

THE ORGANIZATION AS POLITICAL ARENA

HENRY MINTZBERG

Faculty of Management, McGill University

ABSTRACT

POLITICS and conflict sometimes capture an organization in whole or significant part, giving rise to a form we call the Political Arena. After discussing briefly the system of politics in organizations, particularly as a set of 'political games', we derive through a series of propositions four basic types of Political Arenas: the complete Political Arena (characterized by conflict that is intensive and pervasive), the confrontation (conflict that is intensive but contained), the shaky alliance (conflict that is moderate and contained), and the politicized organization (conflict that is moderate but pervasive). The interrelationships among these four, as well as the context of each, are then described in terms of a process model of life cycles of Political Arenas. A final section of the paper considers the functional roles of politics in organizations.

INTRODUCTION

How does an organization get captured by conflict, why, and with what consequences? Years ago, the literature of organization theory – particularly its management wing, although less so that of sociology – avoided such questions. But, in the last decade or so, conflict and politics have become not just acceptable topics but fashionable ones in organization theory. Yet these topics, like most others in the field, have generally been discussed in fragments. This paper seeks to discuss them somewhat more comprehensively, in the context of what we shall call the Political Arena – the organization captured in whole, or in significant part, by politics and conflict.

After discussing briefly what we mean by politics in organizations, a series of propositions is introduced about the rise of conflict in the conflict-ridden organization. This leads to a description of four basic forms of the Political Arena – a complete form and three partial forms we shall call confrontation, the shaky alliance, and the politicized organization. A model of the life cycles of Political Arenas is then developed, which enables us to elaborate on each

of these four forms and to place them in context. A final section of the paper considers those conditions under which politics and the Political Arena can serve useful functions in organizations.

A PERSPECTIVE ON POLITICS IN ORGANIZATIONS

What is meant by 'politics' in organizations? Politics may be considered to constitute one among a number of systems of influence in the organization. Among the others, the systems of authority, ideology, and expertise may be described as legitimate in some sense. The system of authority defines power that is formal – allocated on an explicit and legally sanctioned basis. The system of ideology, although implicit, typically represents norms and beliefs that are widely accepted in the organization. And the system of expertise represents power that is usually certified on an official basis and typically sanctioned by formal authority. The system of politics, in contrast, may be described as reflecting power that is technically illegitimate (or, perhaps more accurately, 'alegitimate') in its means (and sometimes in its ends as well). In other words, behaviour termed political is neither formally authorized, widely accepted, nor officially certified. As a result, political behaviour is typically divisive and conflictive, often pitting individuals or groups against formal authority, accepted ideology, and/or certified expertise, or else against each other. Politics can, of course, arise when these other systems of influence are absent or at least weak. But it can also be evoked by them, as when departmentalization, created through formal authority, encourages group processes that benefit parochial interests at the expense of the needs of the organization at large.

Political activity in organizations is sometimes described in terms of 'games'. Allison (1971 p. 162, p.170), for example, describes political games as 'intricate and subtle, simultaneous, over-lapping', but nevertheless guided by rules: 'Some rules are explicit, others implicit. Some rules are quite clear, others fuzzy. Some are very stable; others are ever changing. But the collection of rules, in effect, defines the game'. To Crozier and Friedberg (1977, p. 97) 'the game. . . is much more than an image. It is a concrete mechanism thanks to which men structure their power relations and regulate them. . . It is an instrument essential to organized action'[1].

A number of such political games are described in the literature, although no comprehensive description of the organization as a system of various political games could be found. We have identified thirteen in particular, listed in table 1 together with their main players, the main reasons they seem to be played (to resist authority *per se*, counter such resistance, build a power base, defeat a rival, or change the organization), and how they relate to other systems of influence. Each is described briefly below before returning to the issue of the relationship of the political games with the other systems of influences.

Table 1 Some characteristics of the political games played in organizations

GAME	MAIN PLAYERS	REASONS PLAYED	RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER SYSTEMS OF INFLUENCE
Insurgency	Unskilled operators (in large groups), lower level managers and sometimes professionals (singly or in small groups)	To resist authority (or other legitimate power)	Antagonistic to legitimate systems
Counter insurgency	Senior managers	To counter resistance to authority	Coexistent with legitimate systems
Sponsorship	Any subordinate or junior, usually managers, personal staff, or younger professionals	To build power base (with superiors or seniors)	Coexistent with authority or expertise
Alliance building	Line managers	To build power base (with peers)	Substitutable for legitimate systems, or else coexistent with authority or expertise
Empire building	Line managers	To build power base (with subordinates)	Coexistent with authority or expertise; sometimes substitutable for legitimate systems
Budgeting	Line managers	To build power base (with resources)	Coexistent with authority or expertise
Expertise	Operators and staff specialists	To build power base (with real or feigned knowledge and skills)	Coexistent with expertise, or substitutable for it
Lording	Unskilled operators and their managers (sometimes professionals)	To build power base (usually with authority, especially bureaucratic rules)	Coexistent with authority (or expertise or ideology)

