

# Modernity and Politics

Warren L. Mason

Is there something about modern society itself that makes governments inadequate to the tasks they face in the contemporary industrial world? In recent years critics such as Daniel Bell and John Kenneth Galbraith have analyzed postindustrial society in an attempt to illuminate its basic character. Other prominent analysts have spoken about the ungovernability of modern societies and the dilemmas encountered by governments as the demands they face outstrip resources. The daily press obligingly confirms the existence of almost chronic crisis and of persistent political failure in the various capitals of the developed world.

What emerges from all this is the vision of a society that we recognize but do not really comprehend: a busy, complex society that projects new conquests for itself as it discovers ever new latent capabilities; at the same time, a society out of control and deeply dangerous to the individuals who are both its beneficiaries and its victims. Our attempts to interpret its inner workings often reflect the experience of reading a fascinating book that we have opened in the middle. The characters behave quite plausibly but the antecedent events and causes that would make such behavior meaningful are missing.

I think it useful to look at the task of government in modern techno-industrial societies from a new perspective, to strip down the complexities of such societies and to identify (1) the basic elements out of which all societies are built and (2) the processes through which the highly elaborate structures of modern society are developed.

**E**nergy, Technology, and Modernity. Energy and the processes by which it is formed may be thought of as the basic components—the “atomic particles”—of society. If energy is defined as the

ability to do work, then all human accomplishments must depend upon the amount and kind of energy that can be generated and brought to bear. Individual units of energy, both human and nonhuman, are, from this point of view, the building blocks of social organization. This says nothing about *why* organizations are created, only that their structure consists of routines for combining and focusing multiple units of energy. Ultimately societies rest on their ability to harness energy in stable patterns that do the jobs that make each human community possible.

Technology is the application of rational and efficient principles to energy in ways that permit a society to make increasing use of its latent capacities. Industrial and postindustrial societies are societies in which this process has gone very far, extending beyond the economic sphere to every sector of social life. Education, recreation, and civic life respond to technology, absorbing its lessons for the organization of energy and the release of new capacities, and falling into more tightly organized patterns as a consequence. At bottom, the meaning of both economic development and social modernization is a steady increase in the degree to which society is organized according to technical principles so that energy of various kinds can be brought together and harnessed for the pursuit of society's goals.

Political analysts like Karl W. Deutsch and Samuel P. Huntington have identified the same process at work in the nearly universal drive for “development.” They have spoken about *mobilization*, or the process through which the minds and behavior of individuals are drafted to the service of various social goals. It is a useful way to think about the building of modern societies, but it is too broad a generalization to avoid some confusion. What is it exactly that is to be mobilized? How completely must the individual be linked to the collective enterprise?

The political implications of general concepts like mobilization become clearer when one first focuses on the elementary energy structure of society. From this perspective it is apparent that it is the energy the individual can command, not his person, that is important to

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WARREN L. MASON is Associate Professor of Political Science at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. Former director of the university's European Center in Luxembourg, he has written several articles probing the political implications of modernity and is currently completing a book on *Britain Under Stress*.

organized society. Similarly, it is the job to be done that governs the kind and amount of energy appropriate to mobilize. The problem of politics, as Samuel Huntington suggests, is to insure that such energy is organized into stable patterns, "institutionalized," and effectively harnessed to the goals of society.

How does all this illuminate the problems of governments in highly modern societies? The political process develops the goals society will pursue, gives expression to those goals, and marshalls appropriate means so that they may be pursued. As societies require higher and higher levels of energy, this political task becomes both more complex and more difficult. The sheer size of this task imposes a strain upon governments in advanced industrial societies that has no historical parallel.

