming the role of referee, it also assumes an obligation to mitigate the zero sum nature of group competition by making side payments of select benefits to the losers.<sup>3</sup> However, this introduces a series of additional normative problems for democratic values related to citizenship and leadership: First, because government assumes the obligation of making side payments to the losers, it has an incentive to keep as many interests out of any given debate as possible to minimize the cost. Thus, the civic debate and the public agenda are constrained—artificially. Interests that otherwise would be articulated are not; ideas that might otherwise solve problems go unexplored.<sup>4</sup> Second, the process as a whole intensifies adversarial relations among groups and encourages them to engage in ledger checking. They constantly assess and

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<sup>1</sup> Dahl argues that this is the Madisonian solution to the problem of factions (1956, 30-32, 133; 1989, 218-19). This is based on a hasty reading of *Federalist* #10 and leads to conclusions Madison would neither endorse nor recognize as his own. It has, however, taken root in contemporary democratic theory (see Parenti, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> One virtue of Riker's work is that even as he refrains from making normative applications of his conclusions, he does call attention to the possibility of doing so and invites readers to do so on their own.

<sup>3</sup> Stone (1989, 40) offers the example of land set aside for the historically Black college, Atlanta University, as a side payment to appease Blacks who were on the losing end of a land deal during urban renewal.

<sup>4</sup> Stone notes that the debate over historic preservation was artificially narrow—framed in such a way that no common ground could possibly be found first among the historic preservationists, and secondly between the preservationists and the business community. Therefore, the prospect that all property values are interrelated was never explored (Stone, 1989, 127).

reassess their number of wins and losses at the hands of government, not only in absolute terms, but also relative to rivals. Finally, the process creates greater chances that policy outcomes will be in conflict with the rights of certain groups or the public interest in general.<sup>5</sup>

This is best understood by way of two examples from Stone's Atlanta research: First, the social control model allowed the enactment of policy that was not necessarily in the public interest. During the early urban renewal projects, large landowners from downtown joined forces to make sure that it was smaller landowners in the adjacent neighborhoods who were displaced, then they worked to secure the same land for expansion of the business district (Stone, 1989, 16). Thus, the wealthy enjoyed the benefits while the less well off bore the burdens. In the second example, the social control model prevented the passage of a policy that would likely have been in the public interest. Neighborhood activists and historic preservationists from across the city attempted to unite to support a major conservation program. However, when they came up against an organization of pro-development land owners—the same organization that skewed the urban renewal debate—the “preservationists failed to unify around an alternative to an investor-guided development process” (126). The reason is telling: when the proposal reached the city council, the preservationists failed to maintain a unified front, and given the nature of pluralism, when the council had to choose between a unified business community and a fragmented group of concerned citizens, it chose the former.

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<sup>5</sup> In Madisonian terms, the process will fail to control the effects of factions and therefore invite the problem of instability.

There is ample evidence for my supposition that academic models can influence the real world. This was, after all, the explicit intention as the 19<sup>th</sup> Century closed and the 20<sup>th</sup> began and the Progressive Movement sought to “rationalize government in order to rationalize society” (Wilson, 1989, 376).<sup>6</sup> The advocates of Progressivism, from philosophers such as John Dewey to politicians such as Teddy Roosevelt (and even more so, Woodrow Wilson who attempted to be both), sought deliberately to change the way policy is made and implemented through the application of scientific principles. With respect to local government, the movement’s chief proponent was Andrew White, who argued that:

what is most needed in regard to municipal public affairs, as in regard to public affairs generally, is the quiet, steady evolution of a knowledge of truth and of proper action in view of it. The truth, as regards city government, is simply the truth that municipal affairs are not political. (White, 1998, 126).<sup>7</sup>

White and his followers influenced attitudes regarding how policy should be made and implemented, and also shaped the criteria by which policy is analyzed and evaluated—stressing the importance of efficiency (Schiesl, 1977). Yet the most significant impact of the Progressives was the introduction of new institutions, including the city manager, at-large council, and professional bureaucracy, to facilitate these new public values (East, 1965).

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<sup>6</sup> I thank Richard Hula for calling this important point to my attention.

<sup>7</sup> This is not to imply that the Progressives were a homogeneous group. Some focused on structural reforms; others on social or behavioral reforms. Some, such as Dewey, were democratic in disposition; others, such as White, were weary of democracy. The unifying theme was a belief in the ability of scientific rationalism, grounded in “big ideas” to improve the general welfare of society. For a historical treatment that is sensitive both to the diversity and unity of Progressivism, see Finegold (1995).