GAME	MAIN PLAYERS	REASONS PLAYED	RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER SYSTEMS OF INFLUENCE
Line vs. Staff	Line managers and staff analysts (sometimes support staff)	To defeat rivals	Coexistent with authority for line, antagonistic to it for staff
Rival Camps	Any alliances or empires, usually in middle line	To defeat rivals	Substitutable for legitimate systems
Strategic Candidates	Line managers, professional staffers and operators, chief executive	To effect organizational change	Coexistent with legitimate systems, sometimes substitutable for them
Whistle Blowing	Usually lower level operators or analysts	To effect organizational change	Antagonistic to legitimate systems
Young Turks	Usually higher level line managers and/or staffers, sometimes professional operators	To effect organizational change	Antagonistic to legitimate systems

Insurgency game: usually played to resist authority, although can be played to resist expertise or established ideology, or even to effect change in organization; ranges 'from protest to rebellion' (Zald and Berger, 1978, p. 841), and usually played by 'lower participants' (Mechanic, 1962), those who feel greatest weight of formal authority; Scheff (1961) describes an insurgency game played by attendants of a mental hospital, Sterba (1978) of one played across thirteen centuries by clerks in Imperial China against higher status civil servants; Thoenig and Friedberg (1976) describe an insurgency game played by French government engineers against a minister who tried to reorganize their department.

Counter-insurgency game: played by those with legitimate power who fight back with political means (e.g. Neustadt, 1964), perhaps along with legitimate means as well (e.g. excommunication in the church).

Sponsorship game: played to build power base, in this case by using superiors; individual attaches self to someone with more status, professing loyalty in return for power (Kanter, 1977, pp. 181-4; Martin and Simms, 1959, p. 517).

Alliance building game: played among peers – often line managers, sometimes experts – who negotiate implicit contracts of support for each other in order to advance selves in the organization (Israeli, 1975, p. 60; Kanter, 1977, pp. 184-5).

Empire building game: played by line managers, in particular, to build power bases, not cooperatively with peers but individually with subordinates; Strauss (1964) describes attempts by purchasing agents to gain control of certain engineers, while Pettigrew (1973) describes how a manager of systems analysis captured the programmers.

Budgeting game: played overtly and with rather clearly defined rules (Wildavsky, 1968, 1974); similar to last game, but less divisive, since prize is resources, not positions or units *per se*, at least not those of rivals.

Expertise game: non-sanctioned use of expertise to build power base, either by flaunting it or by feigning it; true experts play by exploiting technical skills and knowledge, emphasizing its uniqueness, criticality, and irreplaceability (Hickson *et al.*, 1971; Hinings *et al.*, 1974), also by seeking to keep it from being rationalized, notably by keeping knowledge to selves (Crozier, 1964, p. 153; Pettigrew, 1973); non-experts play by attempting to have their work viewed as expert, ideally to have it declared professional so they alone can control it (Strauss, 1964).

Lording game: played to build power base by 'lording' legitimate power over those without it or with less of it (i.e. using legitimate power in illegitimate ways); manager can lord formal authority over subordinate or civil servant

over a citizen; member of 'missionary' type organization can lord its ideology over outsiders; expert can lord technical skills over the unskilled; Kanter (1977, p. 189) argues that lording tends to be game of the relatively powerless, a conclusion supported by Strauss (1962-63) in a study of purchasing agents.

Line vs. staff game: a game of sibling-type rivalry, played not just to enhance personal power but to defeat a rival; pits managerial decision-makers in line with formal authority against technical advisers in the staff with specialized expertise (Dalton, 1959); each side tends to exploit legitimate power in illegitimate ways.

Rival camps game: typically occurs when alliance or empire building games result in two major power blocks, giving rise to two-person, zero sum game in place of n-person one; can be most divisive game of all; conflict can be between units (e.g. between marketing and production in manufacturing firm), between rival personalities (e.g. Zalcznik and Kets de Vries, 1975, p. 129), between two competing missions (as in prisons split between custody and rehabilitation; see Cressey, 1958).

Strategic candidates game: is played to effect change in an organization; individuals or groups seek to promote their own strategic candidates through political means; often combines elements of other games – empire building (as purpose of game), alliance building (to win game), rival camps, line vs. staff, expertise, and lording (evoked during game), insurgency (following game), and so on; many play – analysts, operating personnel, lower-level managers, even senior managers and chief executives who must promote own candidates politically before they do so formally, especially in professional organizations (Mintzberg, 1979, p. 365); Zald (1965) describes game where the candidate was the individual for the position of chief executive, promoted to the board of directors by the outgoing chief executive; Pettigrew (1973, also 1972) describes the game played over the choice of a new computer system (which also involved rival camps); see also Stymne (1975) for conceptual view of this game.

Whistle blowing game: a typically brief and simple game, played to effect organizational change in different way: privileged information is used by an insider, usually a lower participant, to 'blow the whistle' to an influential outsider on questionable or illegal behaviour.

Young Turks game: played for highest stakes of all, not to effect simple change or to resist legitimate power *per se*, but to throw the latter into question, perhaps even to overthrow it, and institute major change; small group of 'young Turks', close to but not at centre of power wish to reorient organization's basic strategy, displace major body of its expertise, replace

its ideology (Leeds, 1964), or rid it of its leadership; Zald and Berger (1978, p. 833) discuss this game, particularly in form of an 'organizational coup d'état', where the object is 'to effect an unexpected succession' – to replace the holders of authority while maintaining the system of authority intact.

