

4. Politics as a Thought Process

Overview: This chapter considers 'politics' as a minding process – in human groups, and in society as a whole – with 'law' and 'policy' as its cognitive results.

The politics of a group is strongly analogous to the competition of patterns in a brain. As political entrepreneurs, individual leaders play a triple role in such processes. First, they mobilize their constituents as political groups or factions, helping to organize and concentrate their potential power. At the same time, they represent and project their constituents' power in larger political arenas. They also pursue interests of their own, and introduce their own suggestions.

Those who respect the law or love sausage should not watch either being made.
- Attributed to Otto von Bismarck

Setting out to view the politics of a group as a thought process, we must make clear up front what is not being said: We are not saying that politics conforms to any pattern of systematic thinking – whether inductive, deductive or abductive (the patterns respectively of ordinary experience, formal logic and scientific method). Though such systematic patterns are deployed in political arguments from time-to-time, the political process as a whole is one of rhetorical debate, negotiation, enactment, enforcement and evasion, much more akin to sausage-making than to scholarly analysis and argument. A group's members will ordinarily differ, sometimes bitterly, in their interests, desires, beliefs and preferences; and will band together into contending factions accordingly. Somehow, all these differences must be chopped, minced, rendered homogeneous and packaged conveniently into laws, policies and specific projects – much as sausage-makers grind up the scraps of meat and fat, combine this bloody paste with starchy filler, spice the mixture to taste, and stuff their palatable mess into convenient tubular packaging, usually just segments of intestine. As Bismarck suggests, both processes are disgusting to contemplate, however desirable or necessary their end result – edible food in one case, viable choices in the other.

In any current situation, the group receives a variety of messages from its own members, from other groups and from its natural environment. These get parsed and interpreted by members and factions into competing suggestions which are then weighed and recombined so that a response (essentially, a suggestion of the group to itself and its own members) may be selected. In an individual, this process is what we call 'thinking' or 'thought.' In the life of human groups, it is called 'politics' when the emphasis is on the competition of

suggestions, and 'governance' when emphasis is on the outcome – in law or policy, and its implementation. These are two sides of the same coin. Necessary processing is carried on by the group's political institutions (whether formal and authoritative or not). In these forums, they compete for 'air time' and allegiance and, in the end, for collective acceptance. Once accepted in principle, they also compete for the obedience of individuals, and for any resources needed for their implementation. Violent conflict is the default process – that of last resort when less costly political methods (e.g. debate, voting, negotiation or trial-at-law) do not avail.

'Politics' and 'governance,' then, are alternative terms for a group's minding process, through institutions both formal and informal. Formal institutions of government may include its three traditional branches – executive, legislative and judicial – and the complex structure through which these function. Informal institutions may include business firms, NGOs, rumour mills, markets and social networks, which not only make autonomous choices on their own, but seek to influence the formal institutions also.¹ Through institutions established by law and custom, much of this minding process is pre-built into the group's mindset by its laws, norms and language, and its stigmergic environment.

In sum, then, where the concept of governance emphasizes top-down direction and administration of a group through authorized institutions and persons, that of 'politics' stresses the bottom-up autonomy of group members, their interaction and their collective process of self-management. Otherwise, the terms are synonymous.

4.1 The Content of Politics

Our word 'politics' comes from the Greek 'polis' – their word for 'city' or 'community,' back in the days when each city was a sovereign state. As in the title of one of Aristotle's books, 'politics' just meant “matters concerning the affairs of cities.” But today we use the word in a much wider sense, recognizing that even couples and nuclear families have their politics (at one extreme) and that international state systems have politics (at the other).

Today, we mostly think of politics in connection with power relationships, to distinguish these from economic and commercial relationships (which are presumably voluntary). But this distinction is just an academic convenience, and my inclination is to reject it. I think we might do better to start over with a transactive, suggestion-based approach, frankly recognizing that all relationships – whether predominantly political, economic or purely communicative and social – involve all these elements, to some extent. There are distinctions of power in a relationship. There are offers – offers of work, for example – which may be voluntarily accepted, but which one may be in no position to refuse. There is a cognitive climate and exchange of suggestions in which transactions are negotiated and carried through. In practice, all four

¹ See Marc Hufty's paper on the [Governance Analytical Framework \(GAF\)](#).

types of relationship described in Section 2.2.4 come inter-twined: separable conceptually, but co-occurring in reality.

Al Capone, the Prohibition-era gangster, well understood this multi-dimensional nature of business relationships. On one occasion he remarked that “you can get much farther with a kind word and a gun than you can with a kind word alone.” On another he pointed out that “capitalism is the legitimate racket of the ruling class.” On yet another, he said “When I sell liquor, it's called bootlegging; when my patrons serve it on Lake Shore Drive, it's called hospitality.” One could write a textbook of social science around these quotes.

4.1.1 A Specialized Industry

We may think of governance as a specialized industry, much like any other in some ways. Like any business firm it has its inputs and its outputs; and it seeks to grow (by making a kind of profit and avoiding loss). Like any business, it competes against rivals for 'market share' (under such different rubrics as 'sovereignty' and 'jurisdiction'). Like any, it is organized by 'entrepreneurs' of a sort – private individuals who choose to enter and compete in the public arena, bearing the risks of that game and seeking its potential rewards, for whatever personal reasons. Like any, it pays a wage to its employees (called 'civil servants') who gain their livelihood and status by making themselves useful to political entrepreneurs, but are not players themselves.

Governance differs from normal industries, however, in two main ways: First, it tends toward monopoly because it is scarcely possible (and lethally uncomfortable for subjects) to have two sovereign organizations with the same jurisdiction, sharing power without fighting over it. And second, because governance is always centrally concerned with the production, financing and provision of so-called 'public goods, whose production cannot be financed on a pay-as-you-go basis. Where normal industries produce goods which can be paid for directly, just in proportion as you consume them, governance produces benefits (if they are such) that will be freely available to everyone once they exist at all. The paradigm example is a lighthouse. Once such a facility is up and running, any boat in its vicinity will benefit from the warning it provides. There is no way to charge a fee for that information, and no certainty that sufficient funds would be provided on a voluntary basis to meet its building and operating costs. Indeed, there is a practical certainty that some who benefit (free-riders, as they are called) will take unfair advantage of more public-spirited types who make a voluntary contribution. For this reason, the lighthouse (like other public goods) must be built either with tax revenue, or its equivalent in compulsory labour.