After years of neglect, contemporary literature has once again begun to acknowledge the connection between the policy process and civic values. From the side of the practitioner, Robert Reich (1988) has called attention to the effect of “public ideas” on the policy process. The reverse, the impact of policy on citizenship has also been explored in both a theoretical treatment by Stephen Elkin (1987, 84) and a more empirical study by Helen Ingram and Anne Schneider (1993). Beyond the subfield of public policy, we also see two very different areas of political science taking up this issue. First, Robert Axelrod (1984), a positivist, concludes his very important work--a work often held up as the epitome of rigorous science--by making recommendations for applying the lessons gleaned from his work to the real world. Second, the emerging influence of postmodern philosophy, seen most clearly in the work of Deborah Stone (1997), notes that even when researchers are not explicit about the normative implications of their work, they still exist implicitly. Tying these strains together, it seems doubtful that any step in the policy process can be value free. The values that bear on the process must come from somewhere. My contention is simply that it is plausible that after more than a generation of teaching students in government classes about pluralism, this is one likely source of those values.

Pluralism is important not simply because it is well known and widely accepted in academic circles. Rather, the importance lies in that it is the dominant model to have emerged at the critical time when Pragmatism and Progressivism had taken root in the regime. As has been argued, the ascendance of pragmatic philosophy and reform politics brought a preference for expedient outcomes without regard for ideological content. This was the moment, then, of the break between normative and empirical research, bringing

soon thereafter the break between descriptive and prescriptive research. The new model offered by pluralism, focusing on the relationship between the aggregate strength of coalitions and policy decisions served the new politics well. In its parsimony and value neutrality, it also fit with the intention of Pragmatism. As a model it described the new political landscape—at least in certain cities: There continued to be competition among interest groups, but there was no longer a political machine capable of mitigating this competition, and so government assumed the role of referee with an emphasis on efficiency and outcomes over problem solving. The substance of politics becomes identifying the winners and losers, and so the important question, exemplified by the title of the first important work in pluralism, was *Who Governs?* Lost was any regard for the question of *how* they govern (Dahl, 1961).

It is our departure from the original basis of liberalism—our move in favor of political expedience toward Progressivism and Pragmatism—that has rendered us unable to meet liberalism’s greatest challenge of inclusion. Citizens are divided against each other and now organize not for the collective good, but for the sake of narrow, short-term benefits that come at the expense of others. Liberalism was not meant to have absolute winners and losers, but that is increasingly what we see when we look at our society. If this is true, then we must pay close attention to the warnings of the founders of liberalism, for it may be that they were aware of the danger and left us a lesson in how to deal with the danger.

### **The Problem with Pluralism**

Pluralists focus too closely on the procedural aspect of Madison’s teaching. As a result, they portray republicanism as a system wherein groups simply compete against

each other issue after issue. This leads pluralists to pay attention to policy outcomes only inasmuch as they tell us which groups win and lose without regard for the relationship between that outcome and the regime as a whole. In effect, policy outcomes serve as the pluralist scorecard. Following scorecard mentality, stability requires careful refereeing of the various groups to ensure that each dominates a sufficient amount of time. However, this means that pluralists have little to say about the *content* of outcomes and whether they actually improve whatever condition brought about the need for policy action in the first place.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the pluralist interpretation neglects the importance of minority opinion in influencing the content of outcomes.

In the Madisonian model, the number of interests involved in the process effects both the content and the quality of the outcome. Consider a series of decisions made by three parties. On one hand, we could imagine a series of outcomes that look very much like those which pluralist theory would lead us to expect: In the most optimistic scenario, consider a regime composed of three people, A, B, and C and an agenda composed of three issues. Assuming the regime is a democracy, it will render a decision whenever two of the three agree on a single issue. Therefore, it is possible that persons A and B unite in favor of the first issue at the expense of the dissenting person C. However, just because A and B agree on one issue, it does not follow that they must necessarily agree on the next. Perhaps B and C unite in favor of the second issue at the expense of A. Carrying this logic to its conclusion, when the regime takes up the third issue, it is

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<sup>8</sup> One might even compare the pluralist strategy to that of machine politics. The famous ward heeler of Tammany Hall, George Washington Plunkett openly bragged that he did not concern himself with policy arguments, but rather focused on doing favors for his constituents (Riordon, 1963). Like the pluralists, the goal was appeasement for the sake of political expedience. This raises doubts regarding the accomplishment of the Reform

possible that C and A, who agreed on neither of the other two issues, form the majority this time at the expense of B. Thus we see that even though a majority decided each issue, there was no *single* majority that decided *every* issue. As a result, each person was in the majority two out of three times.<sup>9</sup>

However, an alternative scenario is also possible. As soon as two out of the three people recognize some common ground, they could simply negotiate all outcomes as if the third person were not involved. This strategy, born of the pluralist invitation to focus on process without regard for content, poisons the nature of political communication and the tone of political discourse. Communication becomes the means to victory. The goal is not to educate one another, shape preferences, discover common advantages, and therefore arrive at policy outcomes that are collectively beneficial. Rather, discussions are about tradeoffs: If A and B use the fact that they agree on the first issue as a basis for negotiation on future issues, they might strike a perverse deal: They might form an alliance such that whenever they disagree on an issue, they take turns each supporting the other's position regardless of the content (logrolling). If this is the case, when we move on to the second issue, perhaps A supports B in exchange for B's support on the third issue in the future. Now B, knowing that she will have the support of A, is free to set policy at her preferred outcome, without consulting C at all. Likewise, on the third issue, A is able to set policy at his ideal outcome without consulting C. In effect, there is still no permanent majority, A and B each get their ideal preference half the time. However,

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Movement which sought to destroy the machine and laid the groundwork for city government that has embraced the strategy of pluralism.