Some of these games, such as sponsorship or lording, while themselves technically illegitimate, can nevertheless co-exist with strong legitimate systems of influence; indeed, they could not exist without them. Others, such as insurgency or young Turks – usually highly divisive games – arise in the presence of legitimate power but are antagonistic to it, designed to destroy, or at least weaken it. And still others, such as rival camps, often arise when legitimate power is weak, and substitute for it. The implication is that politics and conflict may exist at two levels in an organization: they may be present but not dominant, existing as a kind of fifth column, or else politics may be the dominant system of influence, and conflict strong, these having weakened the other systems of influence, or having arisen in their weakness. It is this second level that gives rise to the configuration of power we call the *Political Arena*.

FOUR FORMS OF THE POLITICAL ARENA

How does the system of politics capture an organization? Some things are known about this process, but there are also a number of gaps in the established knowledge. Accordingly, the description proceeds in a theoretical but not empirical manner, building on a series of propositions, a number of them speculative. The first of these derive four basic forms of the Political Arena, while the subsequent ones consider the interrelationships among these four.

The conflict that eventually captures an organization must originate somewhere before it spreads. Hence we hypothesize that:

(1) *At the outset, the conflict that gives rise to the Political Arena tends to be confined.*

It can arise between employees of the organization, between interested outsiders, or between these groups. (The term *influencer* will be used for those who wish to affect the behaviour of the organization through what Hirschman (1970) has called 'voice'. 'Inside' influencers – essentially full-time employees or volunteers – will be described as constituting the *Internal Coalition*; the 'external' influencers – those with a limited time commitment to the organization whose behaviour they wish to affect – will be described as constituting the *External Coalition*). Such conflict may flare up suddenly, in an intense way, or it may build up gradually.

(2) *When intense, conflict tends eventually to pervade the entire power system – the Internal and External Coalitions as well as the relationship between them.*

The external influencers, because they do not typically make the decisions of the organization, must exercise their power by influencing the internal influencers who do. Hence, if intense conflict arises in the External Coalition – say between a government and a medical association each trying to control the behaviour of a particular hospital – it will tend to spread to the Internal Coalition as outsiders try to impose their conflicting demands on insiders. This will tend to politicize the Internal coalition – to evoke the use of illegitimate means of influence – and to breed conflict within the organization. Likewise, when intense conflict arises between insiders, they will be inclined to enlist the support of different outsiders, thereby introducing conflict to the External Coalition. And when the conflict arises between the two coalitions – as when a monopolist conflicts with the chief executive of an organization that it supplies – each side will tend to seek supporters on the other, thereby spreading the conflict. But:

(3) *Few organizations can sustain a state of intense conflict.*

Intense conflict consumes so much energy that it must eventually threaten all but the most protected of organizations. Thus:

(4) *In order to be sustained, the conflict must eventually be moderated in its intensity.*

In effect, past some point the conflict can continue only if the conflicting influencers accommodate each other somewhat, reducing the intensity of their disagreement. And once achieved:

(5) *Moderate conflict can often endure.*

In many cases, the conflict is not only moderate but also contained – to one of the coalitions or to the relationship between the two of them. Often, two centres of power face each other – perhaps two alliances, or just two powerful influencers – but they do not seek to destroy each other. They reach some kind of implicit accord, muting their disagreement to keep the conflict from spreading and to ensure that the organization can survive.

Moderate conflict can, however, spread and pervade the entire power system. In that form, it may not be as taxing as intense conflict, but it still tends to consume a good deal of energy. Hence we conclude that:

(6) *An organization can sustain a state of pervasive moderate conflict only with some artificial means of support.*

With so much energy invested in conflict, the organization is believed capable of surviving only by finding some way to make up for its losses. It may, for example, be sustained by a benefactor (as in the case of a regulatory agency supported by a government) or by a privileged position in a market (e.g. by being a member of a cartel) [2].

This discussion has introduced three basic dimensions of conflict in organizations – intensity, pervasiveness, and duration (or stability). In terms of these dimensions, the propositions suggest four basic forms of Political Arena, labelled as follows:

Confrontation, which is characterized by conflict that is *intense, confined, and brief* (unstable)

Shaky alliance, which is characterized by conflict that is *moderate, confined, and possibly enduring* (can be relatively stable)

Politicized organization, which is characterized by conflict that is *moderate, pervasive, and possibly enduring* (relatively stable, so long as artificially supported)

Complete Political Arena, which is characterized by conflict that is *intense, pervasive, and brief* (unstable)[3].

One of these forms of Political Arena is called 'complete' because its conflict is both intensive and pervasive; it would appear to be closest to the 'ideal type' organization captured by conflict. In this form, the external influencers disagree among themselves; they try to form alliances with some insiders, while conflicting with others. The Internal Coalition is likewise conflictive, permeated by intense political games. Authority, ideology, and expertise are all subordinated to the play of political power. Such an organization can pursue no goal with any consistency. At best, it attends to a number sequentially (Cyert and March, 1963), at worst it consumes all its energy in conflict and never accomplishes anything. In essence, the complete Political Arena is less a coherent organization than a free-for-all of individuals (Georgiou, 1973). As such, it is probably the form of Political Arena least likely to be found in practice, or, at least, the most unstable when it does appear.

