

1967

Conspiracy and Power Politics

John E. Guendling
Arkansas Tech University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/jaas>



Part of the [Political Theory Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Guendling, John E. (1967) "Conspiracy and Power Politics," *Journal of the Arkansas Academy of Science*: Vol. 21, Article 19.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/jaas/vol21/iss1/19>

This article is available for use under the Creative Commons license: Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-ND 4.0). Users are able to read, download, copy, print, distribute, search, link to the full texts of these articles, or use them for any other lawful purpose, without asking prior permission from the publisher or the author.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the Arkansas Academy of Science by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UARK. For more information, please contact scholar@uark.edu, uarepos@uark.edu.

CONSPIRACY AND POWER POLITICS

John E. Guendling

Arkansas Polytechnic College

I should like to examine some first-magnitude concepts of political theory in their constellation about a key concept, **conspiracy**, for the sake of illuminating an ideal of **integral democracy**.

It should be recognized at the outset that the political conditions which foster tendencies to conspiracy require some distinction from those conditions in society which foster accusations of "conspiracy". To be sure, an actual tendency to conspiracy furnishes occasion for the accusation; but the absence of the tendency does not preclude the accusation.

What seems to be required for an understanding of the disparity is a study of the dynamics of political behavior which attends less to the qualitative differences of ideology between the parties involved and more to the quantitative disposition of their forces in the struggle for power. The aim of such an approach should be to draw from the equilibrations of political forces in a society what might be called generalizations upon the dialectic of power politics".

The observations here essayed are, however, rather more preliminary, their value being construed mainly in terms of their suggestion of the fecundity for political theory of concepts ingredient in the ancient tradition of dialectical philosophy.

* * *

The notions most men hold of "power" and "freedom" antecedent to political reflection bear witness to the efforts of every thing living to procure for itself a state of well-being. Such a state may be defined as a favorable balance between intrinsically self-aggrandizing factors and whatever extrinsic factors impose limitations on any thing's being.

Power, accordingly, in its pre-political aspect, is simply the positive, self-integrating or substantive display of these intrinsic factors of vitality, while **freedom** is the negative, dispersive or non-substantive conception of the lack of obstacles to their operation. As positive and negative sides of the same idea, both bespeak as common to every organic being a striving to master and reduce its immediate environment to material upon which it can set its own characteristic form and by means of which it can magnify its substance unchecked by alien impositions.

Although the biological world is one which, at first glance, exhibits universal conflict between unrestrained tendencies to self-aggrandizement, the ecologist, is able to recognize standing patterns of irresolution constitutive of so-called "balances" in nature.

Conspiracy and Power Politics

It was among the Greek natural philosophers of the Sixth Century B.C. that generalized expression was first given to the idea that the characteristic ways in which the dynamic components of nature equilibrate their relations furnish paradigms for understanding the human social order. This insight, traceable to Anaximander of Miletus, was explicated in the thesis that justice and law exist first and foremost in a cosmic state and only secondarily in human society, where they furnish natural norms for human behavior. The assumption was that there is an inherent order in nature, a self-enclosed, self-regulating system of due proportions in the give and take among things, whereas in human society, on the contrary, laws have been necessitated as conscious contrivances for securing justice by their regulation of socially conflicting claims.

The theory of "cosmic justice" of Heraclitus of Ephesus mirrors the "state of nature" with metaphorical aptness: The world is made up of "opposites" checking each other. Nothing gives check to itself. Cosmic justice is, accordingly, the principle of equilibration between all forces in being, monitoring their "strife" lest they overstep their "natural limits".

I regard to the factions competing for power in any body politic, Greek thought discerned a system of checks and balances, recognizing in their operation but a special case of a natural, cosmic law. The moral for mankind is expressed in an emphatic tendency in ancient political theory, even among those thinkers who no longer stand explicitly within the tradition of dialectical philosophy, as, e.g., Aristotle, Polybius and Cicero, to seek conscious compliance with such a law.

It is within this theoretical context that I wish to affirm, as being of contemporary relevance, certain political aperçus, starting with the following as a working definition of "justice": **Justice** is that ideal of an accepted norm defining the limits and arbitrating the occasions of conflict among competing parties within any system of power-relations in accordance with a principle which seeks to secure maximal stability in the total system through maximal responsiveness to the shifting balance of power among the competing parties.

* * *

No individual, institution or movement in society has a natural tendency to give check to itself: That is, if you will, a law of primitive, blind being.