The political consequences of moving from lower to higher degrees of energy dependence—that is, the consequences of development—are observable in even the most simple cases. Such a change is involved, for example, when a traditional society decides to embark upon a great building project like the pyramids of Egypt or the Great Wall of China or the road system of ancient Rome. In order to accomplish such tasks large numbers of laborers must be drafted to the enterprise. As they are physically relocated and psychologically reoriented, their links with the traditional society from which they were drawn become progressively weaker. At the same time, a new infrastructure arises to provide bread, housing, and essential services for those working on the project. Classes of specialists arise—architects, skilled artisans, foremen, administrators, purveyors of building materials, and the like—each of which comes to depend upon the project for its status and livelihood within the system. Achieving a major social goal has become the occasion for drawing together energy units into energy structures that are both complex and interdependent.

If the project begins to falter—say, if resources are overtaxed or faith in the legitimacy of the enterprise declines—the consequences for government will be sobering. If, for example, laborers have been transformed into a slave class or a proletariat in the course of several generations, it will be impossible for them to "return" to the traditional society. Their energy, once assembled in a new structure, becomes simply random when the structure is abandoned. For specialized cadres of élite workers the threat of a loss of status or impoverishment is even more extreme and potentially more dangerous for the regime. The various types of energy mobilized for the purpose of the project will seek some outlet. Slave uprisings, economic depression, entrepreneurial innovations, banditry and vice, military insurrection and palace revolts are possible and even likely. Certainly the legitimacy of the regime responsible for the project will be called into question.

Any regime is under great pressure to maintain the level and even the kinds of energy structures already developed in the society. Even where the redeployment and redirection of these energy structures must be risked, the overall level of mobilized energy must be maintained. Societies thus acquire a set of energy commitments that become minimum performance requirements.

The political implication of all this is that maintaining the system of energy generation and marshalling new energy resources for collective projects becomes a major—perhaps *the* major—political imperative. Every society depends on the energy structures at its core, but managing the energy system does not pose the same political challenge in all societies. Whether there is a qualitative difference between the corner grocery store and General Motors depends on one's perspective, but an understanding of most of the problems that interest most social scientists requires that the two types of economic enterprise be treated as distinct from one another. Similarly, the politics of high-energy society *are* significantly distinct from those of other social types. A society that both requires and expends high levels of energy has a total configuration that is different from more traditional societies, even if many of the elements are the same. What occurs is an incremental process of growth that gradually produces a new social reality.

**I**ndividuals in a Bureaucratic Society. The pursuit of social goals requires converting individual energy into social effort through ever more complex structures of energy. This process confronts the individual with the deeply personal problem of maintaining coherence and integrity within his own life. In the network of organizations through which he or she acts, personal relationships become increasingly partial and temporary; the individual life is brought under steady pressure by constant changes within the social environment.

To maintain consistent behavior and a sense of personal coherence, integration within a larger bureaucratic structure becomes essential for the individual. No matter how many smaller units one works in, one's life and career have continuity and meaning when they are seen within the context of the embracing organizational structure. It is a process of abstraction that creates an interdependence between the individual and the organization. Individuals *need* an intellectual and emotional anchorage in the social structure in order to make sense of their experience and maintain the stability of their contribution to the overall energy system of society. At the same time, the organization *needs* the commitment of individuals because it could not exist and perform its function without their support.

The *pace* at which change occurs in high-energy societies increases the need for personal integration. Rapid change creates a need for "coherent time" just as the quantity and scope of change produce a need for "coherent space." Even if the various aspects of one's experience seem to be in harmony at any given moment, change raises the question of continuity—the consistency of experience over time. The individual strives to preserve a sense of integrity about his personal experience and society seeks to maintain the configuration of its goals and the means assembled to achieve them. This is the sense in which Alvin Toffler argues that modern man "lives faster" than his traditional counterparts. In this faster life, relationships are more transient and the danger of breakdown in the coordination of social behav-

ior is constant. Tension management and the maintenance of conformity with society's norms become increasingly important political functions. Social welfare and mass propaganda are only two important aspects of governmental activity directed at this problem. High-energy society, after all, can tolerate malintegration only from individuals and groups that matter very little in the system of energy mobilization. A variant of this idea is that if individuals cannot be integrated for whatever reason, they must be *made* irrelevant by segregation or by severing important links with the larger society. Criminals, political prisoners, the insane, unemployables, and the aged increasingly share a similar fate in this respect.