In contrast, the other three forms of Political Arena are partial, one by moderating its conflict, a second by containing it, and the third by doing both. As a result, these forms are probably more common than the complete Political Arena and, at least two of them, far more viable.

Typical of the *confrontation* form is the takeover situation, when, for example, an outside stockholder or other influencer tries to seize control of an entrepreneurial firm from its chief executive. (See, as an illustration, Perrow's [1970, pp. 157–8] account of US government pressures on the Isbrandtsen shipping company). Another example of the confrontation form is the organization that divides into two warring camps, as when certain prisons experienced conflict over the missions of custody *versus* rehabilitation (Cressey, 1958).

Shaky alliances commonly emerge when two or more major systems of influence or centres of power must coexist in roughly equal balance. The symphony orchestra, for example, must typically combine the strong personal authority of the conductor with the extensive expertise of the musicians. As

Fellini demonstrated so well in his film 'Provo dela orchestra', this alliance, however uncomfortable – experts never being happy in the face of strong authority – is nevertheless a necessary one. Common today is the professional organization in the public domain, which must somehow sustain an alliance of experts and government, one pushing upward for collegial participation, the other downward for technocratic control.

The *politicized organization*, characterized by moderate conflict that pervades the entire system of power, would appear to describe many of today's largest organizations, especially ones in the public sector whose mandates are visible and controversial – many regulatory agencies, for example, and some public utilities (see, as an illustration of the latter, Selznick's [1966] description of the Tennessee Valley Authority). Here the government is the benefactor that sustains organizations captured by conflict. This form seems to be increasingly common in the private sector as well, among some of the largest of firms. (See, for example, the article by Blumberg [1971] entitled 'The politicization of the corporation'.) Such firms appear able to sustain conflict through their market power (described, for example, by Galbraith, 1967), and perhaps by their ability to influence government legislation as well.

LIFE CYCLES OF POLITICAL ARENAS

The relationships among these four types of Political Arenas can now be woven together, and each placed in context by considering in theoretical terms how conflict arises and captures an organization, sustains itself, and is eventually resolved. Again the discussion proceeds through a series of propositions, which together constitute a process model (Mohr, 1982) of the life cycles of Political Arenas. This model is illustrated in figure 1, in three stages called impetus, development, and resolution.

Impetus

As shown in figure 1, three conditions can combine in various ways to give rise to a Political Arena. One – major pressures from one or more influencers to realign one of the coalitions or to change a stable configuration of power – is a necessary condition, and it can also be a sufficient condition. But, perhaps more commonly, such pressures are evoked by the other two conditions. The key one is likely to be change in a fundamental condition of the organization, such as the emergence of a new, critical body of expertise, a major innovation, or a serious reduction in the resources available to the organization (Hills and Mahoney, 1978; Mumford and Pettigrew, 1975). Such a change frequently incites certain influencers to challenge the established order of power, to bring it into line with the new condition. But

sometimes the established order of power breaks down by itself – the third condition – as when an autocratic chief executive falls ill or a dominant ideology weakens. Such a breakdown creates a power vacuum, which influencers may try to fill.

We can summarize the interrelationships among these conditions in terms of three basic propositions.

- (7) *A prerequisite for the emergence of the Political Arena is a set of new major pressures from influencers to realign a coalition or change a stable configuration of power.*
- (8) *These pressures can arise of their own accord or can be evoked either by a breakdown in the established order of power or by a change in a fundamental condition of the organization (which itself may break down the established order, leading to such pressures).*
- (9) *The pressures for realignment and the breakdown in established order tend to reinforce each other (whether provoked by a change in condition or not).*

Development

No matter what the impetus, these pressures tend to result in an important challenge to the existing, legitimate order of power, if there is one, otherwise in challenges among influencers seeking to create that order for their own benefit. In other words, the one essential condition for the emergence of the Political Arena is a set of conflicting and irreconciled influencer demands on the organization. These demands result in a situation in which the organization has no focus of legitimate power for a time or, what amounts to the same thing, more than one such focus.

Of course, pressures for realignment need not result in conflicting demands. A challenge may be stopped short or it may succeed immediately, so that conflict is avoided. Sometimes a realignment of power in an organization is so long overdue and so widely supported that it can happen in a kind of instant *coup d'état*. Power changes hands without the need for a transitional stage of Political Arena (as shown by the line on the left side of figure 1 from impetus straight to full resolution).

But few transitions of power – even from one relatively non-conflictive configuration of power to another, and even widely supported ones – prove that smooth. Most involve resistance, and it is usually politics that must serve as the lubricant to get them moving. As noted in Proposition 1, the Political Arena tends to emerge first in a partial form, contained in some way. Usually the conflict seems to arise between an established group of influencers trying to hold on to power and set of challengers trying to seize it, in common terminology, an 'old guard' and some 'young Turks'.