<sup>9</sup> This is similar to the paradox noted by French mathematical philosopher Condorcet. For a lucid analysis, see Riker, 1982. Much of the literature on Condorcet's Paradox implies that it is a problem for democratic government (Shepsle and Bonchek, 1997;

*C* is rendered a permanent minority which is something the pluralist model does not anticipate.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the ideas that person *C* would have brought to the political arena go unexplored. The resulting policy is made in the interest of a subset of the whole society and may very likely be adverse to the interests of others or the common good: It is the very definition of Madison's factionalism.<sup>11</sup>

This is not what James Madison intended. Instead, he sought to create a system wherein interests are substantively represented in the deliberation. This is accomplished by having a larger number of interests in the process, preventing the sort of contact that would allow a subset of interests to recognize the perverse incentive to forge a permanent alliance. This creates opportunity for minority interests. If *A* and *B* are unable to collude then *C* can make both of them more aware that they all potentially share some common ground. This will prevent *A* and *B* from cutting *C* out of the process. In this event, *C* may be able to move an otherwise undesirable outcome toward a less offensive outcome, or even an acceptable outcome. Thus, even if *C*, in the end, does not get its preferred outcome—even if the outcome is still outside its indifference curve—the outcome may be more agreeable than it would have been had *C* not participated (and most important, the outcome would likely not be so offensive to *C* that it would have reason to resist the policy).

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Barry and Hardin, 1982). However, it need not be a problem for *republican* government. In fact, the present analysis suggests it may be a desirable thing.

<sup>10</sup> This seems to be what Clarence Stone found in his Atlanta study. During urban renewal, most of the land went to white owned business interests. As a side payment to black businessmen, some land was given to historically black Atlanta University. This was of little consequence, however, to the poor minorities who were displaced and unlikely to go to the university. See Stone, 1989, 40.

<sup>11</sup> This is the sort of political communication Madison hopes to render unlikely in the extensive commercial republic by making it “more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other” (10:61).

This exposes the great danger of the pluralist strategy: It encourages behavior clearly at odds with democratic temperament. Whatever group outmaneuvered its rivals would be practically free to implement its ideal position. Put another way, the system would be essentially zero sum with clear winners and losers, and the winners would have little incentive to compromise or be moderate in terms of the outcome. In formal terms, groups would not have very wide indifference curves. Therefore, as groups realize that they have little chance of winning on a given issue, they have little reason to stay engaged in the process. The political consequences are grave. Weaker voices are pushed out and then, as political discourse takes on an increasingly belligerent tone, moderate voices of democratic temperament grow alienated and also drop out. This suggests that the voices that do remain will belong to the groups possessing the strongest opinions, and likely the most radical opinions. That is, the middle will exit, leaving the debate to take place among uncompromising, marginal voices. For this reason, whoever loses will be more likely to harbor ill will. At the very least they will demand a side payment—some special benefit from government. More likely, after they lose the formal debate they will refuse to concede, instead shifting the “battle” from the policy making process to the implementation stage. That is, they will now dedicate their energies to circumventing whatever policy was made. Thus, policy will suffer in one of two ways: Either some other policy will be enacted as a side payment to the losers, a policy that is at odds with the initial policy, or the losers will use extra-political tactics to undermine the policy (perhaps both).

In the liberal regime Madison described, all parties engaged in the process have the opportunity to influence the outcome in ways not acknowledged by the pluralist

models. This allows the greatest possibility that the solution reached will be one that is effective in terms of social production, and it also brings certain psychic advantages in that everyone involved develops a sense of agency in the process and therefore an sense of ownership in the result.<sup>12</sup> In Madisonian terms, the process takes advantage of human vanity or the union between reason and self-love. Certainly every group will not end up fully satisfied, but fewer groups should feel completely dissatisfied. The system, in short, should build capital with all involved and, at the every least, discourage them from taking action to undermine the results. Thus, the process is better because the dynamic among the diverse groups affords them opportunity to educate each other and shape one another's preferences. In sum, what Madison intended, but the pluralist model does not allow, is a process of social learning or democratic education. The departure from this plan has had devastating consequences for urban America.

**The Legacy of the Pluralist Strategy:  
The Fractured Public Sphere and the Suburbanization of the Soul**

Over time leaders have allowed actions that weaken both of the conditions necessary for a robust public sphere. They have allowed the size of the sphere to shrink, and the tone to be poisoned. Twentieth century philosophers Hannah Arendt (1958) and Jürgen Habermas (1991) have called attention to the changes in the public sphere in liberal society. They have also related changes in the public sphere to social ills and unrest. However, their work is less clear on the matter of what brought about the changes in the first place. The preceding analysis of Locke and Madison may be helpful in this

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<sup>12</sup> Hamilton writes in *Federalist #70* “men often oppose a thing, merely because they have had no agency in planning it, or because it may have been planned by those whom they dislike” (70:457). Hamilton goes on to warn that merely including a group in the decision process but then disregarding their opinion altogether could do more harm than

capacity. In urban areas we have fractured the public sphere, dividing it into a multitude of municipalities and then subdividing it further with the use of special districts and targeted policy areas such as enterprise zones. At the same time, the policy we enact serves to sharpen self-interest and encourage self-preservationist behavior. This organization is perfect for pluralism—which we have now seen is contrary to the spirit of republicanism.

