Public Engagement and the State

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Relationship to Public Square

- Public Square defined last week as “A space between private individuals and government authorities” in which people could meet and have critical debates about public matters – notion derived from “coffee houses” of the 17th and 18th centuries

- But French and American revolutions in late 18th century brought about broad democratic movements that displaced monarchy and then-existing “government authorities”

- Since the democratic experiment, the state has been a critical arena in and through which people have had critical debates about public matters, and through which vital public/civic/community services are delivered
The state is a huge part of our lives – how we receive services/income, and how we live

- Government spending as a % of GDP by country:
  - Ranges from 81.4% (Cuba in 2008) to 9.6% (Turkmenistan)
  - US is at 19.9% (but note that this is for only national government; 40% of public spending is done by state and local governments) – including both, closer to 35%
  - UK is at 50%. Germany and Canada around 48%, France is at 61% and most other European countries are in between (in the 50’s)
  - Russia and India are around 20%
  - Japan (30.9%), China (22%), Singapore (16.3%), and Taiwan (21.2%) are relatively low (mostly employer-based rather than government-based welfare systems)

Table
Origins of State: The World of Aristotle (384-322 BC)

- *Ethics* and *Politics* Closely Linked – Ethical/Virtuous life only available to one who participates in politics. “Man is by nature a social and political being.”

- Teleology: everything has a purpose. Human *telos* is to live life of virtue (moral life), because we are uniquely endowed with speech and reason. “The good of man is an activity of the soul in conformity with excellence or virtue.”

- End of *Ethics*: Only in a political community can man cultivate virtue.

  “The end [or goal] of politics is the best of ends; and the main concern of politics is to engender a certain character in the citizens and to make them good and disposed to perform noble actions.”
Aristotle’s *Politics*

- The first partnerships among human beings would have been between “persons who cannot exist without one another.” Two types (together form household, providing for the bare needs of life:
  - Male and female, for the sake of reproduction.
  - “the naturally ruling and ruled, on account of preservation” (slavery).
- Village – allows for greater prosperity
- City – different in kind. Necessary for life of virtue, or for man to fulfill his telos. State is a creation of nature and prior to the individual, because the individual when isolated is not self-sufficing. “A social instinct is implanted in all men by nature.”

“The political partnership must be regarded, therefore, as being for the sake of noble actions, not for the sake of living together.”
The Origins of State: Hobbes (1651)

- Egoistic conception of human nature. “Men have no pleasure (but on the contrary a great deal of grief) in keeping company where there is no power able to overawe them all.”

“In the nature of man, we find three principal causes of quarrel. First, competition; secondly, diffidence; thirdly, glory. The first maketh men invade for gain; the second, for safety; and the third, for reputation.”


- Civil peace and social unity are best achieved by the establishment of a commonwealth through social contract. “The bonds of words are too weak to bridle men’s ambition, avarice, anger, and other passions, without the fear of some coercive power.”

- Egoism and contract became the bedrocks of modernity and liberalism – in both the economy and the state. Locke, Machiavelli, America’s founding fathers.
Intervening Change: Technology

- Made war more proletarian and helped end feudalism: Ended personal honor of knight in war and replaced it with amorality of the state. Curbed power of landed nobility and in favor of crown/state. Feudalism (public power in hands of private property owners) to monarchy.

- Benefitted ruler seeking to organize a large territory, as warfare in age of gunpowder was expensive and required many infantrymen. Rise of permanent mercenary army. Created need for taxation.
Intervening Change: Technology

- Gave scholars identical texts – turned intellectual work into a cooperative rather than solitary activity. (Like invention of writing and computer)
- No need to memorize or transcribe; printing freed memory and hold of institutions (rise of popular education) – like radio and TV reduced hold of live performances.
- Spread of Lutheranism (from 1517), decline of HRE (prior established sphere of public virtue), rise of nation-state
- Scientific revolution, Renaissance (and rise of coffee houses)
In support of stronger central authority: “the vigorous government is essential to the security of liberty; . . . A dangerous ambition more often lurks behind the specious mask of zeal for the rights of the people than under the forbidden appearance of zeal for the firmness and efficiency of government.” Pure democracies “have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention . . . And have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths.”

