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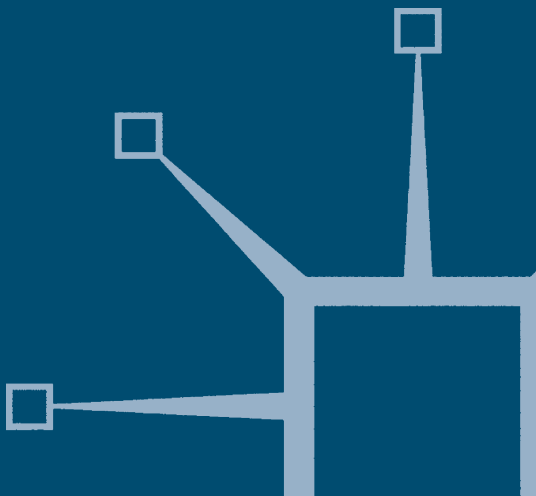
The National Interest in International Relations Theory

Scott Burchill



The National Interest in International Relations Theory

Also by Scott Burchill

AUSTRALIA IN THE WORLD (*with Gary Smith and Dave Cox*)

THEORIES OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, third edition (*with Andrew Linklater, Richard Devetak, Jack Donnelly, Matthew Paterson, Christian Reus-Smit and Jacqui True*)

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This book is dedicated with love to my wife, Robyn Colegrave, and our two children Zoë and Callum.

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Introduction

> Providence never intended to make the Management of publick Affairs a Mystery, to be comprehended only by a few Persons of sublime Genius, of which there seldom are three born in an Age.
>
> (Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*)

> If citizens are to support the government which prosecutes it, soldiers are to die for it, and foreign policies are to conform to it, what could be more appropriate than to ask: What is national interest?
>
> (Charles A. Beard, *The Idea of National Interest*)

There have been two seminal analyses of the term 'the national interest' as it is used and understood in both the conduct of diplomacy and in the study of international politics.

The first, *The Idea of National Interest* by Charles A. Beard, was an historiographical inquiry into the use of the term in modern United States history and foreign policy up to the period of Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s (Beard 1934; 1966). In his investigation Beard traces the earliest claims made on behalf of the national interest back to sixteenth-century Italy and seventeenth-century England when 'reasons of state' (*raison d'état*), 'dynastic interests' and the 'will of the sovereign' began to lose their efficacy and were replaced by a term which more accurately reflected changes that were occurring in contemporary forms of political diplomacy (Beard 1934; 1966, pp. 21–6).

Beard's study is important because it explains how 'the national interest' as an idea and the rise of the nation-state as a modern form of political association were coterminous. Beard's detailed examination of US

diplomatic records reveals that the term gained currency in the very debates which ultimately framed the United States Constitution towards the end of the eighteenth century.

More controversially and with remarkable prescience for the future direction of research in International Relations, Beard examined the role played by national interest arguments in defending US commercial and territorial expansion in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Anticipating discussions which would occur later between conservatives and radicals, realists and Marxists, Beard's account emphasised the extent to which the economic interests of certain groups within US society have, over time, been presented as those of the national interest of the United States. This is a critically important claim and one that is supported with extensive documentation and relevant case studies of US regional diplomacy.

Surprisingly, Beard's magisterial analysis has been largely forgotten and has been out of print for over four decades, a fact which belies its importance in the field but which might be explained by his personal experience of political hostility from Establishment quarters. Beard is perhaps best known for highlighting the economic self-interest of the 'founding fathers' as a factor in the drafting of the US Constitution: in the early twentieth century this was, at the very least, a controversial perspective. His approach to political analysis, which can be described as a non-Marxist materialist approach, was also used to explain the basis of US foreign policy during its early imperialist phase.