As we would expect, much of the trouble follows from a mismanagement of private property. Tax and land use policy has vacillated between extremes of laissez-faire and burdensome regulations. A close reading of the early works in classical liberalism reveals that neither is compatible with Locke's political economy. Both have had a negative effect on the public sphere, narrowing self-interest and preventing the diversity needed for the Madisonian republic.<sup>13</sup> As Paul Peterson (1981) has shown, when property regulations become too burdensome, those with the means exit, taking their wealth and their contribution to the diversity of opinion with them. This is a serious problem. If people leave the city and take their wealth with them, they effectively cut off the supply of spillover benefits to the less well off. Yet, as we saw, it is access to these externalities that forms the basis of consent to the institution of private property (and liberal government). Thus, the act to cut off the supply is facilitated by a government that no longer appreciates the need to control the effects of factions, and the result is a further loss of legitimacy and a redoubling of the tendency to look out for one's private interests

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good. In sum, the process must be inclusive, and the participation must be meaningful in order to avoid resentment.

<sup>13</sup> This is confirmed by Stephen Elkin (1987, 90-95), who found that systematic bias is greatest in the issue of land use, which deals directly with property and therefore is the issue most likely to invite narrow self-interest. Elkin also relates the problem to pluralism at 55-59.

at the expense of the public interest. Madison's critique of his own time would aptly to our own:

It will be found, indeed, on a candid review of our situation, that some of the distresses under which we labor have been erroneously charged on the operation of our governments; but it will be found, at the same time, that other causes will not alone account for many of our heaviest misfortunes; and, particularly, for that prevailing and increasing distrust of public engagements, and alarm for private rights, which are echoed from one end of the continent to the other. These must be chiefly, if not wholly, effects of the unsteadiness and injustice with which a factious spirit has tainted our public administrations. (10:54).

The factious spirit has caused many to exit the public sphere and to assume a defensive posture with regard to their private rights. Those who remain in the anemic public sphere will become more narrowly attached to their opinions—a common reaction to a system seen as adversarial. This, in turn, invites more extreme positions, which renders cooperation all but impossible. Thus, if decisions are to be made, government may no longer act as a broker bringing interests together into a cooperative forum, but instead it must make itself a referee, choosing winners and losers. Thus, the politics of social control are born out of the corruption of the public sphere.<sup>14</sup>

This helps us to understand whose voices are most subject to systematic bias. Conventionally we are led to believe that systematic bias effects the poor and racial minorities most. There is good reason to suspect this. After all, if we look at our cities, we see that it is they who suffer most and they who most exhibit the signs of alienation (Wilson, 1987). Likewise, poor residents of urban areas have lower than average scores on “trust in government” assessments. Those who study the concept of social capital also find that even if the rate of decline is no greater among the urban poor, the negative effects stemming from decline are greater (Putnam, 312-317). Finally, at least since the

release of the Kerner Commission Report (1968), we have been alerted to the problem of urban violence. However, to conclude that the poor simply exit from the political process is incorrect. Low social capital does not translate into lower rates of formal participation, especially voting (Berry, Portney, and Thompson, 1991). Consequently, it is too simplistic to say that the rich simply dominate the public agenda. Politics is not so simple; it is not king of the mountain. If it were, and if the rich were the clear winners, getting to make their ideal preferences the outcomes, policy would reflect their exclusive and narrow interests. There would likely be extremely low taxes and few public services. The problems identified by Paul Peterson would not exist. Therefore, cities would be packed with business and industry—and wealthy residents.

But this is not what we see. Indeed, the greater problem seems to be that it is the middle who has exited the process, leaving politics to be conducted only between rich and poor. That leads to the present day mutation of republican politics we call pluralism and improperly ascribe to Madison. In such a regime, the government becomes a referee and chooses winners and losers. Importantly, we note that it is not simply the middle in the economic sense (although this is an important part of it) but also, it is the middle in terms of interests or opinions that is alienated from urban politics. These are the voices that were adversely effected by urban policy in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These are the people whose self-interest was narrowed to the point that they chose to exit the public sphere and retreat to an alternative sub-regime that allowed them to live in isolation (suburbia).<sup>15</sup> Thus, suburbanization is a deliberate effort to escape from the city and

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<sup>14</sup> On the polarizing effects of pluralist politics and the relation to social capital see Putnam, 2000, 339-344.