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**“Modern politics is group politics . . .”**

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Clearly the individual needs abstract social organizations—corporate structures and large-scale bureaucracies—to make sense out of his life. Yet abstract relationships are likely to prove unsatisfactory for the individual in the long run. As Cynthia Enloe has argued convincingly in *Ethnic Conflict and Political Development* (1973), man seeks something more enduring than abstract statuses as the basis for his relationships with others. He will tend to resist forming attachments that are abstract and partial in character or, more likely, tend to transform formal relationships into contacts that are more emotionally toned and “traditional.” In both cases the efficiency of energy mobilization will be diminished. Either the individual will resist bureaucratization or informal relationships will complicate organizational performance. From the point of view of the political process, *any* sentiments that bind individuals to organizations are a mixed blessing, since they complicate the task of political management by becoming barriers to the flexible realignment of organizational structures as new needs arise.

The process of abstraction that permits individuals to fit themselves into complex organizations also appears to have a logical upper limit. As one recent scholar of complex organizations put it:

One of the consequences of increasing complexity is an increase in the number of people and/or types of interaction they experience within the organization. At some point, individual channel capacities are saturated, and no additional relationships are likely to take place....There are simply too many other people to take into account. Overload occurs and to relieve this situation delegation begins [Todd R. LaPorte, “Com-

plexity: Explication of a Concept,” in Todd R. LaPorte, ed., *Organized Social Complexity* (1975)].

One might add that once the human capacity for adapting to complex bureaucracies has been largely tapped, the ability of the political process to harness further human energies in this way is blunted. The problem of mobilizing support from individuals is, therefore, likely to move more and more toward the center of political attention in high-energy societies.

**Demand Overload.** As the complexity of social structures is compounded, functional groups of all kinds become linked into a kind of “establishment” structure in which the system's need for cohesion takes precedence over the demands of specialized interests. The trend is reflected in the emergence of so-called “catchall parties” and in the fusion of previously antagonistic parties into formal or informal coalitions. The most advanced examples of this establishment mentality are found among the bureaucracies of highly industrial states. In reviewing several recent works on the politics of planning in Europe, Jack Hayward described the tendency in Britain:

Just as harmonious relations with the major interest groups usually take priority over all other considerations in Britain, so too, in intra-administrative relations, the primacy accorded to the avoidance of conflict has meant that policy effectiveness has been sacrificed to sustaining a sense of community [“The Politics of Planning in France and Britain,” *Comparative Politics* (January, 1975)].

It is this style of government that has become the rule in the most structurally complex industrial democracies.

The model of the “European polity” developed in an important essay by Martin Heisler (*Politics in Europe*, 1974) elegantly describes the pattern of group activity that is at the center of politics in high-energy societies. As complexity increases, every important sector of life is structured according to the organizational form most appropriate to its efficient performance. Where no groups exist, politics creates them; where they are imperfectly articulated, politics draws them together. Territories of functional sovereignty are staked out and ruled through agreement among bureaucratic élites. Diverse interests are systematically coopted, Heisler argues, in what amounts to a new and distinct governing style.

A basic reason for the emergence of this essentially corporatist style of political management is that human beings tend to resist integration within structures that become too large to accommodate the expression of at least some parochial values and that become too complex for man's capacity to absorb information and to handle multiple relationships. The result is that more or less stable subsystems tend to emerge within complex societies. The pressures toward ever greater organizational complexity are always present, however, so there is a need to draw together these subsystems of society, even if this is only possible at the élite level.

Indeed, the role of government in such societies has increasingly become that of arbiter and facilitator in the bargaining process among established functional sectors. It has been able to play this role because, in modern society, the techniques, values, and élites of government are essentially the same as those of other corporate structures within the society. Government has stood out from other groups in the political process only in its responsibility for formulating overall policy, but as political decisionmaking becomes more and more a process of negotiations among "peak organizations," even this distinction blurs. The system of cooptation described by Heisler becomes the process by which necessary coordination is maintained among semi-independent structures.