Of course, the production of public goods entails the use and expenditure of scarce resources. Worse, no public good will benefit everyone equally. The couple with no children cares little about the quality of the education system. The rich can buy medical treatment as they need it, and care little about health insurance. They can hire security guards as needed, where the middle-class

and the poor cannot do so. For sure, contentious choices will have to be made; inevitably, these will involve some collective thought process of debate and conflict – i.e. some politics.

Now, we can see at once that group thought is done primarily in two modes: economic and political.² The economic type occurs in a market of some kind where individual agents, as nominal equals, buy and sell (or make exchanges) voluntarily, pursuant to a logic of supply and demand. By contrast, political thought occurs in hierarchies of domination and obedience, pursuant to a logic of power and credible threat. In a provocative little book called *Systems of Survival*, Jane Jacobs (following Plato) distinguishes these modes and their corresponding mindsets and cultures: the commercial syndrome and the guardian syndrome, as she respectively calls them. Her thesis is that these modes have almost diametrically opposing values and moral principles which lead to corruption when they are mixed together: when the policeman takes a bribe, for example, or when a merchant uses threats to close a sale.

Guardianship came first, and still enjoys a certain primacy in many parts of the world. This is the morality of hunters, warriors, policemen, and governments in general, and includes precepts like 'shun trading,' 'adhere to tradition,' 'value honour' and 'dispense largesse.' Commerce developed much later, and only claimed precarious dominance over guardianship in modern times. Its precepts include: 'shun coercion and violence,' 'be open to inventiveness and novelty,' 'respect contracts,' and 'invest productively.' Guardianship is the morality of the samurai, or the medieval knight. Its commercial opposite is the morality of the banker and the modern businessman. When business and guardianship are intermingled, as in the 'military-industrial complex' (which Eisenhower famously warned against, and is ubiquitous today), the opposing moral schema tend to cancel each other in an ethical train wreck.

The problem with Jacobs' argument is that it is hard to think of a time when the two syndromes were not closely intermingled. While it's true enough that soldiers and business persons have, and must have, very different values and methods, commercial transactions (e.g. between hungry sharecroppers and their landlord) are not as voluntary or mutual as the law pretends. At the same time, wealth and military power have always been largely inter-dependent and inter-convertible. With enough money you can buy weapons and pay large armies. With large, well-equipped armies you can plunder and extort; and you can monopolize markets, trade routes and sources of raw materials. Though history gives ample evidence of the corruption that Jacobs fears, there is just no way that the economic-military package can be teased apart.³

4.1.2 What Is Politics About?

Who? To whom?

² See Section 2.2.4 on the four modes of relationship.

³ The inter-relationship of wealth and power is thoroughly documented, for example, in Paul Kennedy's book on *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*.

- Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (better known as Lenin)

Politics can be about anything at all that people can understand or desire differently. In practice, it tends to be about power: about who does what to whom. Identifying politics with governance we see that these are first, about the rules which govern members' inter-relationships; second, about the direction and management of the games they play; and third, about specific issues that arise in connection with these games. Alternatively, we can say that politics and governance are about the formulation (however done) of collective intentions for a whole group from the divergent wishes and beliefs of its members. Let's spell this out a little: In which areas will collective intention be needed, and by what means will it be obtained?

Human Realities

To begin with, the politics and governance of any human group must be constrained by certain human realities. With threats to themselves and their loved ones, human beings can be coerced. If they are not fed, they will starve and die. If large numbers are crammed together – say, in an army or a large city – without public health controls and medical treatment, large numbers of them will perish from disease. In the procession of years, people age and die, requiring that a new generation be born, raised, socialized and educated – trained, at least – to fill the roles vacated by their elders. The unequal investment by female and male in the conception and birthing of children leads to a basic, invidious asymmetry in human relationships and populations. These and other facts of human biology have obvious political consequences. Because human individuals are so versatile, and because our cultures are even more so, it is scarcely possible to read political consequences directly from our knowledge of human biology. Still, we can be sure that our biology will shape and limit the politics of human groups and societies in certain ways. One aim of governance for any group must be to meet, or (at least) not too radically violate the ordinary human needs of most of its members. Even slaves have to be fed; and when they are worked and punished beyond certain limits they are no longer profitable. In connection with such realities, customs and laws are always needed to define the expectations of human inter-relationships and of ordinary human life.

The Quest for Windfall Benefit

In a perfect world – in the Garden of Eden, say, or in the shmoo-world of L'il Abner – anything that one could possibly want would be there for the taking. In our real one, people have to work for the goods they want, and even the raw materials for these goods require some effort to gather, and may be in short supply. For this reason, while social existence is by no means a zero-sum game, it is far more competitive than one might wish. There is a fundamental desire and competition for windfall benefits, as we may call them, which satis-

fy desires and needs for no more effort than is required to take them up and enjoy them, as one might pick a windfall apple off the ground.

Everyone loves to get something for nothing. Infants will not survive if their basic needs are not taken care of by adults who charge nothing for their services. In a loving and thriving family, children get many of their desires satisfied on that same basis. If, as adults, we can get such windfall benefits to continue – so much the better; and this wish too has political consequences. We compete for leisure time at the expense of other's labour. We compete for economic rent – unearned income from the 'ownership' of natural resources (like arable land, or oil), or from exclusive privilege of any kind. We compete to receive and enjoy various 'public goods,' in which we hold some private stake: military defence of our rental income (if we have some); medical care (if we are sick); free education (if we have children); etc. In practice, the only way to produce public goods on a large scale will be build them and pay for them with public revenue, which will have to be obtained somehow. Inevitably, public goods represent windfall benefits for some, but not for others; and there will always be political questions of which public goods to produce, exactly how, and whose expense. In short, the provision and financing of windfall benefits will be another shaping issue of political life – and of the governance that results.

Class Relationships

Large groups are never homogeneous. If all sentient beings are equal in some abstract moral, economic or legal sense, we are never so in the practical sense of identity, role and status. With our differing temperaments and talents, and with the advantages of education and training, we enter into different pursuits and occupations and naturally find ourselves with differing capabilities and interests – some complementary, but some in conflict. Thus it becomes a challenge for the politics of any group to negotiate the working relationships of its members to maximize the benefits of their collaboration while containing their conflicts and frictions. Somehow, the work must get done. And "everyone has to eat at the table," as I once heard a manager say, though some will get more than others.

