

The European Legacy



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Reviews

The Concept of “Interest”

Imagining Interest in Political Thought: Origins of Economic Rationality. By Stephen G. Engelmann (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), x + 194 pp. \$21.95 paper; \$74.95 cloth.

HALL GARDNER

Stephen G. Engelmann’s engaging book, *Imagining Interest in Political Thought: Origins of Economic Rationality*, critically examines the evolution of the concept of “interest” in western political philosophy and its subsequent development from the work of English political philosophers, such as the Earl of Shaftsbury and particularly the utilitarian Jeremy Bentham. It was Bentham’s theories that provided the backing for the 1832 British Reform Bill as well as the secret ballot, and introduced key terms to the political vocabulary, including “international,” “maximize,” “minimize,” and “codification.”

Engelmann’s major purpose is to trace the genealogical roots of the concept of “interest” and to explicate the relationship between nineteenth-century utilitarianism and contemporary neo-liberalism. Engelmann thus seeks to explain how the neo-liberal concept—whose pre-eminent representatives are perhaps Gary Becker and Richard Posner of the University of Chicago (see the Becker–Posner web blog <http://www.becker-posner-blog.com>)—has sought to circumvent traditional conceptions of sovereignty in which a government “serves neither the people nor a ruler but instead an economy” (2).

While neo-liberalism is closely associated with the political “right” of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, it has likewise influenced the policies of the political “left” of Bill Clinton and Tony Blair. Engelmann argues

that there are two sides to neo-liberalism. The positive side is that which liberates the imagination and mobilizes individual *interest* in “all of its spiritual, creative and altruistic manifestations” (2); it also provides “freedom to choose” (even if the neo-liberal preference for free choice is often exaggerated). The more negative side of neo-liberalism is that which mobilizes individual interest “in crass, routine and selfish” ways (2). The problem then arises as to how to limit the negative manifestations of a neo-liberal approach (as well as what Bentham referred to as “sinister interest” with respect to geopolitical affairs), precisely when neo-liberal policies do not necessarily enhance spirituality, creativity or altruism—the search for efficiency for the sake of efficiency (and profit) leads to greater unhappiness, gross inequalities, unnecessary exploitation and suffering (149).

Bentham’s work challenges the notions of the rights of man (or natural rights), as well as social contract theory as developed by Hobbes, Locke, and later Rawls (12–13). It also challenges Kantian and Marxian conceptions (among others) of “social relationships,” “community,” “civil society,” and “solidarity.” Bentham believed that “the community is a fictitious body” and that it is “vain to talk of the interest of the community, without understanding what is the interest of the individual” (53). Although he continues to use the term as shorthand, Bentham’s concept of “community” thus represents the aggregate of differing and ever shifting individual interests, in which some individuals, but not others, may join together in a common cause, depending upon their respective “interests.”

Engelmann seeks to move beyond the typical focus on Bentham’s normative and social concerns toward his market-oriented *monistic* conception of governance (but without

providing a very elaborate definition of the term). At the same time, however, Engelmann notes that Bentham himself "violated the formality of his own conception of economy whenever he emphasized the 'four ends' of government: security, subsistence, abundance and equality" (147). An alternative interpretation is that Bentham may have wanted to outline the key areas where the pursuits of government might actually improve upon the market, particularly by pointing out the more *appropriate* political and social directions in which the investments and markets *should* move. With respect to these fundamental pursuits of government, Engelmann argues that contemporary neo-liberal theorists generally do not concern themselves with themes of subsistence and equality, but tend to focus on abundance, while taking security for granted. One could add that neo-liberals generally do not concern themselves with questions involving the nature of labor relations, as well as the *social* dimension of the decision-making process—within the context of either the micro or macro economy.

Engelmann's goal is to re-conceptualize economic rationality by transcending traditional distinctions and by developing a more truly holistic concept of *monistic interest*. In this regard, he makes a key distinction between *instrumental reason* (which finds the most efficient means to fixed and given ends) and the more comprehensive concept of *economic reason*, in which "all ends as well as means are subordinated to a calculus that weighs priorities against one another and against present and future resources" (3). In arguing against Kantian assumptions, Engelmann contends that *economic reason*, if fully understood, represents, in itself, a "form of critical consciousness" that promotes a kind of "disciplined self awareness" of options and constraints (8).

In this respect, the question arises whether decision makers are disciplined enough to seek out *all* pertinent information and perspectives and are then willing to examine the *entire* range of preferences, priorities and choices. Moreover, because neo-liberal theory attempts to apply microeconomic analysis to nearly all areas of life, one could also argue that it constructs a kind of tunnel vision that ignores questions of ethics and norms, for example, among other relevant criteria, that may still play a major role in the decision making process—in

that deceit, illegal and immoral decisions may directly or indirectly undercut the final results made in the name of presumed "self-interest."

In addition to developing the "economic" side of *monistic interest*, Engelmann also develops its geopolitical side. Although some of his argumentation goes off on tangents and is really more of a *genealogy* than a historical chronology, he develops concepts of Tacitus and Cicero ("the safety of the people is the supreme law"), as well as theories of medieval and Renaissance theorists, such as Justus Lipsius (concepts of "'light,' 'middle' and 'great' deceit" and "mixed prudence"), in addition to Montaigne and Richelieu (examining the historical movement from *a* reason of state to *the* reason of state). The book then examines the rise of the concept of "interest" during the English Civil War, in the work of Richard Hooker and Thomas Mun, among others, including Cromwell's aide Henry Ireton—as it changes from a *juridical* to a political and economic concept. Also important is Engelmann's observation that the concepts of "policing" and "political economy" arose concurrently. Antoine de Montchrétien was the first to use the term "political economy" in his work *Traicté de l'Oeconomie Politique* (1615). By way of critiquing Aristotle and Xenophon, Montchrétien argued that "economy [*l'oéconomie*] cannot be separated from politics [*la police*] without dismembering the principal part from its Whole, and that the science of acquiring goods . . . is common to republics as well as to families" (98).