Beard described his book as 'an inquiry into the things and patterns of conduct covered by the formula "national interest" ' in the modern historical experience of US diplomacy (Beard 1934; 1966, p. 28). From an International Relations viewpoint,[1] what is missing from Beard's analysis is a broader theoretical outline which can be applied to ways the national interest is constructed generally by nation-states, as well as an engagement with contending approaches which stress the autonomy of the state from the constituent groups which comprise it. Beard's account fails to acknowledge the existence of international theory which reflects directly on the subject matter of his analysis; his account is strictly historical and empirical. This book, in part, seeks to rectify this deficiency.

[1] The capitalisation of International Relations is used throughout to refer to the academic discipline. Lower case is used when the general domain of international politics is indicated.

In his seminal analysis *National Interest*, Joseph Frankel was conscious of just what an elusive concept 'the national interest' is (Frankel 1970). Much of his account comprises a range of definitional and category distinctions which remind us how ambiguous and contested the formula has been ever since its entry into the lexicon of foreign policy analysis and the study of international politics.

Arguably the most important division Frankel draws in his study is between those who use the national interest to explain and analyse the foreign policy of nation-states and those who employ the term to justify or rationalise state behaviour in the international realm. This cleavage is characterised as a split between *objectivists* who believe there are permanent objective criteria against which foreign policies can be evaluated, compared and contrasted, and *subjectivists* who emphasise the changing priorities and preferences of decision makers as well as the public defences and explanations of their actions (Frankel 1970, pp. 15–17).

According to Frankel, *objective* national interests are those which relate to a nation-state's ultimate foreign policy goals, independent of but discoverable by policy makers through systematic enquiry. These are permanent interests, comprising factors such as geography, history, neighbours, resources, population size and ethnicity. *Subjective* national interests are those which depend on the preferences of a specific government or policy elite, and include ideology, religion and class identity. These interests are based on interpretation and are subject to change as governments themselves alter.

Given that Frankel's account focuses primarily on the ingredients of decision-making in foreign policy and has a self-consciously behavioural slant rather than a philosophical or normative method (Frankel 1970, p. 27), this sort of distinction is important and meaningful. It is also a distinction preserved in more recent studies (George & Keohane 1980). From a constructivist perspective, for example, Jutta Weldes argues that 'the national interest' is important to international politics in two ways.

> First, it is through the concept of the national interest that policy-makers understand the goals to be pursued by a state's foreign policy. It thus in practice forms the basis for state action. Second, it functions as a rhetorical device through which the legitimacy of and political support for state action is generated. The 'national interest' thus has considerable power in that it helps to constitute as important and to legitimise the actions taken by states. (Weldes 1996, p. 276)

The distinction enables Frankel to examine the aspirational and operational aspects of the term, to establish permanent criteria for comparison and to assess the human motivations behind international diplomacy. As an account of the geopolitical, cultural and psychological dimensions which come together to form 'the national interest' as an expression of foreign policy, Frankel's account has few if any peers.

In outlining the problems of methodology for such a project and his preference for behaviouralism, Frankel claims that 'unfortunately the theories of international relations supply no clues for our search of the meaning of national interest as a whole' (Frankel 1970, p. 27). This is an important remark in at least two respects. First, in contradiction to an earlier suggestion that the national interest is used in a variety of ways to achieve a range of purposes, Frankel seems to be implying here that there is a single meaning of the national interest which can be ultimately revealed. And secondly, Frankel argues that theories of international relations will shed little if any light on this task.

The primary purpose of this analysis is to challenge Frankel's claim by showing how the term 'the national interest' is variously understood within the major theoretical currents of the discipline of International Relations (IR). By examining how conventional (realism, liberalism), progressive (English School, constructivism) and critical (Marxism, anarchism) theories of international politics understand the concept of the national interest, it is possible to move beyond Frankel's primary concern with decision-making in foreign policy for the purpose of comparing and contrasting the foreign policies of nation-states.

The objective/subjective dichotomy which underlines Frankel's approach remains an important taxonomy and must be considered in any treatment of the subject. However, contextualising the concept with the well-established theoretical schools which constitute contemporary IR theory is a more sophisticated method of examining the national interest as an organising concept in international politics. It is an approach which refutes Frankel's claim that a study of the national interest cannot be theoretically and philosophically informed.