The members of a group work out their relationships as individuals, sometimes formally and contractually, but mostly informally and tacitly – 'between the lines,' so to speak, of whatever else they are doing. But in a complex society, roles and relative status will also need to be regulated by custom and law. Some possible relationships may be encouraged; others may be deterred or punished; and these patterns will be shaped somehow, as an aspect of group governance, by a political process.

For our purpose, a simple five-way taxonomy will suffice to think about the impact of politics and governance on class relationships:

- 1) At the top of any group, and of the whole society, we find a relatively

- small number of players, political entrepreneurs who gather followers, contend for power and seek to move current law and policy in some preferred direction. We typically find one or more of each at the head of every faction – every side of every issue – which currently perturbs a group's tranquility.
- 2) Under these, often clinging to one or another of these player's coat tails, is a ruling cadre of organizers and senior managers and administrators who are not so much playing their own game, as playing hard, for remuneration and a share of power, in the game of someone else.
 - 3) Beneath these again is a class of indulged professionals, usually upper-middle class in lifestyle and income, who sell their valuable skills, knowledge, reputation and whatever else to one or another team, or to the public at large. These individuals are workers, of course, but valuable ones who cannot be taken for granted because they are in short supply and their time is of special value. They probably have at least some personal capital to buffer them against misfortune. They can do well for their children. They are not powerful as individuals, but can be very powerful as a class when they have strong common interests. To varying degrees, they live very nicely.
 - 4) Beneath these comfortable professionals is another class of exploited workers who are not nearly so well off. Men being horny and women fertile, unskilled workers are always in plentiful supply. Today, they can often be replaced by machines, or by cheaper workers in some other country. Though Marx and others have tried, they are difficult to organize on any scale that can prevail against other groups – not even on a scale that can hold public attention for very long, given all the other interests in play.
 - 5) Finally, at the very bottom of society is a class of marginal persons, unable or unwilling to compete for any secure role in society – not even for the privilege of being exploited. As it would take a whole book to do justice to this wretched class, and as many books about various sectors of it are being written, I can add nothing here.

The upshot is that class relationships and conflicts must be a preoccupation of any human society, and of any large political group. Something will have to be done to distract those lower classes, the exploited and the marginal from their envies and resentments. In ancient Rome, it was 'bread and circuses.' We have our own versions of these, and we use religion, nationalism and sports for the same purposes. The 'class struggle' and various efforts to appease or mitigate it are another chronic theme of politics.

Conflict Management

Because all sorts of things that people want are in limited supply, because disruptive conflict may arise for all kinds of reasons, and because armed viol-

ence, when it breaks out will be bloody, uncertain and fearfully expensive, the prevention or containment of conflict becomes a central aim of governance. The apparatus of law is one facility for this purpose. Central power and its formal exercise is another. Endless bureaucracy and procrastination are a third. The point is, one of the central functions of governance is to interpose itself as a kind shock absorber between the subgroups and factions of a society to limit violent conflict between them – to resolve conflict where possible, or at least prevent it from becoming violent (and thus disturbing the civil peace of others), or at least stamp out such outbreaks of violence when they occur.

We think of government as sitting at the top of society, taking decisions and giving rational orders. Up to a point this is correct but, as we've seen,⁴ a working government also sits in the middle of society like an enormous air bag, absorbing kicks and punches from every direction, and allowing the angry citizens to 'express themselves,' while keeping them from each other's throats – and from disrupting the vital functions of the society. People who complain about the irrationality and inefficiency of government, as I have done myself, fail to see that this inefficiency really serves a crucial buffering function. When that buffering works well, there is tranquility and gradual progress. When it breaks down there is violence.

Ideology

When you consider that thought is the ultimate free good – Die Gedanken sind frei, as that German song goes – it is surprising that ideas are so contentious in politics, and that so much blood has been spilled in the enforcement of orthodox opinion. Or maybe not. Maybe the inquisitions are so fierce, and the religious wars are so bloody precisely because our thoughts are free: so much a matter of personal taste.

The question is: What stake does a group have in its conventional wisdom, in its officially endorsed and enforced beliefs? Why not sweep the ideological questions aside – just ignore them – to focus instead on the practical questions of a group's existence and functioning? To some extent, modern nations have learned to do this, with their doctrines of secularism, laïcité or separation of church and state. Yet this separation remains problematic in many parts of the world, notably in China, with its persecutions of the Falun Dafa movement; in many countries of the Middle East and Africa, which regard Islam as the basis of their law and their official religion; and in the United States, whose Christian right remains unreconciled with the nation's constitutionally prescribed pluralism. Why is this so? Why is the secularism of the state so difficult to accept, although its opposite – the idea of a nation under divinely revealed law – has been a chronic source of violence, civil war and poverty? This is another question on which thick books can and have been written, yet I will offer just a few basic answers:

- First, the nation is inherently a mystical concept to which religious

4 In Section 3.3.1

sentiments attach. Many people pin their identities to a sense of national belonging, to their sense of the nation as a divinely guided tribe.

- Thus religious beliefs acquire an unfortunate political role, as cognitive flags that groups wave to rally their members, or as cognitive tents that they set up for their members' psychological shelter.
- Finally, there is the simple pragmatic reason that we cannot help but be more comfortable with people who are like ourselves. The intentional stance works better, and we find it easier to deal with them. We can feel sure how they will respond in a given situation, because we know how we ourselves would.

For at least these reasons, ideology is not likely to depart from politics any time soon. It will remain a key source of political divergence, and a weapon in political disputes.

Autonomy and Power

There is a chronic tension, discussed in Chapter 2, between human sociality and our self-interest. As social animals, we humans find it pleasurable and comforting to belong securely to a strong, congenial group that upholds our beliefs and interests; and there are many advantages in forming and adhering to such a group. At the same time, no one likes to be governed by others. No one likes to have their autonomy curbed, as the price of continuing membership. Still less do we enjoy being hammered down to conformity by a group's need for working 'consensus.' The result, seen everywhere, is that humans organize themselves into groups but resist their discipline in small ways. We assert our individuality with small variations of 'style' and sometimes with seriously criminal acts. We all have personal tastes: things that we like or don't like. Some individuals actually develop a personal philosophy, aesthetic and style – a personal 'taste' of their own. Several aspects of this tension – between sociality and self-interest (alternatively, between individuality and social conformity) – were also discussed in Section 3.3 on 'power.'