Whether or not that conflict spreads depends on the speed and intensity with which it develops. Changes in fundamental conditions and breakdowns in established orders, as well as the resulting influencer pressures, can appear

suddenly or can develop gradually – the difference between an autocratic chief executive suffering a stroke or slowly growing senile.

- (10) *Influencer pressures that erupt with suddenness and intensity lead to the confrontation form of Political Arena, which is unstable and therefore transient.*

But being intense,

- (11) *The conflict can spread quickly, pervading the entire power system, so that the confrontation form turns into a complete Political Arena (shown below as the confrontation form in Figure 1).*

The complete form of Political Arena, however, tends to be even more unstable, and so cannot last. It risks destroying the organization, as well as the influencers involved. Thus, the intense conflict must be resolved quickly, or at least moderated so that a more stable form of the Political Arena can be reached.

Influencer pressures that develop gradually tend to lead straight to a more moderate and potentially more stable form of Political Arena (and so will be discussed under the resolution stage, which follows). Of course, at any time, moderate, gradually developing conflict can flare up, leading to confrontation and perhaps subsequently to the complete form of Political Arena for a short time (as indicated by connecting lines from the right side of Figure 1 to the centre).

Resolution

Figure 1 shows up to five steady states that can result from the emergence of the Political Arena. In two, the conflict is fully resolved, in a third, it destroys the organization, and, in the last two, the more enduring forms of the Political Arena emerge, one of them stable only if supported artificially.

In the simplest case, one set of influencers wins outright: those already in power stave off the challenge, or else some new influencers consolidate power around themselves.

- (12) *Full resolution would seem to be the most likely result of the confrontation form of Political Arena, a flare-up being followed by victory for one side or the other.*

The complete Political Arena may be resolved in this way as well, although such full resolution is considered less likely due to the pervasiveness of the intense conflict (and so is shown by a thin line in figure 1).

Second, the conflict can kill the organization. We believe that:

- (13) *The complete Political Arena most commonly precedes the demise of the organization, either killing it outright or else speeding up its inevitable death from other causes.*

On one hand, politics that is intense and pervasive takes so much out of an organization that it cannot survive for long. On the other hand, in what ultimately amounts to the same thing, as it becomes evident that an organization is about to die from other causes, there is a tendency for all the influencers to try to extract whatever personal benefits they can at the last moment. The organization becomes a complete Political Arena – a free-for-all – which, of course, speeds up its demise.

Third, the conflict can abate, enabling the organization to survive with a moderate form of the Political Arena, one that is potentially more stable and enduring. In effect, the conflict is partially resolved. Two of the four forms of Political Arena were described as moderate, and here is where we would expect to find them.

The shaky alliance – moderate conflict that is contained in some way – is probably the more likely of the two to arise.

- (14) *The shaky alliance can emerge when the result of a confrontation Political Arena is standoff: neither side can win, yet neither wishes to give up.*

Hence they moderate their conflict and reach some kind of accord to enable the organization to survive. Of course, an organization need not pass through a period of intense conflict – of the confrontation form of Political Arena – in order to emerge with a shaky alliance.

- (15) *The shaky alliance can also arise directly, from a gradual build-up of conflict.*

- (16) *The shaky alliance can also appear near the founding of an organization, when there is no one obvious and natural focus of power, but two or more that must accommodate each other in a rough balance, as in the symphony orchestra discussed earlier.*

The other moderate form of Political Arena is the politicized organization, where moderate conflict pervades the power system of the organization. As noted earlier, this form is considered to be only marginally stable, since it depends on artificial support for sustenance. Hence it is shown in figure 1 halfway between the development and resolution stages of the Political Arena.

- (17) *In the most likely case, the politicized organization arises directly from the gradual build-up and pervasion of conflict, such that no other form of Political Arena preceded it. But:*

- (18) *The politicized organization can also follow a more intense form of Political Arena, notably when conflict is moderated (but remains pervasive) in the complete form of Political Arena, or is moderated but becomes pervasive in the confrontation form.*