Modern politics is group politics, and the voice of the individual must be channeled through organized structures of some kind. The problem is that when the political system responds to hundreds of specialized demands (each claiming to represent some important portion of "the people"), it is not necessarily responding to the needs of the mass of individuals at the base of modern society's bureaucratic pyramid. In fact, it is quite *unlikely* that specialized organizations can express the priorities of individuals, simply because such organizations are structured to perform one task efficiently, while individuals must balance the whole array of life's values. The likely result is that frantic governmental activity will be met by widespread frustration and disillusionment. Hence, an increasing portion of the energy that society generates must be expended in response to the requirements of the bureaucratic entities that modernity fosters, and less is available for the more parochial and nonfunctional needs of individuals and communities of individuals. Dissatisfaction produces yet more demands, and the danger of overload is ever present.

What is crucial if the political process of such societies is to work at all is that demands be counterbalanced by equivalent energy resources, i.e., supports. The satisfaction of a growing level of demands depends upon the ability of the political process to harness new support, and the building of support becomes, as a consequence, an overarching concern of high-energy governments. This does not eliminate the danger of overload, but without the maintenance and creation of new capabilities the demands within a highly organized society would quickly push government into the danger zone.

The emphasis of modern industrial governments upon compromise and consensus-building in the policymaking process reflects the degree to which political leaders perceive that they must *first* build coalitions of stable support if they are to cope with heavy demands. The same political parties, interest groups, and bureaucratic agencies that channel and control demand must also mobilize support for the system. The goals adopted by the political system for the society as a whole, therefore, tend to become a blend of goals from organizations with quite diverse purposes and functions upon which the continued flow of energy within the system depends. A defensive and quite natural response of political leaders in this situation is to submerge ideologies that might

cause division within the integrated social system. Increasingly such ideologies are replaced by a political program that depicts society as progressing toward the constant improvement of the human condition and which prescribes, as an efficient means to that end, an openness to technical improvements and the solution of technical problems. More commonly, as Samuel Beer has noted, it simply takes the form of a commitment to the endless satisfaction of appetites.

**T**he Retreat of Political Leadership. It is common in industrial societies to speak about the crisis of leadership. The symbolic leader, with a particular vision of his society, is becoming an historical memory. As many writers have observed, in the complex social environment of the technological society leadership in politics has increasingly passed from party politicians to governmental bureaucrats. At the root of this trend is the nature of modern society as a high-energy system, for the simple fact is that the bureaucrat has a technical advantage over the politician: He knows the technical system and has an insight into its complex structure. Most visionary programs of political movements are likely, in the long run, to crumble before the conservative force of bureaucratic expertise. There is nothing calculated or malevolent about it. It is just that one type of actor is better suited than the other to the routine decisionmaking requirements of highly complex societies. The shift in the internal balance of power is simply the reflection of this technical requirement.

Policy conservatism, it seems fair to say, is the dominant style of decisionmakers in modern societies, because their decisions must take account of the existing energy systems—and, as we have seen, these are extremely elaborate in highly technological societies. The caution of political leaders is simply a reflection of the inherent conservatism of any system of interdependent bureaucratic structures. Concerns about precedent, ripple effects, and hidden costs are the components of administrative prudence. What we might call the "mystique of remote effects" reflects sociological reality as seen from the bureaucratic perspective. It is a perspective based upon a real appreciation for the complex and subtle linkages upon which modern societies rest. It is only one of the curious contradictions of the technological era, however, that this neoconservative mystique is strongest among those whose job it is to apply technique to move the society toward new achievements. The real checks and balances of high-energy politics may lie in the contradictory impulses built into the role of bureaucratic decisionmakers.