Now, when we speak of 'the content of politics,' we must recognize that this tension between centralization and anarchic individualism is always what is ultimately at stake. It is a chronic dilemma. Because there are large problems and disadvantages at either extreme, the outcome in practice is always some form of confederacy, federalism or devolution, which combines a certain amount of centralized authority with a degree of local and individual autonomy. Every relationship of peers is a confederacy of sorts; every master-slave relationship shows some degree of devolution because no master can supervise every tiny detail of the slave's performance. In practice, the best that can be done is to assign a task and then check later that it has been adequately done. But 'adequacy' here is always subject to interpretation, and hence to

politics. All relationships and groups are politicious⁵ because there is always room for dispute whether tasks have been adequately performed, roles and agreements faithfully carried out. The group as a whole must somehow think about and decide whether its 'social contract,' its 'terms of association,' are being met.

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From this section's cursory review, we see that groups have quite a lot to think about – issues and problems that present themselves, and need some-how to be resolved or managed:

- They must cater for at least some of the needs of an empowered subset of their membership, and must keep the rest alive, in service, and under control.
- They must organize the scramble for windfall benefits, to avoid chaos, and hold the loyalties of (at least) a ruling elite. They must direct the energies of that elite in a way that will redound somewhat to the group's benefit – at least not immediately to its harm. In the process, they will typically produce a varied 'shopping cart' of public goods.
- They must buffer against internal conflict, containing it where possible, directly suppressing it when necessary.
- They must arrange for some degree of cognitive uniformity – at least, to the extent of agreement on what the issues are, and how the different factions will contend. They will articulate and propagate a 'conventional wisdom,' marginalizing and often punishing the deviance and dissent that they choose not to accept.
- They must arrange for an appropriate concentration of power, allowing public business to be handled appropriately, without excessive corruption or tyranny or sheer bureaucratic inefficiency.

Now, with some idea of what groups need to think about – the content of their politics and governance – we must try to describe how this thinking gets done.

4.2 Collective Thinking

Although groups do not reason in any formally valid way, they perform at least five functions analogous to the thinking process of individuals:

- they direct and colour joint attention;
- they experience collective moods and emotions;
- they ruminate on their collective experience, articulating and gnawing at their current, collective issues;
- they develop, maintain and project a collective identity; and,
- so long as the group is at all viable, they take at least some collective decisions that result in collective intentions, mindset and action.

5 See Section 2.2.5.

In at least these ways, groups may be said to think; and it is precisely through their politics and governance that this happens – that the divergent thoughts and actions of their members get synthesized into collective thought and action. This collective thought is the work of the group's individual members in a sense quite similar to that in which your own thought and mine is the work of neurons in our brains. Yet, in themselves, the actions of individual persons (and neurons) do not explain the thinking of the whole, which is a product too of the way these components inter-connect and talk to each other, and of the external situations in which they do so.

What we know today about collective thought is divided over various academic disciplines which, between them, have compiled an impressive body of solid information, with a rich assortment of concepts and explanatory theories:

- From the study and writing of history we have extraordinarily detailed knowledge of the social past, of what has been thought and done by groups and by important individuals, responding to one another and to their natural and social environments.
- From economics we have a theory of the marketplace, with its 'invisible hand.' It is supposed that rational actors (business firms and customers) with their conflicting interests will converge toward collective choices which are in some sense optimal for the market as a whole.
- From political science, we have theories of the state – of governmental institutions, public goods, and of political power which interfere or improve upon the market (depending on your politics) – but which provide the market with protection and law without which it can scarcely flourish as a stable, public institution.
- From anthropology we have the notion of 'culture,' along with thick descriptions of the distinctive cultures of numerous groups which have been studied. From systems theory and biology as applied in this field, we have meme theory and Bateson's 'ecology of mind.'
- From social psychology we have studies of 'groupthink,' and of the strengths and weaknesses of collective decision making under various conditions. Jungian psychologists, anthropologists and scholars of mythology even provide us with glimmerings of a notion of 'collective unconscious,' already getting at the idea of collective mindset which is our focus here.

What we still lack though is a holistic social science to reconcile these various approaches and explain the workings of groups and societies as integrated, collectively intentional systems. But I believe that we now have at least the vocabulary and enough fundamental theory to support such integration. Over so many different disciplines, the writings on collective thought fill libraries – too much for any one person to master and digest, and far and beyond all possibility of review in this or any other single work. Fragments of my take on

this literature are scattered in every chapter of the book; and represent the best I could do.

4.2.1 The Rulers and the Ruled

The 'rulers' of a group, as that word suggests, are the people who make the rules. They may or may not be actual leaders, as we'll discuss below,⁶ but they do provide the day-to-day guidance and management that keep their group in being. They are by no means an exclusive source for their group's collective intelligence; they hold no monopoly on its effective desires, beliefs and intentions. But they are seated at the focus of this intelligence. Their offices, the desks and chairs they occupy, are loci of power, minding and administration for the group as a whole.

The rulers of a whole society correspond roughly to what C. Wright Mills called its 'power elite.' They may be so because, they control wealth, or because they hold positions of command in the military, or in some other powerful institution. They may be corporate executives or senior civil servants, or may alternate between public and private sectors via the well-known 'revolving door.' They hold significant power in the groups they head, but it is their groups that give them power (not the other way round) by acknowledging their rule and submitting to it. It is one thing to be promoted or parachuted into a position of rule. It's something else entirely to gain the trust, loyalty and obedience of those you intend to rule. These must be earned, and they are seldom earned cheaply.

It is one thing to dress up as a ruler and sit in a ruler's chair issuing edicts and proclamations. It's quite another to be heeded and obeyed. And, as we'll see below (in Section 8.3), power and authority are very different things. If rulers are actually to rule – to shape the activities of individuals who are theoretically their subjects – then their suggestions must carry weight. They will need either the authority to attract voluntary attention and obedience, or the power to compel reluctant, grudging attention and obedience. Either way, the collective wish, belief or intention of a group will seldom be exactly what its rulers instruct or command. The rulers themselves may reject large parts of their own message. They may believe, for example, that religion is good for the masses, for stability in the group as a whole, and for their own authority – while paying only 'due respect' to it themselves. They may wish to convince their people that some measure – e.g. some war, or free trade, or protective tariff – is in the group's best interest, while knowing well that it's their own interest they have at heart.