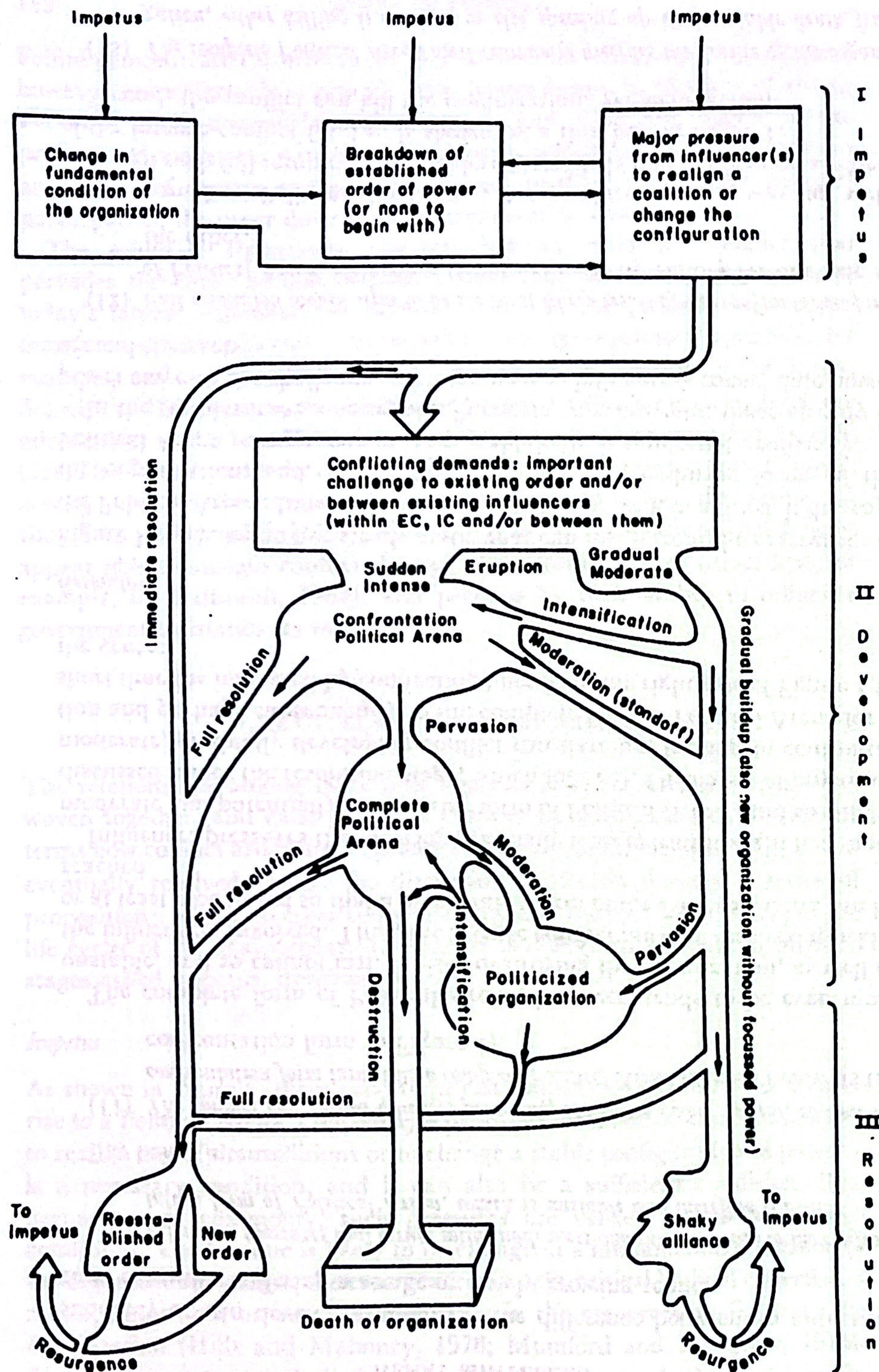


Figure 1 Life cycles of political arenas

Finally, Figure 1 shows that:

- (19) *The principal way out of the politicized organization is the eventual death of the organization, via the complete Political Arena, as the pervasive conflict intensifies (although full resolution is also shown as a possibility).*

Full resolution can occur when the influencers, fearing the demise of the organization, contain their demands and defer to a central leader or other form of legitimate power. But our suspicion is that the organization that has been captured by pervasive conflict is unlikely ever to shake itself free of it: more commonly, it will remain a politicized organization until its conflict eventually intensifies and destroys it.

Resurgence of Conflict

No distribution of organizational power, whether or not conflictive, is ever completely stable.

The shaky alliance is just what its name says: shaky. Outright conflict can never be far from the surface. The relative stability of this form of Political Arena depends on the delicate balance between its two or more centres of power. Any small perturbation – a changed condition, the weakening or strengthening of either centre of power, a desire on the part of one centre for more influence – is likely to bring on a confrontation to readdress the distribution of power. Such confrontation may not lead to change in power distribution when the basic conditions sustaining each centre of power have not changed. We do expect, however, that these confrontations will be common in the shaky alliance: its power can be thought of as oscillating around some central mean, in a state of homeostasis. Major change in condition can, of course, lead to full resolution of the conflict.

Even so-called full resolution from any of the forms of Political Arena can prove unstable if the basis of influence of whoever gained power is untenable: not supported by natural conditions or needs of the organization. This happens, for example, when an old guard out of touch with an environment exploits its formal authority to defeat challengers and so to sustain an out-dated strategy.

- (20) *When power rests on an artificial base, pressures for realignment are likely eventually to take the organization through a new cycle of the Political Arena to seek a more permanent correction.*

Mismatch of power and situation can be sustained for only so long before something must give way. Either the distribution of power must change or else the organization itself must succumb.

But even appropriate resolution of conflict must be viewed, ultimately, as unstable. That is to say, in the long run no established order of power is ever safe from challenge. At any time, it may be confronted artificially or arbitrarily, or it may become vulnerable by breaking down of its own accord.

or by facing a changed condition that undermines its basis of influence. Most organizations – the shaky alliances and politicized organizations excepted – are, we believe, relatively free of conflict for the greater part of their lives. But all are susceptible to capture by conflict periodically. Only one place in all of Figure 1 is truly and permanently stable: the death of the organization!

THE FUNCTIONAL ROLES OF POLITICS IN ORGANIZATIONS

We have described how Political Arenas appear to rise and fall, or else to sustain themselves in moderate form. Let us consider one final issue in conclusion – the functional role of politics in organizations.