The darker side of this heavy load of system-maintaining pressures is exposed by Leon Lindberg (*Politics and the Future of Industrial Society*, 1976), who sees the political process largely in terms of its ability to handle efficiently the demands made upon it. For Lindberg, existing commitments always confront élites with the temptation toward overly conservative responses that could prove fatal. The concern with preserving existing arrangements may discourage an adequate response to new demands until policy errors become so obvious that the dominant élites are put in risk of their jobs. If they

are lucky, they will successfully mount a "search for new status quo maintaining strategies or form new policy and coalition options." If they are not, Lindberg predicts, new élites will arise to replace them. What he does not stress is that the process of élites replacement may be a revolutionary upheaval that shakes the society to its foundations and puts in question its very survival.

The dilemma with which decisionmaking élites in modern societies must live is that, in the presence of massive capabilities, the policy alternatives available to them in any given instance are likely to be quite limited. This is the most ironic twist to the politics of high-energy societies. The pressures to maintain society's adaptive efficiency are profound, but so are the pressures to avoid the unpredictable consequences of altering society's established pattern of energy mobilization. If the essence of politics is to set goals and to launch policy designed to achieve them, then the distinguishing characteristic of high-energy politics is the tendency for technical requirements to prescribe both goals and means, leaving only marginal latitude for policy choice. The system, once created, must be maintained in order to retain its capabilities and to keep the horrors of social disintegration at bay.

The specter of a breakdown in the political process and the ensuing social instability is more terrifying in high-energy societies than in traditional ones because, in some respects, the pressure toward breakdown is inherent in modern social processes. The constant need is for mobilization of resources to meet demands upon the polity; the persistent danger is that mobilization will create more demand than it generates energy to satisfy it. In an overly simple economic analogy, political success consists of generating a surplus of energy resources of the right kind while keeping demands for its expenditure within the bounds of those resources. The problem is that the human organizations producing that energy become somewhat unpredictable producers of political demands as well. It is the tale of Dr. Frankenstein retold on a grander scale.

The relative fragility of high-energy society has another, more psychological dimension. The constant pressures toward rationalization in such societies tend to break down the communal attachments that sustain and reinforce the personality of the individual. No matter how one wishes to define personality, it is clear that the individual in high-energy society is confronted with the need to maintain an integrated and coherent sense of himself in the face of increasing pressures toward fragmentation and with fewer personal primary associations to support his effort. What this means from the perspective of society is that individuals may respond to social changes in unpredictable ways if the level of tension they are experiencing in this regard is *already* high. The existing state of tension alters the meaning of social experiences; threat is more severe from the perspective of such individuals; it is difficult to know exactly when a given action will come to have the character of "the last straw" for segments of the population. The tension of an eroding sense of personal integration translates itself into increased load upon the political system as it is forced to cope with "irrational" demands.

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The quasi-bureaucratic, corporatist leadership style we have already discussed is one observable consequence of the importance and persistence of system-maintenance problems in high-energy societies. The elaborate process of consultation and consensus-building among major sectors of society is both a form of coordination and contingency planning against an unforeseen future. No immediate issue is likely to be worth the cost the system would have to pay if a major group were alienated and its integration within the system disrupted. It is a delicate balancing act, which governments must largely superintend, and the kind of individual who rises in such a system is more likely to be a mediator with an overall view of the system than a partisan with a burning commitment to a particular program of action. We have already noted the observable tendency for élites in all sectors, including the political leadership, to resemble one another in their backgrounds, assumptions, and operating style. Moreover, as similarities among élites grow, it becomes easier for informal élite relationships to reinforce the formal need for cohesion in the face of manifold pressures. What results is an essentially establishment style, with the political élite acting, more often than not, as first among equals.

Without exaggerating the tendency for élites to converge in terms of their operating style, it is plausible to argue that the pressures of high-energy society tend to mold élite behavior in this way. This style of élite politics is possible, however, only as long as élites are able to maintain their authority with the communities of interest upon whom they depend for support. The tension between system-level priorities and local values poses the danger of eroded authority and reduced effectiveness as élites find it increasingly difficult to play a double game.