In tracing the concept of "interest" as it has transmuted over the centuries, Engelmann's major aim is to argue that both Machiavelli and Hobbes were among the first to develop concepts of a *long term* and *future oriented* national or public interest (in the singular) that was truly independent of, and abstracted from, the selfish interests of individual leaders. Yet, while both theorists regarded the state in terms of competing *pluralistic interests*, neither developed a *monistic* concept of the national or public interest. The monistic concept then makes its appearance with the rise of the "economic polity" in the nineteenth century.

The problem, which Engelmann seeks to underscore, is that the so-called "economic polity" has tended to be regarded in the abstract; yet state interest in both domestic and international economic affairs cannot be

easily separated from either political or security interests. This fact leads to the following questions with respect to *monistic interest*. The first question, on a pragmatic level, is whether it is always possible for the political and economic leaderships, even if using a sophisticated calculus of costs and benefits (that "seeks to serve neither the people nor a ruler but instead an economy"), to really distinguish between what is *necessary* versus what is *convenient*, or between its *immediate* and *long-term interest*? Related to this question, is the question as to exactly where do the power and interests of those who actually make decisions come into play in the *monistic* decision-making calculus?

The second question is why should *reason of state*, seen in terms of *monistic interest*, be increasingly determined in terms of political economy *alone*—and not in terms of a more encompassing definition of *national interest* that incorporates geostrategic, military technological, socio-cultural/religious/ideological, as well as moral/ethical interests—in addition to those of political economy?

The third question is whether it is possible for the *monistic* concept of national or public interest (that is tied to the aggregate interests of a given population) to be *extended* to incorporate the *pluralistic* interests of alien states and their populations, so as to truly augment the "happiness of the greatest numbers"? Is it at all possible for the *monistic concept of interest* to take into full consideration the interests of alien states and populations, as a "positive" form of its "disciplined self awareness"?

With respect to the first, more pragmatic, question, one can ask from a traditional *realist* perspective, exactly where in the pursuit of *monistic interest* does the calculation of *political power as interest* come into play? In other words, will political and economic policy makers actually engage in "disciplined self awareness"—if the economic calculation of those decisions may actually undermine the *power and interests* of the individual leader, his political party, his business, class and/or supporters? Will self-interested decision makers and entrepreneurs distinguish between what is *necessary* and what is *convenient*, and between the short and long term interest, so as to make "positive" decisions that truly benefit the greater "utility" of consumers and their own domestic populations (let alone those of alien states

and societies)—or will they choose the more "negative" or "sinister" options?

In terms of the second question, it is important to ask why should *reason of state*, seen in terms of *monistic interest*, be increasingly determined in terms of political economy *alone*? Why must political economy necessarily take precedence over an even more comprehensive conception of national interest and *reason of state*? The issue raised here is that the concept of *reason of state* may incorporate a much wider scale of considerations than that of political economy. *Reason of state* incorporates a multidimensional composite of conflicting geo-strategic, military technological, socio-cultural/religious/ideological, as well as moral/ethical interests—in addition to those of political economy. It appears that each of these conflicting interests must be prudently weighed *alongside those of political economy*—if a truly *rational* and *long-term* calculation of national *and* international interest is to be achieved.

National interest is often stereotyped as "sinister interest" (in Bentham's own terms) that is devoid of morality, ethics, as well as altruism. And yet, what if state leaderships see altruism (defined as actions intended to augment, rather than diminish, the "happiness" of the greater "community" in utilitarian terms) in the national interest? Thus, in regard to the third question (as to whether the *monistic concept of interest* can take into full consideration the interests of alien states and populations), Engelmann himself suggests the possibility that neo-liberal reform seems to be paving the way for a "global regime of security" (12). The question remains, if such a global regime of security is truly in the process of being formed, what *aggregate whole* will it adopt (149)? Should the aggregate considered be that of the nation-state—despite the fact that Bentham's (often idealistic) analysis is largely devoid of references to *reason of state* as well as nationalism? Or should the aggregate considered be those populations defined by a neo-imperialism that attacks states "as partial interests," but that still serves the "sinister interest" of the major powers and corporations? Or can the aggregate considered be the global "community" as a whole?

In other words, is it at all possible for the leaderships of the major states to see that their "enlightened" (my expression) and long term

self-interest lies in "relations" with the "aggregate community" in all its dimensions—regional, national, international? Is it thus possible to move from considerations involving *the monistic* interests of particular nation-states in regard to domestic affairs with pluralistic interests in regard to the international community, to those of *a monistic interest* that incorporates a global "community" through greater *multilateral* inter-state cooperation, whether through the UN, G-8, a thoroughly reformed World Bank, IMF and WTO, or other international institutions and *ad hoc* forums?

Imagining Interest in Political Thought: Origins of Economic Rationality is an interesting and erudite study. As "to be radical is to go to the root," Engelmann has, indeed, gone to the genealogical roots of the concept of "interest" in order

to better comprehend its relevance for contemporary political economic doctrines and to begin to point the way toward developing alternative options to the predominance of neo-liberal thought and policy making. At the same time, more work needs to be done to elaborate the apparent discrepancies in the concept of "national interest" as developed by domestic and international political theorists, on the one hand, and by political economists, on the other. Likewise, in the age of "globalization," more work is needed to examine whether the concept of *monistic interest* can—or should—be applied to decision-making beyond the confines of the major states and empires (and their populations), so as to truly augment the "happiness of the greatest numbers" throughout the planet.