If, notwithstanding, any entity acknowledges limits to what it may "lawfully" do, if it defers to any so-called "rights" of others or agrees to give them their "just due", or if it formally subscribes to a system of moral or legal rules of "fair play" among competing "loyal" elements, it does so from a platform of acquired realism instructing its view of the possible.

Reciprocity, i.e., mutual toleration, interposes itself as a rule where a division of power prevents unilateral rule: That is, as it were, a law of nature, enlightened being.

Where a tradition of mutual guarantees, tolerance of differences and equality before the law governs the administration of justice, responsible majority and loyal minority share alike in a public conscience binding them to common observances in the exercise of freedom. In the measure that these observances extend to all forces competing in the society, it exemplifies the definition of an **integral democracy**. Under such a system the principle of checks and balances is no longer simply a fact of life but becomes an avowed value directing the several parties to common terms of constraint in their behavior.

If, accordingly, justice be conceived as a principle specifying the terms of competition governing the political dialectic, it should be clear that it will function effectively in this capacity only so long as all parties stand truly "under" or "within" the dialectic, i.e., are unable to manipulate the terms definitive of the conditions of competition to their individual ends. Only so long may justice be said to be "impartial" in its dispensations.

If, on the contrary, one faction is able to monopolize the positions of power for any length of time, it reveals a resurgent primitive tendency to stand "above" the dialectic, i.e., to make itself master of the meaning of justice and arbiter of the mechanisms of arbitration. Old balances may then be drastically upset as the spectrum of permissible allegiances shifts or contracts and hitherto "loyal" opposition groups are "unmasked" and made to suffer the brunt of accusations of "conspiracy", "counter-revolution", "subversion", etc.

This is a tendency ever at work no matter who the parties or what the claims of the system. Lord Acton's observation on the tendency of power to corrupt and absolute power to corrupt absolutely must count as a corollary to any dialectical theory of politics.

But individuals and groups lag in their adjustments at times, failing to respond to new situations preemptorily in accord with the dictates of **real** — or **machtspolitik**, precisely because they do have consciences, private and public, which cannot overnight be remade. Accordingly, abuses of power develop slowly or quickly depending on a number of factors, including the nature or severity of the political imbalance, the length and strength of the imperiled constitutional tradition (as the formal expression of the common consensus of justice), as well as on characteristics peculiar to the contending factions themselves.

But peculiar ideological characteristics, whether of the attacking or defending parties, I consider of least significance as genuine casual agents in the curtailment of political freedom, even though action against a disfavored group generally follows upon accusations designed to establish a stereotype of disloyalty in terms of specific beliefs or

Conspiracy and Power Politics

practices — omitting from the bill of charges its real sin, namely, its relative inability to fight back in the terms of pure power politics.

It may, indeed, be true for reasons at least partly doctrinal, that a Catholic majority in this country would infringe upon the liberties of other groups more readily than a similar Quaker majority. To this extent, the peculiar "aggressiveness" of Catholics and "peaceableness" of Quakers would be germane to understanding certain details of the usurpatory process. But the burden of my thesis diminishes the significance of such group differences before the fact that both groups, if long able to escape the normal checks on power, would tend with comparable avidity to meet harsh "justice" to their erstwhile loyal opposition.

* * *

The ideal of integral democracy can be approximately realized only where a hardy distrust prevails with respect to anyone's ability long to resist the abusive seductions of power, a distrust much in evidence among the founding fathers of the American constitutional system. Its success is contingent on a continuing schooling in the basic moral principle, the golden rule, of doing to others as you would have them do to you. This principle is in radical opposition to the power-political sophism of doing to others as they "actually" do to you. For the latter readily results in a standard patterned upon a conceit as to the disparity between our own and our neighbor's behavior; it conveniently feeds our fancy of injury and threat, magnifying their intolerability in nice proportion to the accumulation of power whereby we can "appropriately" requite them.

The notion of "integral democracy" implies that whenever there is a group in the policy which does not honor the common commitment to justice the system is to that extent endangered in its integrity. Two approaches suggest themselves by way of remedy: (1) Invocation of sanctions against the offending group, including, in the extreme case, proscription of its existence, and (2) employment of positive, system-identifying stimuli to encourage it to acceptance of the common commitment.