<sup>15</sup> Putnam (2000) presents significant empirical evidence on the declining participation of the middle. Beyond voting, middle class alienation is examined in Warren, 1978. For an

isolate oneself from the problems related to race, crime, and poverty (Harvey, 1973). Suburbanization is in part a response to policy decisions that strengthened the desire to leave, but suburbanization is also made possible by yet other policy decisions that subsidized the cost (Jackson, 1985; Sugrue, 1996). One positive result of suburbanization has been the easing of certain cleavages within both the middle class (Wolfe, 1998b) and the upper class (Brooks, 2000). However, the uneven pattern of suburbanization has resulted in high levels of segregation based on class and race (Harvey, 1989; Massey and Denton, 1993). Consequently, the central city is left with far less diversity—generally the very poor who could not afford to get out and the very rich who never needed to get out, and the many suburbs are tiny islands of homogeneity. With no middle, cities lose the voices that make possible republican stability. Their exit left urban politics to be a narrow set of tradeoffs between the patriarchal rich and the dependent poor. Their exit rendered regime politics impossible.

This leads to the most significant level of the moral problem. Once the public sphere is fractured into several sub-spheres and institutions arise to give the arrangement official sanction, there develops a spirit of moral separation and moral difference. People come to believe that their well being is independent of the well being of others in separate sub-spheres, regardless of their geographic proximity. People exhibit what Alexis de Tocqueville called individualism:

A calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into a circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself. (1966, 506).

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interesting account of the alienation of what might be called middle intellectualism, see Wolfe, 1998a.

Furthermore, once people believe they have isolated themselves morally from the rest of society, they are more apt to blame any defects in the society on the moral inadequacy of others (Young, 1990). The result is a sort of moral complacency and consequently, an intellectual complacency. Since we no longer identify certain conditions as problematic, we stop searching for solutions at all. The public suffers a massive loss of creativity.<sup>16</sup>

Yet Tocqueville notes that “individualism is based on misguided judgement” (1966, 506). People deceive themselves when they conclude that they can isolate themselves from others and that their own welfare is completely separable from the welfare of others. Recent history supports his position. The effects of a growing belief that those who have left the city have insulated themselves from the welfare of urban America and the resulting belief in moral difference are becoming clear. However, there may be a price to be paid for this. The problems they thought they could escape and insulate themselves from, crime, poverty, race, failing schools, are now showing up in the suburbs (Fishman, 1987). So the attempt to cut oneself off from the well being of the city

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<sup>16</sup> This points to a serious, perhaps even tragic problem. It could be that creativity is born out of tension, difference, and meaningful debate. Yet tension is contrary to our desire for comfort. Perhaps we have come to confuse ends with means. Human nature would have us desire comfort as an end. However, as we saw in Locke, this end is generally pursued through uncomfortable means—labor, research, negotiation, collective action, and the like, none of which are meant to be easy. It could be that if we attempt to make the process itself more accommodating to our lust for comfort, if we attempt to make it more expedient, we remove the tension that serves as the catalyst for creativity. However, with the loss of creativity we fail to develop those goods, which serve the greater comfort of the future. In other words, we sacrifice a process that was uncomfortable but produced desirable ends for a process that appears to be more comfortable, but has produced less desirable ends. In sum, our desire for comfort has corrupted the soul of American politics and weakened our desire and ability to think creatively at all. If this is true, then there is a force more harmful than systematic bias at work: Creative solutions need not be kept off the agenda by procedural machinations, for

is not only morally corrupt, it is also simply impossible. Suburbia looks more and more like the city, as we see school shootings, workplace violence, road rage, and other signs of collective desperation. Thus, the isolationist policies of suburban America have been bad for the inner city, but also bad for the suburbanites who demand them.

To counter the tendency toward individualism, Tocqueville recommends that citizens be “bound to take part in public affairs” for in doing so, they “must turn from the private interests and occasionally take a look at something other than themselves” (1966, 510). This calls to everyone’s attention the degree to which people are not, can not, and should not be as independent as once thought. Furthermore, he notes that “when the public governs, all men feel the value of public goodwill and try to win it by gaining the esteem and affection of those among whom they must live” (ibid.). This seems to be exactly what Madison had in mind as well. But people can not govern together if they do not live together, and as we have seen, few people of diverse interests live together in the fractured public sphere of the modern metropolis.

This is the condition in which we find ourselves. We have abandoned the advice of Madison, ignored the warning of Tocqueville. Systematic bias has become severe, the public sphere has been fractured, and bourgeois morality has been corrupted, all of which has had a profound effect on policy. Ironically, at exactly the same time people are demanding a more active government, government is less equipped to facilitate problem solving. This does not mean that the content of urban policy is simply poor nor that policy has been an unqualified failure. Certainly good results have been achieved in certain cases. But this analysis does suggest that other potentially beneficial policy has

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they are never thought of in the first place. A penetrating analysis of this problem is Allan Bloom’s *Closing of the American Mind* (1987).

been blocked. It also suggests that when decent policy is made, it is accomplished through a deeply flawed process. Because of this, some very harmful policy gets enacted and much of the decent policy is resisted and even offset by rival policy with contrary intentions. Indeed, it may be fair to wonder whether, in a case where logically sound policy is resisted by some element of the population, the same policy would have been more acceptable had it been made under better conditions. Clearly the time is ripe to consider whether anything can or should be done to restore a public sphere wherein self-interest rightly understood can take root and people are once again drawn out of themselves.