Within each theory of international politics, the national interest is a significant point of intellectual orientation: sometimes it is the very foundation of a theoretical approach (traditional realism) while in other cases it is a means to rationalise and mask decisions taken for a variety of other reasons (Marxism). It will be argued here that a survey of how the term is understood across the theoretical spectrum within International Relations reveals much that Frankel's methodology cannot. Even if the national interest has become a debased currency in recent

years it remains in wide circulation, both in political and academic domains. It deserves a further examination, this time from the perspectives offered by leading contemporary theories of international politics.

One early attempt to do this was made by Martin Wight in his renowned lectures on international theory delivered at the London School of Economics in the 1950s when the discipline of International Relations was still in its adolescence. Despite the impact they had on students who attended them, these lectures were only published posthumously in 1991 (Wight 1991). One of them, devoted to 'theory of national interest', compares and contrasts the approaches of three groups – realists, revolutionists and rationalists – to the idea of the national interest. Although concise, limited in scope and underdeveloped, Wight's analysis constitutes an important beginning to any theoretical consideration of the concept. He uses both historical writings and current events (for the 1950s) to show the very different understandings of the national interest across the ideological and philosophical spectrum. His remarks will be used here as a useful starting point and an indicator of the direction needed for a broader and more detailed contemporary analysis of the discipline, particularly in the important distinction he makes between realist and rationalist perspectives.

How can we account for Joseph Frankel's pessimistic conclusion that 'theories of international relations supply no clues for our search of the meaning of national interest as a whole?' One answer is that at the time Frankel wrote his account, international theory remained comparatively impoverished. At the time, debates within the area were dominated by two approaches: realism and liberal-utopianism. Since the late 1960s, however, there has been enormous growth and development in the field which, in turn, provides new contexts for intellectual consideration of the national interest. A primary task of this analysis is to assess the extent to which contemporary international theory provides new insights into the political functions of the term.

A more specific explanation of Frankel's pessimism, however, springs from his definition of international relations theory in narrowly positivist terms.

We have grown accustomed to the idea of theories within the 'natural sciences', but for many like Frankel, the suggestion that the political and social worlds also lend themselves to theoretical inquiry is problematic. As one sceptic has noted, in the analysis of international relations, 'historical conditions are too varied and complex for anything that might plausibly be called "a theory" to apply uniformly' (Chomsky 1994, p. 120). If by theory the sceptic is referring to the levels of certainty and

exactness, standards of proof and 'scientific rigour' normally associated with the 'physical' sciences, then he has a point when he claims that 'if there is a body of theory, well tested and verified, that applies to the conduct of foreign affairs or the resolution of domestic or international conflict, its existence has been kept a well guarded secret' (Chomsky 1969, p. 271).

There is a world of difference between the 'physical' and the 'social' sciences, and it is difficult to argue that the methodology of the former, with its emphasis on testable propositions and the production of falsifiable hypotheses, can be automatically applied to theoretical endeavours in the latter without serious problems arising (see Burchill 2001). Thus for Frankel, little of any scientific worth is likely to be revealed about the national interest by conventional, non-scientific theories of international politics. It may still be a 'social science' but only a behaviouralist approach which focuses tightly on foreign policy decision-making is likely to reveal anything meaningful about what is generally held to be the prime consideration of modern diplomacy.

Frankel's seminal account of the national interest was a product of the scientific turn in International Relations which occurred most notably in the US during the 1960s: the so-called 'behavioural revolution'. Scholars such as Frankel, Morton Kaplan, and nuclear deterrence theorists such as Albert Wohlstetter, Thomas Schelling and Herman Kahn, believed that the historical and empirical claims of classical realists such as Hans Morgenthau were too vague and impressionistic. For them, the study of international politics required greater precision and scientific rigour in order to uncover its underlying patterns and laws. Inductive methodology, applied to either prove or refute empirical claims and to predict human behaviour, was their preferred approach.