We can borrow the term '*windage*' from ballistics to capture the difference between the aim of some decree, or law, or policy and its result in practice. In ballistics, windage is the force (from wind and air resistance) which may cause a bullet to miss its point of aim. In governance, it is the force of public

6 In Section 4.3

resistance to a ruler's commands. It may arise from shirking or from small mutinies by the people (typically soldiers, police persons or clerks) charged with the implementation and enforcement of those commands. It may arise from resistance and counter-measures by the target population, or from enemy action from outside the group. From whatever source, windage is what makes the difference between the intention behind some act of governance, and its end result, once all the public responses, side effects and unintended consequences are factored in.

History affords no end of examples of this phenomenon – the difference between what rulers intend and what they actually achieve. To mention just three well-known examples, Mao's Great Leap Forward, the British Stamp Tax and the American experiment with Prohibition⁷ come to mind. These policies, and many like them, were not just expensive and counter-productive, but ruinous for governance itself – for effective regulation of the society by those who attempt to rule it.

The broader point here is that the collective volition of a group is never exactly what its rulers intend. The ruler has power, to be sure – at least, until the time when he is beheaded, shot or otherwise disposed of. But that power is only suggestive and coercive, never literally controlling. Always, the collective feeling, thought and will of a group is an outcome of the whole groups' thinking: its groupthink and its politics.

4.2.2 Groupthink

'Groupthink' has been studied as one aspect of social psychology at least since 1952 when William Whyte coined the term in an article in Fortune magazine. Since then, much research has been focused on the weaknesses and the disastrous failures of collective thinking in committees, in crowds, and in the public at large. Research has also been directed toward collective intelligence and for crowdsourcing,⁸ – toward some things that groups do well, and toward strategies for organizing and managing groups to get them to do these things even better. We may take it, then, that the phenomenon of collective thought is well established, and that history affords numerous examples of its effects, both small and large.

But here I want to write about 'groupthink' from a somewhat different perspective, emphasizing its autonomous purpose and process more than its strengths and weaknesses. As to purpose, we saw at the beginning of this section that the collective thinking of a group serves to take collective decisions (which result in collective intentions, mindset and actions). To do this, it collectively ruminates on its experience, articulating and gnawing at its current questions and issues. In doing so, it experiences collective moods and emotions, directing and colouring collective attention on a day-to-day basis, or

7 And with the [prohibition of other recreational drugs](#) than alcohol.

8 The process of obtaining services, ideas, or content by soliciting contributions from a large group of people.

even faster. For the longer term, it develops, maintains and projects a collective identity, through which it perceives and understands itself and attempts relationships with others.

If we try to list the specific mechanisms through which these things are done, we arrive at something like the following:

Normal Operations

Normal operations, in the sense meant here is just the routine functioning and governance of a group under its normal conditions.

Routines are followed. Small perturbations happen, but these are recognized and answered according to custom or the rule book. No great changes of direction are required or contemplated. Any and all of the basic modes of human interaction may be in play.⁹

In the normal operation of a group, minding is seamlessly directed by its existing mindset, and it occurs more-or-less by habit. Orders are given by those entitled to give them, and followed by subordinates accustomed to obey. Goods and services are bought and sold in an orderly market of some kind, or they are transferred through gifting or on command. Whether as ruler or follower, people function smoothly and rather automatically – as does the group as a whole. Customs, habits, precedents go undoubted and unchallenged as nothing significantly interferes with them or calls them into question. Everyone knows their place and does their job.

Emotional Contagion

Under certain conditions, however, human affect and emotion can spread through a group or crowd by a kind of contagion. Gusts of laughter, of enthusiasm, or panic propagate contagiously, triggering swarm behaviour, or just a collective re-alignment of mood. Such contagion is important for a group's minding as a basis for its solidarity and esprit de corps. It is manipulated fairly easily with propaganda, and through ritual, music and art. Without this propagation and sharing of emotion, it is hard to see how group identity could develop as a sector of collective mindset.

The force of emotional contagion is hard to imagine if you have not experienced it first hand on a sports team, or project team or military unit. In my own life, three episodes stand out as instances of large scale emotional contagion with impact on my identity: The first was the murder of President Kennedy on 22 November 1963. The second was a peace march down Fifth Avenue in New York City on 17 October 1965. The third was in Haifa, Israel, in the weeks of mobilization before the Six Day War.

A fourth such episode, the 9/11 attacks certainly affected the whole of the United States, but I had been a Canadian for many years by then, and lived in Ottawa at the time. I can't say that day had much impact on my identity, as I had been expecting something of that sort to happen – on the principle that

⁹ Alan Fiske's four modes, described in Section 2.2.4

"what goes around, comes around." The US had been doing things like that to other people for years.

Swarm Effects

Swarm effects occur in human mobs and crowds when people lose much of their individuality, but find themselves guided by those around them. In the pure case, there are no rules or customs to guide you, but in practice this seldom happens. A human mob comes together for a reason; most of its members come to it with something in common – an interest, an attitude, a target. With this much common mindset, the members are not reacting purely to one another, but to this mindset as well. Notwithstanding, many political events – e.g. a mass demonstration, a lynching, an infantry attack – make use of the swarm principle, and show the features of a swarm. In such a movement, you "go along to get along" with only a minimum of normal self-interest or personal identity. With everyone behaving in this way, the group makes collective decisions spontaneously, with little external constraint and no centralized command structure.

Human swarming is not just a matter of physical activity. There can be cognitive swarms as well – as with an intellectual paradigm or a religious movement. The waves of buying or selling on a stock exchange, the so-called bull markets and bear markets, are swarm effects, driven by desire for gain and fear of loss.