### **Regime Theory and the Restoration of Liberal Politics**

Fortunately, we need not begin wholly anew in this endeavor. Others have written of this problem, particularly as it appears in the urban crisis literature, and some have gone on to offer advice for working beyond the crisis. Peterson argues that we must rise above the simple dichotomies that seduce us away from general theory. There is more to understanding local government than debating whether power is exercised according to pluralist or elitist models, and more to discussing institutions than arguing over machine vs. reform cities. These debates lead us down a path that too often degrades into methodological disputes over units of analysis and data sets. Before long we suffer from the very problem Elkin bemoaned: we have spirited academic debate that is otherwise meaningless to the real world. Katznelson adds that if we are to produce work that will contribute toward a general theory of local government as opposed to specialty studies of budgeting, service delivery, or power, we must recover a sense of history. Elkin agrees that we need to move away from what he calls the “organ theory”

and back toward discovering the body that connects the parts. More importantly, drawing from Tocqueville and Mill, he argues that “the study of local politics should be normative” (1987, 1).

By normative, Elkin does not mean that scholarship should focus solely on a discussion of what the city ought to be. He does not simply contrast normative from empirical research as if the two were independent of each other. Instead, he draws close connection between them. Building on his original argument that political science should be prescriptive as much as it is descriptive, he adds that scholarship “must rest on a more complex conception of the larger political whole.” Furthermore, it must be “self conscious” meaning that researchers need to be aware of “the kinds of arguments that underlie their advice” (Elkin, 1987, 4). The study of policy, for example, must be more than a series of econometric models; it can not be isolated from questions of how that policy relates to the foundational assumptions of the political regime. Put another way, self conscious research not only asks the question “What is it?” but it also asks the question “Is it good?” or “Does it fit within the nature of the regime?”<sup>17</sup> Every regime is founded on a particular understanding of human nature. This determines the purpose of the regime and in turn gives form to its institutions. Institutions, Elkin notes, instruct citizens of their rights and duties—they shape what we expect from the regime and each other. Yet, institutions also establish the parameters for policy debate and place limits on

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<sup>17</sup> In a sense, Elkin is recommending that we follow the model provided by Plato’s *Republic*. The dialogue begins with a series of definitions of the subject matter, justice. However, the interlocutors (particularly Glaucon) are not satisfied with mere description or definition of justice, but rather, they ask Socrates to convince them that it is also good.

certain outcomes. Ironically, the solutions most conducive to a good society—one that realizes its founding principles—may at times lie outside the horizons established by its own institutions. It is in the interest of understanding, and also expanding these horizons that regime theory emerged. This necessitates explaining and correcting the damage wrought by Pragmatism, Progressivism, and pluralism.

One of the first explanations of the inadequacy of pluralism appears in Paul Peterson's *City Limits*. There, he argues that rather than simply aggregating the demands of competing groups, we must understand policy outcomes as a function of the economic character of a particular program. In doing so we realize that "the social and economic context within which the city is embedded limits choice" (1984, xii). Cities seek to maximize their interests, which can be generally equated to the interests of their export industries. They also need to preserve their residential base (23). The limits on policy choices arise because cities have no legal authority to prevent residents or industries from leaving and taking their capital with them. Companies will leave a city if its policies interfere with profits and residents will leave if the costs of taxes too far exceed the benefits of services. Thus, cities are forced to compete with one another by offering the most efficient settings with regard to land use, labor force, and capital (24). According to Peterson, the average resident already receives less than one dollar in services for every dollar paid in taxes (38). As cities engage in redistributive policy, that ratio becomes even less favorable and the odds of emigration increase (44). Leaders realize this, and the result is a chilling effect on policies that emphasize egalitarian concerns (69). In short, there is a strong bias in favor of policy that enhances the local economy, which

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This requires that they move beyond the empirical definition of justice to a normative or philosophical analysis of its nature.

Peterson calls developmental policy. As Peterson concludes, “the emphasis local governments place on efficiency at the expense of equality is due not to any antiegalitarian commitments of local policymakers, but to the constraints under which local governments operate” (71).

At the same time that Peterson was explaining the economic limitations of pluralism, Ira Katznelson took up the institutional limitations in his *City Trenches*. His case study of northern Manhattan looked at political organization and noted that certain groups were faring much better than others. He explained this fact by demonstrating how the separation of work and community established a set of informal institutions or “trenches” that preclude certain kinds of political movements (1984, 18-19). Katznelson argues that the spatial distinction between work and home is key. As capitalism created this separation, it became possible for the first time for the wealthy to live apart from the poor. Thus, the spatial distinction compounded the preexisting class distinction (75). However, the working class only paid attention to the economic distinction when it was at work; at home, since all who lived in a given area were of the same class, the most noticeable distinction was ethnicity. The first lines of difference were between the area’s Jewish and Irish residents. The wealthy, who controlled the city’s formal institutions, took advantage of the situation by creating a set of informal, community-based institutions that would accommodate the ethnic cleavage by providing a few basic services and petty offices of patronage. In doing this, they exasperated the ethnic cleavage and ruled out the possibility of class unity. Katznelson compared this to a system of trenches channeling one rival against another, and diverting both from their true opponent. As many white ethnics left the city for the suburbs, a second wave of