The value of such methods in the study of international politics was soon challenged by traditional or 'classical' IR scholars such as Hedley Bull who believed that important dimensions of international politics were neglected by the advocates of social science and were unlikely to be explained by this method (Bull 1966). According to Linklater,

> the search for patterns ignored the life-blood of international relations which is to be found, for example, in the beliefs states have about the rights and wrongs of using force or intervening in one another's internal affairs. It is to be found in their attitudes to international law and in the moral problems and tensions which have manifested themselves in many different ways throughout recorded international history, specifically in debates about the morality of war. Bull did

> concede that the social-scientific method had forced the analysts of international relations to aim for greater conceptual clarity and precision. But he argued that social-scientific approaches failed to match traditionalism in understanding unique historical events and in reflecting on the moral and cultural framework which is specific to the society of states. (Linklater 2000, p. 4)

Consistent with Bull's critique of the scientific turn in International Relations, this book will argue that the term 'theory' in the study of international politics should not be limited to a narrow 'scientific' or positivist formulation which is implied in Frankel's analysis. Contemporary explanatory and constitutive theories of international politics – few if any of which could be described as 'social science' – consider the national interest in a much broader, less restrictive sense. Instead of focusing on decision makers and the various 'inputs' into decision-making, this book will be concerned with locating the national interest within the internal theoretical debates of International Relations, and thus with questions largely ignored by both Beard and Frankel.

For example, does the national interest remain a substantive concept in an era of economic globalisation? If it is still considered the guiding motive of state diplomacy, can it be properly defined and can IR theory assist in this challenge? Does it perform domestic ideological functions for political elites? Is it inseparable from considerations of contemporary nationalism or should it be understood as a socially constructed international norm?

These and other related questions will be considered in three broad sections. The first will examine the national interest within the framework of *conventional* IR theory, in particular realist and neo-realist perspectives. This is where the term has been traditionally defined, developed and posited as the very basis of diplomatic practice.

The second section will examine *critical* perspectives of the national interest by looking at Marxist and anarchist approaches. These two traditions pose major challenges to claims that the nation remains an active agent in international affairs with collective, common interests, instead focusing on the particular interests of special groups within it.

The third section will examine how *progressive* theoretical approaches understand the term, focusing on liberal, English-School and constructivist theories. Liberalism has historically been anti-statist and looked forward to the triumph of market forces over nationalism: globalisation is the ultimate realisation of liberal economic philosophy. The English School, on the other hand, has substantially qualified the stark pessimism of

contemporary realist assumptions about international life and the never ending struggle for power and security. The English School argues that only enlightened self-interest is a morally defensible approach to foreign policy for states. Constructivists have recently revived debate about the normative foundations of diplomacy and how norms shape current understandings of the national interest. They argue that the national interest is inseparable from conceptions of national identity.

This book does not focus on the national interest as a tool for the assessment of foreign policy, although by implication it will raise a number of issues and questions which bear on that task. The extent to which individual governments invoke the national interest for domestic political advantage is an important and worthy study because the concept is assumed but rarely explained or defined. It is also used as a political lowest common denominator – to de-legitimate arguments for diplomatic action based on wider obligations to the species as a whole. However, that is a separate empirical enquiry which ranges well beyond the parameters of this theoretical study which is confined to what the discipline of International Relations understands by the national interest.

The book endeavours to demonstrate that despite its continuing relevance for conventional IR theory and the revival of the term in constructivist theory, in an era of economic globalisation 'the national interest' cannot fully withstand the critique mounted by neo-liberal perspectives and critical approaches such as Marxism and anarchism. Despite its wide currency in political circles as a legitimation tool, and a residual relevance in the domain of security policy, a theoretical investigation reveals it to be a term largely devoid of substantive meaning and content.