Little space needs be devoted to the dysfunctions of politics in organizations. It is divisive and costly, burning up energies that could instead go into the pursuit of the organization's mission. And it can lead to all kinds of aberrations. Politics is often used to sustain outmoded configurations of power, and sometimes to introduce unjustified new ones. Politics can also capture an organization to the point where its effective functioning comes to a halt and nobody benefits. The purpose of an organization, after all, is to produce goods and services, not to provide an arena in which people can fight with one another.

What does deserve some space, because they are less widely appreciated, are those conditions under which politics, and the Political Arena configuration of power, serve a functional role in organizations. Politics and the Political Arena must ultimately be judged by their long term effects on organizations' ability to pursue appropriate missions efficiently. Let us first consider the functional role of the system of politics in the context of the other systems of influence, and then the functional role of the Political Arena itself, in other words, of the situation where the system of politics dominates these other systems of influence.

In essence,

- (21) *The system of politics in organizations is necessary to correct certain deficiencies and dysfunctions in other, legitimate, systems of influence – to provide for certain forms of flexibility that these others deny.*

What this proposition suggests is that the systems of influence called legitimate because of their means – authority, ideology, and expertise – can sometimes be used to pursue ends that are illegitimate. In contrast, the system of politics, whose means are by definition illegitimate, can sometimes be used to pursue legitimate ends. This has been seen, for example, in certain of the whistle blowing and young Turks games, where political means are used against formal authority to correct irresponsible or inefficient behaviours. This proposition can be elaborate in a number of subpropositions.

- (21a) *The system of politics can act in a Darwinian way to ensure that the strongest members of the organization are brought into positions of leadership.*

Authority favours a single scalar chain of command; weak leaders can suppress strong subordinates. Politics can provide alternate channels of information and promotion, as when the sponsorship game enables a manager to leap over a weak superior. Moreover, since effective leaders have been shown to exhibit a need for power (McClelland, 1970; McClelland and Burnham, 1976), the political games can serve as tests to demonstrate the potential for leadership. The second string players may suffice for the scrimmages, but only the stars can be allowed to meet the competition. Political games not only suggest who those players are, but also help to remove the weak ones from contention.

- (21b) *The system of politics can ensure that all sides of an issue are fully debated, whereas the other systems of influence tend to promote only one.*

The system of authority, by aggregating information up a hierarchy, tends to promote a single point of view, often the one already known to be favoured above. So, too, does the system of ideology, since every issue is interpreted in terms of 'the word', the prevailing set of beliefs. As for the system of expertise, there is evidence that people tend to defer to the expert on an issue (Patchen, 1974). Politics, in contrast, by obliging 'responsible men. . . to fight for what they are convinced is right' (Allison, 1971, p. 145), encourages a variety of voices to be heard on an issue. And, because of attacks by its opponents, each voice is forced to support its own conclusions in the terms of the needs of the organization at large. This means that it must marshal arguments, and support strategic candidates, that appear to cater to the interests of the whole organization, rather than the parochial interests of particular groups (Burns, 1961–62; Wildavsky, 1968, p. 194, in terms of the budgeting game)[4].

- (21c) *The system of politics is often required to promote necessary organizational change blocked by the legitimate systems of influence.*

'Vested interests' are often inclined to block changes that are necessary in the organization, since such changes can be threatening. Even when a change must be made from one form of legitimate power to another, say from personalized to more formalized leadership, it is often illegitimate power – the system of politics – that must bring the change about. The system of authority concentrates power up the hierarchy, often in the hands of those who were responsible for initiating the existing strategies in first place. It also favours established rules and procedures, which are designed to sustain the *status quo*. Similarly, the system of expertise concentrates power in the hands of senior and established experts, not junior ones who may possess newer and

more effective skills. Likewise, the system of ideology, because it is rooted in the past and in tradition, acts as a deterrent to change: the object is to interpret the word, not to question it (Selznick, 1957, p. 18). In the face of these resistances to change, the system of politics can work as a kind of 'invisible hand' – 'invisible underhand' would be a better term – to promote change, through games such as strategic candidates, whistle blowing, and young Turks.

(21d) *The system of politics can ease the path for the execution of decisions.*

Senior managers often use politics to gain acceptance for their decisions. In effect, they play the strategic candidates' game to avoid having to play the more divisive and risky counter-insurgency game. They persuade, negotiate, and build alliances to smooth the path for the decisions they wish to make.

Thus, in the last three propositions we see a role for the system of politics in the preparation stage of decision-making, the making of decisions themselves, and the execution of such decisions.