The political relevance of human swarms is obvious enough. On one hand, they can often be manipulated by any individual or group with resources to spend on propaganda, advertising and 'public relations.' On the other, in rebellions and revolutions they can go against their would-be leaders. While it's temptingly easy to inveigh about the 'sheeple,' to decry our human tendencies for swarm behaviour, we should at least understand that swarming is part and parcel of human sociality, and that it evolved in us for much the same reasons that it did in many other species. Often, but not always, it's advantageous to take your cues from the people around you, and not insist on thinking for yourself.

Stigmergy

Stigmergic effects¹⁰ occur when people leave messages for each other by 'writing' (literally or figuratively) on their environment. Encountering these messages, we read and respond to the suggestions left for us; in responding we leave our own suggestions for others. From ancient times, we left inadvertent marks on the ground and on the vegetation as we walked, and we soon learned to make deliberate marks on trees. We made artifacts of all kinds, and we made shelters. With writing and the advance of technology, our stigmergic powers advanced exponentially, with positive feedback as it did so. A modern

¹⁰ Already introduced in Sections 1.3 and 1.4 and especially in 2.1.6

city is a totally stigmergic environment with nothing natural about it, not even the smoggy air above it and the tunnelled Earth below.

In sum, what we create with stigmergy is a physicalized, collective mindset. Whatever else our artifacts do, (and many artifacts have no other purpose), they create suggestive context – a collective mindset, in fact – for the humans who use them or engage with them. They put suggestions which influence our minding and behaviour. Some are ephemeral, some are highly durable; but while they last, they exert a potential influence on everyone who encounters them. The human mind is not, and never really has been, only what human brains were doing. Almost three million years ago, in the old stone age, it was already a matter of sticks and stones and walking trails. Today, it is a matter of concrete, copper, steel and special-purpose alloys, of paper and ink, of plastic, of silicon chips, and all the other materials that we work and write with.

Just what we write with our artifacts is only partly a matter of individual design and choice. Everything large and expensive, be it a cathedral, railroad, skyscraper or battleship, will be a product of politics and governance. In turn, such artifacts will shape and constrain the future thoughts and efforts of the groups that use (and are used) by them. For millions of years now, stigmergic offloading of individual and collective mindset to the physical environment has been a crucial feature of human minding and human evolution.

Gossip and Rumour

A rumour is a little story that propagates through a group via the normal social intercourse of individuals. From ancient times, people have met and chatted and told stories about each other, and about happenings in their world. They did this whenever there was a small group with a bit of leisure – when the hunt or the root-digging was finished; at the well, where they went to draw water; around the fire where sat around after eating. Today, we socialize in the cafeteria and around the water cooler and the coffee machine. After hours, we may do the same at a saloon or coffee house or laundromat. In doing so, we pass suggestions to one another, and we pass information which may or may not be true.

But I want to use the word 'rumour' in a wider sense, to include narrative suggestion of every kind and every degree of intellectual respectability. For our purpose, radio and TV news shows are in the rumour business, as are the newspaper and magazine columns, military intelligence briefings and the articles of scholars in learned journals. This usage lets us speak not just of the 'social construction of reality' but of its political construction, as different groups peddle their rumours in the cognitive marketplace, the public mind-scape (or whatever you want to call it), and as these rumours compete – and sometimes come to violence – for attention and credence.

It's in the milling and mulling of competing rumours that the political process of a group most closely resembles the competition of neural patterns in a

brain. In both cases, the process is fallible, and subject to disruptions of various kinds. Neither is as rational as we might wish. Yet in a group as in a person's brain, this swilling of rumour is the first and last means that a minding system has to make sense of its world and ponder how to cope with it.

Charisma

Charisma is a talent or power which some individuals possess to inspire devotion in others, and to influence their feelings and behaviours. While not the same thing as leadership (to be discussed in the next section), it is certainly a useful quality for leaders to have, and one that successful leaders usually do have in some degree, because it gives their suggestions a weight that they would not otherwise possess, and that is sometimes well beyond what they deserve. For that reason alone, it's an important factor in the way groups think.

More important, however, than the charismatic gift of some would-be leader is the susceptibility of an audience. When the situation calls for significant change and leadership, someone usually comes along to meet that need. When everyone feels or thinks something that no one is bold enough, or quite knows how, to put into words, someone comes along to break the silence. Otherwise, the silver-tongued visionary is mostly ignored. As always, the suggestion is construed more by the system that receives it than by the one who utters a message. A speaker writes and delivers a speech, but it's their audience (individually and collectively) that decides what it will mean.

* * * * *

In each of these effects, there is a loop of social participation like those discussed in Section 2.3. Individuals are motivated and guided by their group while, at the same time, they make their various contributions to its aims and methods through their participation in it. Technology and infrastructure evolve, writing stigmergic guidelines on the environment, and subject to a ratchet effect which gives the system a clear direction in time. Social attitudes also change over time, subject to a dialectical logic of 'action' and 'reaction,' or to a dialectical pattern of 'assertion,' 'opposition,' and 'conciliation.' Subgroups compete and collaborate in the larger groups that contain them – and are themselves contextually guided in loops of participation similar to those of individuals. The group exists in time, generating its own trends and its own events.

This much happens from within the group itself, driven by the logic of social interaction and by human nature. But there are further, adaptive changes responding to events and trends in the group's environment – the world outside itself which it can never fully control, and on which it ultimately depends, however autonomous and powerful it may become. While the group mulls its own issues and dilemmas, it must respond to external happenings as well. For this reason, a group that find itself in a complex, rapidly changing world will need leaders as well as competent rulers to guide and focus its political pro-

cess. Although these functions overlap somewhat, they are actually quite different, as we will see.

4.3 Leadership

The rulers of a group maintain it in being, and keep it viable by giving order and structure, but doing so does not make them leaders. It is crucial that routine choices be made when needed; it is best if they are made sensibly and and well. But routine choices are merely 'business as usual.' In cognitive terms, they correspond to all the work that a brain does to coordinate the activities of its whole body: to keep it alive and healthy and competent. Such work is vital, and it is sometimes difficult. It deserves respect and cooperation, most of the time. But it does not set the group's direction. It does not suffice in situations of crisis or deadlock, when real leadership is needed.