1
Origins and Antecedents

Before the 'formula' of the national interest, to use Charles Beard's perceptive expression, can be placed in a range of theoretical contexts within the discipline of International Relations, it is important to recognise and understand its evolution as a term of political discourse. The intellectual origins and history of the idea of 'the national interest' are virtually inseparable from how rulers came to define their justifications for state policy.

This chapter will trace its development from Rousseau's conception of the 'general will' and the earlier doctrine of '*raison d'état*' most closely associated with Machiavelli, to its use as a term of modern diplomacy. The key components of the national interest will also be outlined. The chapter begins with a brief etymological analysis.

Etymology and epistemology

In the discourse of politics, the concept of *interest* is a contested and problematic idea (Connolly 1974). Though it has a range of meanings, '*interest* is a significant example of a word with specialised legal and economic senses which, within a particular social and economic history, has been extended to a very general meaning' (Williams 1983, pp. 171–3). Although its etymology is complex and difficult to trace, it is possible to use the word 'interest' in both its *objective* sense (a general or natural concern, having an objective right, claim or stake in something) and its *subjective* sense (a general curiosity or having the power to attract curiosity or attention). This is a distinction now preserved in the negatives *disinterested* (not affected by objective involvement in a matter – impartial) and *uninterested* (not being attracted to something or having no power to attract – a subjective judgement).

From a political perspective, it is significant that 'our most general words for attraction or involvement should have developed from a formal objective term in property and finance [the Latin derivation is *interesse*, meaning (i) compensation for loss, and (ii) an investment with a right or share]', so that conflicts of interests can be seen as contests which stem from the very structure of our society and, specifically, matters of property (Williams 1983, pp. 171–3). The state of 'having an interest' can therefore mean holding an objective and/or subjective stake in something, but also, crucially, *being affected either positively or negatively by that stake*. Both usages of 'interest' are relevant to this analysis (see Hirschman 1986, ch. 2).

According to Beard, when secularism and political economy displaced theology as the principal concern of intellectual elites in the late fifteenth century, 'interest shrank to an economic conception in writings and negotiations involving policy, statecraft, and social affairs generally' (Beard 1935, p. 155). A key moment, therefore, is the word's etymological shift from a spiritual to an objective material conception, now meaning 'a gain in wealth as measured by the prevailing economic standards – a gain in land, houses, material capital, money, credits, and exchangeable commodities' (Beard 1935, p. 155). Beard also noted a residual subjective dimension to the term, given that interest also involves human perception and interpretation. The question, 'how can I maximise my interests?' may not always be successfully answered by those who pose it, but it remains an aspiration, a conscious thought process.

As has been noted, the materialist conception of interest in its plural form – *interests* – can be divided into two related senses, property and property owners. Beard argues that this often leads to definitions of *the national interest* which amount to either the sum total (or cumulative aggregation) of particular property interests or the most important and significant interests amongst many.

> It is used to describe outward realities such as material plant and equipment, or aggregations of plants and equipments. . . . The term is also applied to the *owners* of such tangibles, as for example, when we speak of utility interests, railroad interests, shipping interests, and aviation interests . . . . There is a tendency in practice to regard the national interest as a mere aggregation of particular interests, or to interpret it in terms of the most active and dominant interests, even though they may be in the minority – considered either as the proportion of persons or corporations involved or as the proportion of capital measured by pecuniary standards. (Beard 1935, p. 156)

In policy discussion where *the national interest* is central to decision-making, it is the owners of property – *property interests* – who are actually being considered. According to Beard, this can never be an objective or quantifiable process because interests cannot be separated from human motive and concern. There is no such thing as an objective reality called *the national interest*. Considerations of *the national interest* is an ineluctably subjective assessment:

> As far as policy is concerned, interest inheres in human beings as motive or force of attention, affection and action. As motive or force it cannot be defined absolutely, or isolated, or fully comprehended by the human mind .... Those who merely discuss policy likewise bring their interests to bear, consciously or unconsciously, and their interests, both intellectual and economic (salary, wages, or income), are affiliated with some form of ownership or opposition to the present relations or operations of ownership ... The intellectual impossibility of isolating and defining interests in absolute terms is responsible for a large part of the confusion that reigns today in discussion of policy. (Beard 1935, pp. 156–7)

Nor, according to Beard, can ideas and material interests be separated. They are inextricably bound to one another.