Before discussing remedies, however, it is necessary to weigh the considerations which lend or deprive of credence the charge that a group is breaking faith by resort to "conspiracy", "rebellion" or other usurpations. To do so, one must examine the charge for its dialectical significance, i.e., for what it means in terms of its tendency at the time of imputation to affect the balance obtaining in a system of power-relations.

Conspiracy implies dissimulation in the organization of an attempt to command the legal order by illegal means and is obviously a breach of the moral foundation of integral democracy. But it is not usually the weak who so conspire, though due allowance need be made for a quota of fools who cannot realistically assess the balance of power.

Rather, as a general rule, the weaker a group the greater its recognition of the wisdom of a strict observance on its part of the canons of reciprocity. To be weak and at the same time obnoxiously radical is to be doubly exposed, a tempting prey to those behind whose conspicuous asseverations of patriotic devotion there lurks the primeval instinct for leaping at the jugular.

In the uncommon event that petty misguided groups conspire, a society does well to exercise forbearance in letting the conspiracy mature to a consciousness of its own futility, a state of mind affording some possibility of self-redemption. Only where conspiracy plainly issues in overt action damaging to law-abiding interests does the urgency arise for punishment by the constituted authorities.

But honesty should compel the conclusion that, more often, the dialectical significance of a charge that some numerically weak and odious group is conspiring lies in what it evidences about the accusers themselves—bearing as it does the tell-tale mark of psychological projection—unwittingly witnessing to their own conspiring to rig the system against a vulnerable adversary.

It is by regarding the strong that we discover the usual conditions for conspiracy, as furnished by two contrasting possibilities: (1) Where an out-group conspires against the government because the relations of actual power are not accurately reflected in the legal distribution of power and the system does not provide or use is not easily made of a commensurating mechanism of redress, and (2) where the government, i.e., the legal ruling-power, conspires against an out-group because the former's actual power so exceeds its legal mandate as to make feasible proceedings against that out-group through suspension or revocation of its protections under the law.

A **usurpation**, i.e., the consequence of a successful conspiracy, takes the form either of **revolution** or **despotism**, accordingly as the conditions under (1) or (2) prevail.

* * *

"Revolution" implies drastic change, characteristically, but not necessarily, attended by violence. What is dialectically significant about a revolution is that its proponents justify it by reference to the excesses of the government whose overthrow is sought, while proponents of despotism justify their repressions in turn by reference to the subversive nature of the excesses implicit in the undertakings of the opposition, excesses which render the latter "a clear and present danger" to the security of the state, i.e., an intolerable threat to the established balance of power.

It is not necessary for threats to be real in order to play on them. For despotism constitutes an ingathering of power by methods which naturally tend to evoke one set of threats in order to invoke another. It is, indeed, from despotism's own excesses that its bugaboos derive more than phantom power so as to congeal against its wishes a new,

Conspiracy and Power Politics

albeit now unconstitutional opposition which will endeavor to take its dialectical measure.

Any group conspires out of a certain sense of alienation from the existing order and its processes of justice. The weaker the group the greater the possibility that positive inducements and adjustments can be made to give it a sense of identification with the constitutional governances of the system. The negative route, involving sanctions or proscription, is dangerous to employ against even the weakest group and constitutionally fatal, if not in fact futile, when employed against a major faction in the society.

The problem of abridging any group's legal right to operate is always complicated by the fact that the group which spearheads the effort to censure or suppress is not in the nature of the case a disinterested party in the cause of justice. As a consequence, the unsettling effect of the attendant displacements in power, he fears stimulated in those groups having questionable "affinities" to the banned group but, above all, the witch-hunting spirit of inquiry engendered by resort to proscription as a device in waging politics create a condition of crisis in the existing order which may well only be overcome by a despotic sacralization of institutional forms at the price of a departure of the living spirit therefrom. That there is a pained awareness of these tendencies in some quarters of America today is due, in part at least, to the scarcely allayed ghost of McCarthyism.

What is important, in summary, is that justice, as the defining characteristic of any legal order, pendulates between two natural limits or usurpatory extremes, revolution and despotism. It is at its optimum for the greatest number of people when it returns, after minimal deviations, to a certain mean.

Integral democracy, accordingly, represents a conscious attempt to foster this condition of equilibrium by supporting the existence of various system-stabilizing institutions at cross-power with one another and serving to dampen dialectical excess. As such, it is the political counterpart of an ethical conception, the golden rule, for the utility of the latter is construed as residing precisely in its social tendency as the prime agent for enforcement of a "golden mean".