Leadership may (or may not) be called forth from a group's ruling elite or elsewhere, when a stalemate or deadlock paralyzes its energies, or when some new direction must be found. Leadership represents a breaking of political symmetry – a choice of this strategic course, with corresponding rejection of all those other possibilities. And not just a personal choice, of course, but an effectively collective one: a choice that gathers and mobilizes a group's capabilities and sets them moving toward some vividly imagined goal. For an archetype of leadership, think of a Moses who rallies the Hebrew slaves and leads them out of Egypt. Great leaders lead their peoples to a 'Promised Land.' Bad leaders lead them to disaster. And, of course, what is a promised land for some may be disaster for others. It may be a place where some natives already live. So leadership usually brings mixed results and can be very dangerous, but there are times when it is needed. A book on collective minding can scarcely avoid some discussion of how it works. Here's what I think I understand about it:

The central point, already stressed, is that leadership is not the same as normal, day-to-day rulership. Rulers normally rely on institutional habits and customs, on rules-of-thumb and decision algorithms, on the consensual judgment (or groupthink) of their peers. The last thing they want is the personal responsibility that leaders necessarily accept. Leaders, typically, have a personal vision that they stake their lives on. At least, they stake years of their lives, or their whole careers. They point out a direction and go down that path themselves, seeking and hoping for followers, maybe expecting followers, but not waiting for followers before they commit themselves. They may or may not be rulers as well.

For example, Martin Luther was a leader, though never much of a ruler. John Calvin, by contrast, was both. Jesus, for that matter, was a leader who never ruled anything beyond his little group of disciples, while Mohammad was religious leader who became a secular ruler as well. Admittedly, the distinction between ruler and leader is sometimes fuzzy in practice, though conceptually it's clear enough: Rulers are practical men and women who negotiate

and compromise as a matter of necessity. Leaders fear to compromise because doing so can scarcely help but muddy and weaken their message.

Where rulership is typically about power (as discussed above in Section 3.3), leadership is more about authority and influence. Rulers deal mostly in tangible assets like troops and supplies and money. Leaders deal primarily in dreams, rhetoric and charisma. Of course, both types are needed; and, as we've seen, some individuals have dealt in both. But authentic leadership prompts toward heroism, where rulership prompts toward give-and-take, toward going along to get along, toward self-restraint and moderation.

Excessive emphasis on leadership leads to 'great-man' theories, which see the decisive turns and outcomes of history as resulting primarily from the interventions of one extraordinary individual of outstanding genius or charisma or whatever. But on our emergentist view, we see most great individuals as largely shaped in a kind of dialogue with their world: not that they are just passive products of the society they found around them, but that they are active interpreters and interlocutors of that world, which is seen as a collective mind in its own right. The true leader engages his or her world at more than usual depth, and responds to it in an original way which attracts and holds and gains authority for a significant following. Without followers, it is possible to be a visionary, even a crucially important one, but the visionary is not yet a leader. (One example might be that of Alfred Russel Wallace, who shares with Darwin the honours of discovery for the theory of natural selection, and who participated importantly in its history for his role in prompting Darwin to publish, but who was not a leader of this scientific revolution in the way that Darwin was.)

In practice, the leader, like all of us, is an active interlocutor of his or her world. But the leader is so in an unusually intense and fruitful way which becomes powerfully suggestive for others. Leaders occupy a crucial position (often uncomfortable and sometimes lethal) as interlocutors in the politics of their time. On one hand, the leader internalizes and grapples with one or more of the issues which vex society, and arrives at a striking, personal answer. He then communicates that answer effectively to others and builds for it a cadre of allegiance – a following, in other words. At the same time, typically, he also builds a cadre of resistance and enmity. In this way, the leader becomes a focal point or pivot for the political thought process on the matter, rather as a crystal grows up around its seed.

Finally, would-be leaders need at least five attributes that most ordinary rulers can do without:

- They need focus and intensity, a kind of insanity even, to internalize and work through the vexing issue.
- They need insight or strategic vision, accurate or not, which resolves the issue in a strikingly attractive way.
- They need political courage to pin their fortunes and careers to the

movement that they lead. Often they need physical courage too, as leaders quite commonly die in battle, or get executed or assassinated by their enemies.

- They need the charismatic influence – personal magnetism and rhetorical skill, preferably backed by credible authority – to attract and hold a following.
- Finally, they need the timeliness, and often sheer luck, to be noticed and found relevant by their contemporaries – to achieve enough celebrity (at least, posthumous celebrity) to influence a following.

We should stress that leadership comes in all flavors of good and evil, and that not all leadership is heroic or historically important. We should stress as well that leadership need not be political, in the narrow sense of power politics. There are spiritual leaders, artistic leaders, scientific and intellectual leaders as well as political ones. All groups and genres have their politics (in the broad sense); but crucial leadership is found outside the directly political games of war and government, and in small, private groups as well as large and public ones.

Some rulers rise to leadership when their situation calls for it. Many do not – or, in all fairness, cannot. Louis XVI is one good example of a head of state who failed the challenge. France of 1789 was in a state of financial and political crisis. Constitutional monarchy would probably have resolved the situation; it was a known option at the time, and it was feasible. But Louis lacked the political judgment and decisiveness to lead there. Instead, with his Austrian wife, he chose to flee the country, intending to put him-self at the head of counter-revolutionary army. He was captured on the way; and, almost overnight, from a king became a traitor. Louis and his queen went to the guillotine, and the Reign of Terror followed. Finally, Napoleon brought effective leadership to the situation, with results that were far from ideal. It is possible, however that in 1799, that was the only kind of leadership that France was ready for.

4.4 Case Study: Mexico and the Porfiriato

Porfirio Díaz did not somehow change the direction of Mexico; he was not the maker of his times but he was, like Santa Anna, peculiarly representative of them. This is why, probably, both men have been so virulently hated and despised in later times. Each, in his own way, was the symbol of national weaknesses and humiliations, and each was made the scapegoat for the ills of Mexican society and the sins of a whole generation. Both men, truly representative of the malaise of their times, knew how to take advantage of a current vileness in Mexican souls. Díaz, who sprang from the true mixed race of Mexico, was the more representative Mexican and immensely the better man. Most other presidents had dreamed of perpetual power, but Díaz was canny enough to know how to consolidate it.