> Interest, subjectively considered, may take the form of an idea, and every idea pertaining to earthly affairs is attached to some interest considered as material thing and is affiliated with social relationships. Neither can be separated from the other in operations called 'understanding,' 'appraisal' or 'measurement.' ... There are, to repeat again and again, no ideas without interests, and no interests without ideas .... (Beard 1935, pp. 157–8)

This claim has important implications for all analyses of *the national interest* which attempt to disaggregate its component parts. In particular it represents a challenge to claims (by classical realists) that permanent, fixed national interests can be identified as objectives which should determine the conduct of the foreign policy of states. It also means that *the national interest* cannot be reduced to its component parts for scientific measurement and assessment.

> But men are not endowed with the power to isolate ideas from interests, to assign mathematically measured values to them, and to discover

> which is more potent than the other in the stream of occurrences called history . . . . So we return again – ideas and interests are known to exist, if anything is known; they cannot be isolated in fact; they cannot be measured; they cannot be separately appraised, for appraisal is a form of mathematical valuation; but a realistic view of the world must include both. (Beard 1935, pp. 158–9)

Here, Beard's remarks echo Marx and Engels in a famous passage from *The Communist Manifesto*, and in a less well-known extract from *The German Ideology*, where it is claimed that all ideas have a material reality as interest, and each can only be understood in the context of the other. For Marx and Engels, the material reality of ideas are expressed as class interests.

> Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man's ideas, views and conceptions, in one word, man's consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life? What else does the history of ideas prove, than that intellectual production changes its character in proportion as material production is changed? The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class. (Marx & Engels 1998, pp. 58–9)

> The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, of a people. (Marx 1974, vol. 1, 1A).

In a remarkably prescient observation, Beard is led to conclude that any analysis of the national interest must entail an inquiry into the ideas which express and represent the interests to be considered. It will be subsequently argued that these are the key questions behind critical perspectives of *the national interest* contained in Marxist and anarchist theory.

> The only operation that seems appropriate when 'interest' is mentioned is to inquire: what ideas are associated with it? And when an 'idea' is mentioned, to inquire: what interests are associated with it? (Beard 1935, pp. 157–8)

How, then, does Beard proceed with his account of the national interest if a scientific and quantitative analysis will not reveal anything very meaningful? If ideas and interests are inseparable phenomena and the whole process of articulating and determining *the national interest* is unavoidably subjective, on what basis can an examination of the 'formula' go forward? Beard's answer is that any serious inquiry must focus on the documentary history within a particular national setting. As we might expect from a historian, the national interest can only be truly revealed in retrospect.

> The question – what is the national interest? – can be answered, if at all, only by exploring the use of the formula by responsible statesmen and publicists and by discovering the things and patterns of conduct – public and private – embraced within the scope of the formula. (Beard 1934; 1966, p. 26)

The general will

At the very basis of claims for the national interest is an assumption that a political community can speak with a common voice. This is only possible, however, if the various expressions of particular individual interests which comprise all complex societies are suspended when those societies need to take collective decisions which are binding on all members.

Rousseau was one of the first people to think systematically about the common expressions of a political community, and in particular what happens when the common and particular interests within a society cannot be easily reconciled. The term he gave to the legitimate basis of common political expression was 'the general will':

> only the general will can direct the powers of the State in such a way that the purpose for which it has been instituted, which is the good of all, will be achieved. For if the establishment of societies had been made necessary by the antagonism that exists between particular interests, it has been made possible by the conformity that exists between these same interests. The bond of society is what there is in common between these different interests, and if there were not some point in which all interests were identical, no society could exist. The bond of society is that identity of interests which all feel who compose it. In the absence of such an identity no society would be possible. Now, it is solely on the basis of this common interest that society must be governed. (Rousseau, Book II, I, 1960 p. 190)

It is common within political philosophy to regard Rousseau's idea of the general will as constituting the outlines of early democratic theory and government by legitimate consensus or majority view. This is not in dispute here. However, it also possible to view Rousseau's notion as forming the basis upon which later ideas about the national interest have been constructed. For Rousseau, societies have common interests which should form the basis of decision-making and policy. In fact they are the binding forces which keep society from disintegrating into antagonistic groups and individuals.