immigrants, primarily African Americans and Hispanics, moved in. However, the minority of remaining white ethnics retained possession of the trenches. The city's response was to create yet another set of trenches exclusively for the new residents. These took on a character somewhat different from the original trenches, for they did not seek to remedy problems but merely "aimed at keeping angry people busy to prevent disorders" (141). The result is that the city remains less responsive to the working class. In Katznelson's own words, they are but "substitutes ... for structural economic changes and for a basic redistribution of wealth and power among classes and races" (188).

At first blush these two theories might appear to be at odds with one another. In Katznelson, the source of policy failure is the institutional arrangement of the city. In Peterson, the problem is the nature of the policy within the larger economic context. Katznelson implies that reform of our political institutions would create opportunities for progressive policy outcomes. Peterson's analysis of political economy would seem to suggest that outcomes are limited under any institutional arrangement as long as capital remains mobile. Regime theory, beginning with the work of Stephen Elkin and Clarence Stone, connected the two critical points by expanding the discussion to a larger theoretical context: Rather than focus on institutions or the political economy in isolation, they pushed the analysis to a higher level of generalization and inquired into how both interact in the regime as a whole. Elkin and Stone developed a model sensitive to the nature of policy as well as the importance of institutions and the actors involved in the process—both government and citizen/business. This leads to regime theory, a more holistic understanding of the world, connected to the liberal normative foundation, and therefore the perfect antidote to Pragmatism, Progressivism, and pluralism

### *Systematic Bias.*

One of the key features of regime theory is the problem of systematic bias. The problem stems from the tension between equality and efficiency. Elkin draws on Peterson's analysis of the problem: because policymakers tend to view these two qualities as being at odds with one another—what Arthur Okun called “the big tradeoff”—efficiency will generally win out (for reasons Peterson detailed in *City Limits*). This means that, as Katznelson portrays in *City Trenches*, marginalized classes who are in need of greater emphasis on equality will be effectively shut out from city politics. Thus, Peterson and Katznelson are both accurate in their respective analyses: As long as the political economy remains limited by a particular understanding of efficiency, the institutions of the city will be unable to accommodate certain interests. There will necessarily be groups who benefit at the expense of others. As Elkin puts it, “there are only certain kinds of politics that can flourish given the particular form that the division of labor between state and market has taken in cities” (36). These particular forms will “consistently favor some interests and impede others” (85). This is what Elkin terms “systematic bias”. The idea of systematic bias reveals the theme common to Peterson, Katznelson, and Elkin: the horizons in which American local governments operate are much too narrow, in policy terms, institutional terms and ideological terms. This has the effect of shutting creativity out of the public sphere and diminishing our ability to solve problems.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For this reason, Elkin uses the term social intelligence to describe a system that is free from systematic bias and therefore able to solve problems. For an excellent application and elaboration of the concept (using instead the term social production) see Stone, 1989, 8-9, 226-229.

This brings us to Elkin’s prescriptive teaching. We must first come to understand equality and efficiency such that they are brought into harmony. To Elkin efficiency is a system that promotes social intelligence—the ability to deal with the problems that citizens face collectively. Linked to this is equality: a system that is free of systematic bias (1987, 4), for Elkin argues that “if the operation of popular control is systematically biased, problem solving is also likely to be ineffective, simply because some desirable alternatives will go unexplored” (95). Thus, each quality becomes a necessary component of the other. Yet, the fact remains that we do not ordinarily think of equality and efficiency in Elkin’s terms. The reason is made clear by Elkin himself: the formative effects of our institutions have eclipsed such definitions from our minds. Elkin attributes this to our departure from the founders’ intentions in calling America a commercial republic. It is not that they planned for the Chamber of Commerce to run the city. Nor did they intend the first order of politics to be the inducement of business activity (145). These circumstances would too easily allow for large concentrations of wealth—something the founders cautioned us against. Certainly, there was an intention that business and capitalism would prosper. However, these were largely means to a higher end: security and liberty.

There is a connection between Elkin’s account of systematic bias and James Madison’s discussion of factions in *Federalist* #10. Madison warns that if a particular faction secures control of the regime, its members may use their power to serve their self interest at the expense of “the rights of other citizens or...the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.” If one party continuously prevails over another, the resulting insecurity will breed “increasing distrust of public engagements” and perhaps

ultimately rebellion. Madison counsels that we not attempt to eliminate the cause of faction, but rather we should seek to control its effects. This gives rise to the need to extend the sphere of the regime so that there is a great variety of interests. There is more than a geographic context to this advice: we must also extend the sphere with regard to the *kinds* of interests presented in the regime. We must not only be a nation of farmers, but also of mechanics, manufacturers, and merchants. In short, we are intended to be a commercial republic. The resulting diversity will prevent any single interest, or faction, from dominating the public sphere and abusing the rights of others. Madison explains that “the most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property” and that managing this is the first order of government. In this sense, systematic bias—our failure to control the effects of factions—is somehow related to our failure to manage property. Elkin agrees, suggesting that we have departed from the founders intentions regarding commercial republicanism.