If the system of politics can sometimes be functional, then so too presumably can the organization in which it dominates, the one captured by conflict. Specifically,

(22) *The Political Arena is functional when:*

- (a) *It causes or speeds up a realignment in a coalition or a shift in power configuration necessitated by change in a fundamental condition of the organization or breakdown in its established focus of power;*
- (b) *It corrects an earlier change in coalition or configuration that was itself dysfunctional;*
- (c) *It exists as a shaky alliance that reflects natural, balanced, and irreconcilable forces on the organization, and*
- (d) *It speeds up the death of a spent organization.*

The first point of this proposition argues that when the established order has outlived its usefulness, then a confrontation Political Arena which flares up to change it can be functional. In effect, when politics is the only way to displace legitimate power that itself has become dysfunctional – outmoded expertise, inappropriate controls, a spent ideology, detached leadership, etc. – then the Political Arena, based on technically illegitimate power, must be viewed as functional. The Political Arena becomes the waystation on the road from one form of legitimate power to another. That waystation may be dysfunctional and disruptive while it lasts, but it serves the functional purpose of enabling the organization to attain a new, more viable stability. The Political Arena is, in effect, a prime means depended on by society to change its organizations that have gone astray.

Of course, political confrontation does not always correct a situation. It can also aggravate it, the solution proving worse than the problem. Likewise, politics can also serve as a means of influence to those at the centre of power,

used to block necessary change. But, as argued earlier, such dysfunctional situations are unlikely to remain stable for long. Renewed confrontation is to be expected, political pressures building up until they burst their confines to effect the necessary change. Just as anarchists, who lurk in all societies, foment revolution only when large segments of the population feel frustrated with the current regime, so too does politics, which lurks in every organization, captures it when change is ultimately necessary. Thus point (b) of the proposition argues that the Political Arena can serve the functional role of correcting an earlier dysfunctional change in power.

Of course, some political challenges are arbitrary or neutral – an influencer simply wants a new deal. In this case, while the Political Arena may be dysfunctional while it lasts – weakening the organization's ability to pursue its mission – the result can be termed neither functional nor dysfunctional. With no force drawing the organization toward a natural resolution of the conflict, however, that conflict may get drawn out, weakening the organization. And that can certainly be viewed as dysfunctional in terms of the use of society's resources. In other words, the organization, and society, would be better off with quick resolution – either way. In this case, the worst possible result may be the shaky alliance that endures.

This conclusion leads into a discussion of point (c) of the proposition. As just implied, the arbitrary shaky alliance – the one that reflects no natural set of forces on the organization – is considered dysfunctional because it consumes in conflict resources that would otherwise be directed toward the pursuit of the organization's mission. As we have seen in the example of the symphony orchestra, however, some shaky alliances are not arbitrary at all. They reflect opposing forces on the organization that are natural, roughly equal in importance, and irreconcilable. In other words, the organization could not function if it did not accommodate each of them. Hence the organization has no choice but to form into a shaky alliance. This may not be efficient, in a strict sense, but it is functional. The conflict can be moderated to get the work done, even though some conflict is an inevitable consequence of getting that work done. (While the same argument might be used for the politicized organization, the pervasiveness of the conflict means that paralysis – an inability to get the work of the mission done – is more likely.)

The fourth and final point of the proposition considers the organization that is about to succumb anyway, because it can no longer perform its mission effectively. It may be so moribund that little hope remains for reviving it (or, more to the point, it would be preferable to create new, more vibrant organizations in its place). Perhaps the organizations' mission is no longer required and the organization cannot easily be adapted to a new one. In any event, when demise is inevitable, then, from society's perspective, the sooner it comes, the better. This ensures a minimum wastage of resources during the death throes. And, since, as argued earlier, the complete Political Arena tends to emerge in this period, with the effect of speeding up the

demise, it can be considered to serve a functional purpose under these circumstances. Much as the scavengers that swarm over a carcass are known to serve a positive function in nature, so too can the political conflicts that engulf a dying organization serve a positive function in society. Both help to speed up the recycling of necessary resources.

This, of course, assumes that the conflict is allowed to take its natural course. When artificial forces sustain an organization in a state of pervasive politics, in the form of the politicized organization – as governments sometimes do with giant, essentially bankrupt corporations for fear of the political ramifications of letting them die – then this form of Political Arena during these extended organizational death throes becomes significantly dysfunctional.

CONCLUSION

To conclude our discussion, while this author is not personally enthusiastic about organizational politics – and has no desire to live in the Political Arena, even the kind he has described as functional – he does accept, and hopes he has convinced the reader to accept, its purpose in a society of organizations. Organizational politics may irritate us, but it also serves us. Hopefully we can learn more about this paradoxical phenomenon.

NOTES

- [1] Author's translation from the French.
- [2] In the case of intense conflict, the energy losses are likely to be so great that benefactors are driven off or privileged positions in markets lost.
- [3] Four other forms of Political Arena are possible in terms of the three dimensions but are excluded, two because they violate the third proposition (conflict that is intense and endures, whether pervasive or confined), and two because they do not seem to merit the label Political Arena – conflict that is both moderate and brief, whether pervasive (an unlikely situation according to the first proposition) or contained.
- [4] As Burns (1961–2, p. 260) notes in an amusing footnote;

It is impossible to avoid some reference from the observations made here to F.M. Cornford's well-known 'Guide for the Young Academic Politician'. Jobs 'fall into two classes, My Jobs and Your Jobs. My Jobs are public-spirited proposals, which happen (much to my regret) to involve the advancement of a personal friend, or (still more to regret) of myself. Your Jobs are insidious intrigues for the advancement of yourself and your friends, spuriously disguised as public-spirited proposals'.

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