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Soviet Policy-Making in Comparative Perspective

In the past decade and a half a lively controversy has developed among Western Sovietologists about the nature of policy-making and the distribution of political power in the USSR. This controversy is likely to continue for some time. Not only does it concern intellectual issues central to the study of Soviet politics but it is also related to the way Americans perceive their main competitor on the world stage. Disagreement about Soviet policy-making is further encouraged by the paucity of solid studies of the subject.\(^1\) There is some question, however, as to whether an abundance of evidence would resolve the dispute, so deep run the feelings of some of its participants.

David Powell's critical review of books by Jerry Hough and myself (and inter alia of many recent studies of the political process in the USSR) joins the arguments written by others who remain skeptical about the possibility of genuine participation in Soviet policy-making and about the diffusion of power or influence in the USSR.\(^2\) The appearance of yet another statement along these lines was not unexpected. I was disappointed, however, in David Powell's effort—first of all, because he displayed ambivalence toward the enterprise of comparative politics, if not also of social science itself; and, equally disturbing, because he succumbed to challenging the way Jerry Hough and I interpreted evidence. These characteristics of Powell's review invited a response. Knowing that Jerry Hough was writing his own reply to Powell's


treatment of his book and of the interest group approach generally, I decided to deal only with Powell's treatment of my book. In so doing, I have tried to focus on those differences between David Powell and myself which raise questions of broad concern.

David Powell's criticism of my book, *Soviet Criminologists and Criminal Policy*, can be summarized in three points: (1) that my supposed adoption of the "group approach" was misbegotten because of flaws inherent in that approach; (2) that my conclusions about the participation of specialists were marred by vague concepts and by uncertainty about the identity of specialists; and (3) that my conclusions about the influence of criminologists were warped by insufficient attention to the context of their participation and were biased by the choice of issues for case studies.

In Powell's view the most serious shortcoming of the book lay in my effort "to validate the group approach" (p. 115), an approach which Powell characterizes as "a model which is built on intuition, surmise and supposition." (p. 108) At first glance, Powell's concern with my "attempt to validate the group approach" seems bizarre. As my critic was surely aware, I did not use the group concept or approach in my book (for reasons I explained at length) but chose instead to examine the policy-making role of individual scholars. Why, then, did Powell pay so much attention to my book in a critique of the interest group approach? One reason was that like the authors who have used the concept of interest group I tackled the question of influence in Soviet policy-making and tried to answer this question in a comparative way. The root of David Powell's complaint, however, seems to lie in my comments about the model of "institutional pluralism" developed by Jerry F. Hough. My study did not set out to test propositions stemming from that model (itself an admirable attempt to provide a standard for assessing the Soviet political process) but dealt for the most part with questions originating elsewhere. However, as a social scientist, concerned not only with answering my own questions but also with the cumulation of evidence tending to confirm or call into question the propositions of others, I would have been remiss had I not considered how my findings related to Hough's model. In so doing, I made a contribution to the process of testing that model (not the group approach), but many more empirical studies will be needed before one will be able to delineate fully the scope and limits of that model's applicability.

It is also worth pointing out the shallowness of David Powell's criticism of this model—and more generally of the interest group approach—as "built on intuition." Does Powell really believe that data alone can serve as the basis for building models or for generating propositions? Not just evidence, but also imagination and intuition play a necessary part in the development of explanations and interpretations, both in social science and in the writing of