- Fire and Blood: a history of Mexico, T.R. Fehrenbach

My argument is that politics, even at its bloodiest, can be seen as a cognitive process through which a group maintains itself in being and decides which

way to march. By way of illustration, it needs a case study; and, out of innumerable possibilities, the case I have selected is that of Porfirio Diaz – a dictator, but a sincerely patriotic one, clearly interested in strengthening his country and improving its prospects. In his own terms he was remarkably successful, ruling Mexico with an iron hand for more than 30 years, between 1877 and 1911, and accomplishing quite a large portion of his agenda in the process. Though his legacy is mixed and still controversial, he may fairly be credited with the creation of the modern Mexican state, having given Mexico its first strong government and administration. His great predecessor, Benito Juarez, had had a similar goal, but the Mexico of his day was not ready for the rule of law on a national scale. Juarez was a lawyer and a democrat, ahead of his time in that respect. Díaz was a military man who pulled his country together and largely pacified it, whatever else he did.

What makes him a good example of political leadership is not just the extent and reach of his personal power, but also its accurate matching to the impersonal situation and social forces in the Mexico of his time. Díaz was a dictator, who certainly imposed his personality and volition on the nation and peoples he ruled. But, unlike many other dictators (e.g. Hitler, Stalin or Chairman Mao), he was a pragmatist rather than an ideologue. Though these men too were governed by their circumstances, their regimes were conspicuously more ideological and idiosyncratic than that of Díaz. Also, though personally ambitious, he was far less paranoid than many dictators, and he had a well-founded, realistic sense of what his country needed – though not everyone either at that time or today would agree with him. Above all, he understood power – both its uses and its limitations. Both for himself and the country, he knew what he wanted and he largely got it; but he also knew whose support he needed, and how to obtain that.

Early Life and Temperament

Born in 1830 in the city of Oaxaca in southern Mexico, to an indigenous mother by a criollo¹¹ innkeeper, it could be said that Porfirio Díaz carried the fundamental political division of his country in his DNA.

At age 15 he began to train for the priesthood which, in the Mexico of that time, was the way to get an education. At age 16, when the war with the United States began, he walked 250 miles to Mexico City to join the army, but a peace was signed before he arrived at the front. Returning to Oaxaca, at age 20 he began to study law, coming under the influence and eventual notice of Benito Juarez, who was at that time governor of the province. When he joined a band of liberal guerillas in 1855, in the revolt against Santa Anna, his career began in earnest.

11 i.e. culturally Spanish but born in Mexico.

The Political Situation

The Mexico of Díaz' time already had liberal and democratic aspirations, but lacked the political conditions for effective democratic government. Benito Juárez, Díaz' great predecessor, had given Mexico a constitution and tried to base his government on a popular mandate and on law, but neither he nor Sebastián Lerdo, his immediate successor and another jurist, could make that system work. For one thing, the federal government was still substantially weaker than the powers arrayed against it: regional leaders, ambitious generals and churchmen resentful of attempts by these liberal leaders to confiscate their wealth and curb their powers. The country was in heavy debt to foreign creditors, and was being eyed by greedy investors from the United States and Europe. The indigenous population, comprised of numerous ethnicities and languages – notably the Nahuatl (descendants of the Aztecs), Maya, Zapotec, Purépecha, Mixtec, Yaqui and almost 60 others – remained marginalized, alienated, impoverished and politically divided. The criollos, Mexicans of European heritage, still comprised an economic and social elite. The future of the country lay with its mestizo population, persons (like Juárez and Díaz) of mixed native and European blood, whose predominance was already clear, but far from confident.

The sad fact was that law could not prevail yet without an army under some popular general to back it. The country still needed pacification and unity much more than it needed democracy. It was this that Díaz recognized, and set himself to achieve.

Approach and Policies

Díaz was a liberal, but he was certainly no democrat. He and his *científico* advisors were political and economic positivists who pushed for political stability and economic development – above all else and at any cost, as the precondition for social progress.

These policies did indeed create an economic boom by encouraging foreign investment from the United States and Europe to develop Mexico's resources. Mines, plantations and factories were built and flourished. Many miles of railway track were laid to connect the important cities and ports.

Díaz could be ruthless, yet he was neither paranoid nor bloodthirsty, and his tight regime made few martyrs. His technique was to maintain control by playing the competing factions off against each other, and by giving positions of power (carefully lesser than his own) to any who would cooperate. "A dog with a bone in its mouth neither barks nor bites," was one of his favourite sayings. But when the governor of Veracruz inquired what to do with a band of political opponents of the regime, the reply came back immediately, "Shoot them on the spot!" Understanding that he needed to control the countryside, where the majority of Mexico's population lived, Díaz organized the infamous *rurales* (countryside police) to suppress banditry and insurrection. They could be counted on to follow orders, but they shot more prisoners 'trying to escape' than were ever brought to jail or a courtroom.

He gained support from the elite Criollo society by allowing them their wealth and their haciendas. He appeased the still powerful Roman Catholic Church by leaving it alone – unlike previous liberals who had shot priests and confiscated Church property. At the same time, almost any educated mestizo could get a reliably-paid, government job.

The Diaz Legacy

Díaz' undoubted achievements came at enormous social cost, in particular for the natives and the poor who were largely fragmented and powerless, and whose political support or rage still meant very little. He did little for the poor either in the fields of education or health care. His already wealthy friends were allowed to steal land from Indian villages without fear of punishment while impoverished natives were forced into a system of debt-slavery. Accumulating resentment finally exploded into the long, bloody Mexican Revolution of 1910, leaving the country in a state of civil war until 1920, and unstable until at least 1929 or later. Díaz himself, after 37 years in power, was finally defeated and forced into exile in 1911, to be replaced by a long succession of weaker, more corrupt and far less capable leaders. Yet he left behind him at least the memory of a unified Mexican state, and much of the infrastructure for this as well. When the country had its next fairly stable regime, that of Álvaro Obregón who came to power in 1920, the basic orientation of Díaz era policy seems to have resumed – at least to the extent that social stability, economic progress and US recognition were top priorities.

Today, the memory of Porfirio Díaz is still controversial in Mexico, as both his achievements and his over-arching tyranny are well remembered. Colorful characters from the Porfiriato and the Revolution feature in numerous Mexican films and soap operas. I can give the last word about him to a Mexican friend, the owner of a hostel in Oaxaca where I was staying in the winter of 2009, a few years before this section was written. He said, "Porfirio Díaz did a lot for Mexico, but I don't like dictators." I think most of his countrymen would agree.