Rousseau claims that 'sovereignty . . . [is] no more than the exercise of the general will' (Rousseau, Book II, I, 1960 p. 190) and that the general will 'is concerned only with the common interest' (Rousseau, Book II, II, 1960 p. 193). Here, as we shall observe later, Rousseau's words are almost indistinguishable from claims made by contemporary realists in the discipline of International Relations. Although he doesn't elaborate on the forms which these common interests take, he has no doubt that they exist and that they form the very basis of legitimate behaviour by political communities. Once the French Revolution effectively redefines the state as the instrument of the nation, a key moment in the definition of the nation's interests has been reached.

Just as importantly for the subject under analysis here, Rousseau is fully aware of the dangers of allowing particular interests to dominate the common interests of society:

> the general will, if it be deserving of its name, must be general, not in its origins only but in its objects, applicable to all as well as operated by all, and that it loses its natural validity as soon as it is concerned to achieve a merely individual and limited end, since, in that case, we, pronouncing judgement on something outside ourselves, cease to be possessed of that true principle of equity which is our guide. (Rousseau, Book II, IV, 1960 p. 196)

Rousseau's warnings about the dangers of private interests capturing the apparatus of state anticipate the basis of critical objections to the national interest. As we shall see later in the study, critical conceptions of the national interest argue that dominant private interests within society will direct state policy to advance their particular circumstances. For critical perspectives of the national interest, the claim that a complex society can have common interests is largely a myth which serves the interests of dominant groups. In the following passage, Rousseau is not conceding that the triumph of particular interests is

likely, but is nonetheless clear about the implications of elite dominance for the welfare of the community and the very survival of the state.

> So long as a number of men assembled together regard themselves as forming a single body, they have but one will, which is concerned with their common preservation and with the well-being of all. When this is so, the springs of the State are vigorous and simple, its principles plain and clear-cut. It is not encumbered with confused or conflicting interests. The common good is everywhere plainly in evidence and needs only good sense to be perceived. Peace, unity and equality are the foes of political subtlety.
>
> But when the social bond begins to grow slack, and the State to become weaker; when the interests of individuals begin to make themselves felt, and lesser groups within the State to influence the State as a whole, then the common interest suffers a change for the worse and breeds opposition. No longer do men speak with a single voice, no longer is the general will the will of all. Contradictions appear, discussions arise, and even the best advice is not allowed to pass unchallenged.
>
> Last stage of all, when the State, now near its ruin, lives only in a vain and deceptive form, when the bond of society is broken in all men's hearts, when the vilest self-interest bears insolently the sacred name of Common-Weal, then does the general will fall dumb. All, moved by motives unavowed, express their views as though such a thing as the State had never existed, and they were not citizens at all. In such circumstances, unjust decrees, aiming only at the satisfaction of private interests, can be passed under the guise of laws. (Rousseau, Book IV, I, 1960 pp. 269–70)

In the space of a few words, Rousseau not only provides a philosophical basis for what will become a key term in the study of international politics, he also identifies the principal objections which will arise to the integrity of such an view – an idea which in the context of eighteenth-century thought was on the radical fringes of legitimate expressible philosophy.

Perhaps Rousseau had in mind Thucydides' remark that an 'identity of interest is the surest of bonds whether between states or individuals' (Thucydides 1954; 1972, p. 107)? Though it is not spelled out in detail by Rousseau in the context of the general will, that which 'men assembled together regard . . . as forming a single body' – the binding force which