If we consider the relationship from urban crisis to systematic bias to commercial republicanism, we arrive at a most startling, if not radical, conclusion: moving beyond the logic of crisis will require that we reevaluate our basic understanding of the regime. We need to understand more clearly the purpose and role of private property and commerce as well as the expectations citizens ought to have with regard to the regime and each other. In short, we need to inquire into the very nature of the social contract. Elkin writes in the preface to *City and Regime* that “the test of a good essay is whether it can build on what is widely believed to be true—and present it in illuminating ways” (1987, x). I would submit that not only did he pass that test, but he also established a second test: A good essay should point beyond itself and stimulate further research. In using the

problem of systematic bias as a conduit to connect the urban crisis to our founding principles, Elkin invites the next wave of research to reexamine those principles.

While accepting much of their basic logic, Clarence Stone seeks to moderate the economic determinism of theorists such as Peterson. Stone agrees that economics constrains choice, but at the same time, it is politics that plays the largest role in deciding where, within those constraints, a policy decision ends up. Even more important, politics has a reciprocal effect on economics, and therefore can serve to shape, and even expand, the economic constraints. The driving question for regime theory is “how, in a world of limited and dispersed authority, actors work together across institutional lines to produce a capacity to govern and to bring about significant results” (Stone, 1989, 8). For this reason, regime theory pays close attention to: 1. Who makes up the various coalitions involved in a particular policy decision; 2. What brings together the various actors in each coalition; 3. What sustains the various coalitions; and 4. How the coalitions help to shape policy outcomes (including not only what gets done, but sometimes more important, what does not get done).

Regime theory emerged in part as an alternative to the pluralist and elitist debate over the role of power in policymaking. At first blush, these models appear to be opposites. Elitists argue that power is concentrated in a small number of hands, generally large business interests, who use their power to control government officials and insure that policy outcomes preserve their social and economic advantage (Hunter, 1953). Thus, researchers find an inordinate bias toward the status quo and little opportunity for progressive policy alternatives (Harding, 1995). Pluralists, on the other hand, argue that power is distributed more widely (albeit not equally) throughout the society among

organized interests. No single group is generally strong enough to dominate the agenda, so several groups form temporary coalitions and compete against rival coalitions on specific issues (Dahl, 1961). However, common interests from one issue seldom carry over to the next. Therefore, as issues vary, so does the makeup of the competing coalitions. As a result, few people find themselves in the winning coalition on every issue (Dahl, 1982). Thus, there is no permanent majority, meaning there is greater opportunity for progressive outcomes (Wolfinger, 1973). This debate gave way to extensive literature that attempted to operationalize and test the models. Researchers assumed they were engaging in value free science. Whichever model best fit a given context was applied. However, the competing paradigms fell quickly into conflict: Disputes arose over contested terrain as each school argued its model best fit a particular city.

Some have pointed out that pluralists and elitists share common empirical errors regarding the nature of power (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962; Lukes, 1974). They err in treating power as if it were tangible and therefore directly observable and measurable. For this reason, they are able to personalize power; it is a possession belonging to different groups in varying amounts (Harding, 1995, 38-41). This leads us to assume power is used for the sake of control: Those who have it in greater amounts tend to control the process and in turn the actions of those who possess it in lesser amounts. In this regard, power comes to be seen as a zero sum good: as one entity gains power another must lose an equal amount of power. However, there is reason to believe that the differences between the two models have less to do with actual differences in the real world than with differences in their respective methodology (Judge, 1995, 19).

Consequently, when we move from our theoretical framework to the real world, we find that power is a more abstract and dynamic phenomenon. It is not tangible and therefore not so easy to observe, measure, and quantify in the direct sense that pluralists and elitists would have us believe. In scientific terms, the models lack external validity (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962, 949, 951). Yet this is more than a methodological issue: If the nature of power differs from the assumptions of our models, it is likely that the way power is used differs as well. Thus, there is reason to doubt that power can be used simply as a device of control. Seen in this light, the differences between pluralism and elitist theory all but disappear.

### **Conclusion**

The discussion has also revealed the extent to which much of urban politics, guided by the theory of pluralism, has strayed from the normative foundation of its subject matter. The politics of social control create conditions that weaken the republican spirit. Diversity is lost and self-interest is narrowed. Those who remain engaged in the process are left to focus their energy on survival in the politics of social control. This means that they give priority to tactics over problem solving. Consequently, government becomes, in the language of Tocqueville, more despotic, choosing temporary winners and losers in the interest of procedural expedience rather than facilitating a process whereby people share in decision making. The damage that results is obvious: greater distinction between the “haves” and the “have-nots” and a middle class that largely avoids public life altogether.

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