**W**here Are We Going? I have taken a view of modern industrial society quite different from most, but one that begins to answer some very perplexing questions about the politics of modernity. I have described modern society as a system of energy flowing in greater volume and more rapidly as new units of energy—the atomic particles of the social system—are channeled into the organizational network

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through which society works toward its goals. It is not individuals and machines that are essential to this system but the energy they can produce. In turn, it is not raw energy potential that is important but the ability of the system to convert that potential into socially useful effort. Nor is modern society different in this respect from the most simple tribal community. What distinguishes modern societies is the effects of the cumulative build-up of the basic energy system into a high-energy complex.

I have tried to stress that it is first necessary to be clear about the root imperatives of politics. From my point of view the bottom line in politics is to mobilize, maintain, and effectively deploy the energy resources needed to meet society's commitments. It is not simply a matter of deciding how resources should be distributed, as Harold D. Lasswell asserted in his classic work *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*. When we see society as an energy system, the process of mobilizing and managing energy resources becomes at least as important an aspect of politics as deciding how those resources should be expended. Indeed, as the logic of high-energy society takes hold, the problems of attaining and holding society's energy level may become the first concern of politics. There may be continuity from the most simple to the most complex societies, but there is also a continuous change in the load and pattern of political management problems as the complexity of the system develops.

The object of looking at modern society in this way has been to analyze the important political changes that the emerging characteristics of high-energy society have encouraged. Here we focused attention upon the shifting political role of individuals, groups, and political leaders. The main points are easily summarized.

*Individuals:* As the energies of individuals are drawn more completely into the system, governments must devote increasing attention (and additional resources) to overcoming the problems of individual resistance to bureaucratization. When levels of mobilization are already high, marginal increases come only with difficulty and at greater cost. The modern political leader faces problems in this field that are qualitatively different from those of his counterparts in ancient Egypt confronted with the task of organizing surplus agricul-

tural labor into an unskilled work force of pyramid builders.

*Groups:* The organizational complexity that creates the high level of energy in modern society produces its own political pressures. Groups become the mediators of individual interests in politics and fragment the contribution of discrete individuals into myriad specialized demands and pressures. Often the demands arise from the bureaucratic needs of the organization itself and represent net additions to the total demand load upon political decisionmakers. Hence the organizational instruments of modernity introduce distortions in the link between citizens and government at the same time they generate additional demands that claim an ever larger portion of energy resources. The problems of increasing overhead are added to the problems of understanding and meeting citizens needs.

*Leaders:* The style of political leadership is something that must also change in high-energy society. Just as the modern general staff officer must be different from the traditional warrior chief, the traditional type and style of political leadership are disappearing in the modern world. High levels of energy output require increasing degrees of interdependence among society's various sectors, and increasing interdependence means that political leaders must try to form coalitions that are more and more inclusive. The politics of winners and losers is not possible in a society in which losers are critical to the continued operation of the system. The politics of consensus and coalition has brought forward a new type of political leader, more bureaucratic and less ideological, more technical and less inspiring than his predecessors.

Perhaps it is inevitable that massive contradictions should accompany the enormous power that high-energy societies generate. It is these contradictions that lie behind the most intractable political problems in the modern world. If political leaders are replaced by technical managers, for example, who will inspire individual citizens to harmonize their diverse values around some particular vision of the society? Unless individuals are inspired, how can the marginal increases of energy commitment that high-energy society requires of them be obtained? Who will provide the leadership for extra effort on the part of individuals that a leader like Mao Tse-tung attempted to give to China? Yet without vision and commitment the complex organizations of modern society will have problems of coherence, and energy flows will be restricted. At the same time, the demands produced by organizational needs—bureaucratic overhead—and by a fragmented and psychologically foot-loose citizenry—parochial client demands—require a continuously high level of performance. It remains very much an open question whether problems of overload and eventual breakdown place a kind of upper limit on the development of modernity or whether new political formulas can be devised to cope with these inherent stresses. What does seem likely is that, if we understand the high-energy environment within which modern politics must operate, we shall be able to answer the questions in ways that are linked to the core realities of the modern condition.

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