Strong and larger Union tends to break and control the violence of faction. “The instability, injustice, and confusion introduced into the public councils, have, in truth, been the mortal diseases under which popular governments have everywhere perished.”

Egoistic view of human nature: “So strong is this propensity of mankind to fall into mutual animosities.”

“Ambition must be made to counteract ambition . . . If men were angels, no government would be necessary. . . . In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.”
The central insight of modernity is that our social order should not seek to foster, much less define a path toward, human improvement or individual virtue, but that institutions instead should be designed to turn human selfishness and vice into a collective virtue. (Invisible hand of market, checks and balances of state)

- But note that acceptance and glorification of public egoism/individualism is a historically and geographically contingent view of human nature and a historically and geographically contingent building block of social institutional design.
Origins of State: Views of Human Nature/Need for State

- Aristotle/Gandhi (and Buddha)
  - Interconnectedness of mankind. Man is naturally a social/connected being who strives toward moral improvement while in community. Communitarian vision.
  - Aim of community structures is to foster moral improvement/self-realization of individual in community with others
  - True governance does not happen by a hierarchical government, but through direct, social/communal dialogue and interaction
  - Self-governance is the highest aim (for Aristotle, that happened in small political community; for Gandhi it happened in small, similar village community – distrust of large modern state as it had evolved)

- Hobbes/American Founding Fathers
  - Egoism of the individual. Libertarian vision.
  - Aim of state is to channel and defuse the ill effects of human ambition, passion, selfishness and vice and to turn those into collective/institutional virtues: “a republican remedy for the diseases most incident to republican government.”
  - Best way of doing that is through strong central institutions in which there is delegated power from the people and representation, rather than direct participation.
  - Suppression of the worst aspects of the individual self is the aim.
Question of Scale: E. F. Schumacher

- Federalist 10: Nation and state. But has the state become too depersonalized and too much an abstraction, and is technology pushing the boundaries of both ends of the spectrum? Schumacher: “We need the freedom of lots and lots of small, autonomous units, and, at the same time, the orderliness of large-scale, possibly global, unity and coordination.”

- Pursuit of Virtue and Wisdom: “Ever bigger machines, entailing ever bigger concentrations of economic power and exerting ever greater violence against the environment, do not represent progress: they are a denial of wisdom. Wisdom demands a new orientation of science and technology towards the organic, the gentle, the non-violent, the elegant and the beautiful.”

- “I have no doubt that it is possible to give a new direction to technological development, a direction that shall lead it back to the real needs of man, and that also means: to the actual size of man. Man is small, and, therefore, small is beautiful. To go for giantism is to go for self-destruction."

“We must learn to think in terms of an articulated structure that can cope with a multiplicity of small-scale units.”
Frances Fukuyama

Besides, large-scale governmental institutions are dysfunctional, especially when they’re founded on distrust (as they are in America).

Divided government = gridlock and decay = mistrust/nonparticipation by the many = skewed participation by the few (the polarized and the resourced).
exponential
governance
gap
technology
state-based governance
Filling the Governance Gap: Responsive Cities

- Using technologies to make governmental institutions more effective, responsive, accountable, efficient
Responsive Cities: Barriers to “Scaled” Reform

- Procurement of new technologies (obsolescence by the time of deployment); different procurement cycles
- “Unaligned and inconsistent databases”: Lack of standardized data categories (different laws/regulations for age, race, income, occupational qualifications, etc.)
- Personnel systems
- Data privacy/sensitivity – “need to know” v broad data sharing (eg Wikileaks)
- Short political shelf-life of leaders, as compared with entrenched civil service rules and systems.
Filling the Governance Gap

- Using technologies to make the state more effective, responsive, accountable, efficient (especially in small governance units)

- Using technologies to strengthen hyperlocal/decentralized communities and to foster peer-to-peer networks that govern themselves outside the state

- Fostering self-governance (do-it-yourself regulation in this age of do-it-yourself innovation) -- shifting from the egoistic view of the self in need of external regulation, to one capable of improvement in the right setting/system design