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Wither the state, and its agent, the government?

Chapter 17 in Responsibility and its Avoidance.

[Curtis 2017 pages 244-256 Matador]

17. Wither the State, and its Agent, the Government?

Government is an everyday term but, when you think about it, it is a bit exceptional. 'It', although an abstraction, can act. It is closely related to another abstraction 'the state'. These two abstractions are held in place – place being ultimately the mind; many minds – by symbols and ceremonies that sit atop an apparatus peopled by officials who act on behalf of the state. They create a public domain that purportedly serves the public good. An awkward 'who' question however can serve to demystify. When the state appears to fail the symbols alone remain.

To establish a thing called Government is only possible if it is granted a status of some kind. Big buildings with Romanesque pillars, lofty ceilings, long flights of steps, stone carved lions decorating their porticos will not suffice of themselves; though image matters. The thing apparently needs to be able to act and to grant it the power to act it needs to be given person-like status. The law does this. The law goes on to grant other social institutions person-like status. Corporate law for instance gives certain structures, registered in certain ways the status of legal persons; that can sue and be sued, contract with other parties, that kind of thing. Such measures are designed to enable an individualistic culture to prevail over large areas of human endeavour. They also enable particular people, selected in particular ways, more or less bound by particular codes of conduct, to be the puppeteers who pull the strings.

This is a rather strange phenomenon. My late friend from field-work days in Botswana, Sampo Mngqibisa,¹ knew how personification worked, believed all sorts of things possible that I deemed impossible – for instance, that the truck he was driving one day had stopped dead at the moment that its owner, his employer, died from a dose of poison. Sam also knew how to play with the resulting social constructs. When a diamond smuggler, visiting from a neighbouring village, found himself unable to start his brand new high performance car Sam instantly diagnosed the problem. The guy had stopped in overdrive. All that was required was to flick a switch under the dashboard. The technician in Sam could not resist the indrawn breath; the "It will cost you" moment but to extract the expected gift the situation had to be manipulated

¹ Sam was a man of Xhosa origin. The 'ngq' in his spelling of his name signals one of the aspirated 'clicks' of the Xhosa language, 'Xh' being another one. The Batswana refuse to get their tongues around these sounds, apart from their own 'kh', as in khosi, meaning chief, which Scots recognise as it occurs in their own 'loch'.



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socially, with an interpretation of who might be interfering with the motor, and how he, Sam, might expel the offending influence, etc., before surreptitiously throwing the switch.

'Government' Sam took to be a game with the same kind of rules. When he failed to licence his lorry; which he had deemed long dead - its carcase resting on bricks outside his compound - the police threatened prosecution.

"Government says you must pay" said the Inspector. "What is this thing you call government?" Sam claimed to have said "Where do you keep it?".... and went around the police station looking in the cupboards. His tactic failed, I seem to remember. Certainly he was left with the task of rounding up the cash, which, in that only semi-monetised economy, entailed calling upon his friends. That I do remember. Government the person, Sam probably concluded, is a predator. But then 'big men', such as that diamond smuggler (who had not come good with the gift of a goat), often are. The wise give the man what he asks for, even if there is no real expectation of bounty in return.

To give a thing individual-like entity - enabling 'it' to 'say' 'you must pay' is a fiction. This fiction is so well established in most societies today that it escapes notice or comment. But to an anthropologist - who must always guard against the ethnocentric notion that one's own culture is normal while all others are exotic - 'government' or 'state' are as fictional as a totem pole - or the other way around; both are social constructs. They externalise, define and objectify in ways that enable us as citizens to conceptually separate how we respond to a tax bill from 'Her Majesty's Government' from our view of the rogue who we elected to Parliament and who became the Chancellor of the Exchequer. We unconsciously make such distinctions all the time; and make nothing of it; odd though it is.

In fact, there is a missing dimension in this mix; because another face of government is always asserted. The 'government of the day' is a definite bunch of people. In that dimension governments are, or claim to be, collective entities and that in a double sense; they seek to be recognised as a collective body of individuals who share power and responsibility and they claim to represent the people or nation as a collective entity; which brings us citizens into the picture. This collective dimension demonstrates most clearly that modern government is also a moral matter. And as soon as people are recognised in the picture one's expectations change; fallibility must be acknowledged and we should expect the usual human mix of asserted moral principles and ever-present pragmatics.

So government is a thing, a legal person and a collectivity. Its thing-ness sets it apart as an embodiment of power, symbolised by those marble columns and

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stone lions. In legal matters its symbol is the Crown. It endures; while its personnel – even the monarch of the day – can come and go. But just being there does not do it any good. Its fate is Ozymandian unless 'it' has agency and instruments.² As an agent in its own right it assumes the identity of a person 'who' can act as government, taking the part of government in contractual dealings with the citizen; enabling the actual person who is doing the acting to hide behind a recognised office of state; a chief of police, a civil servant holder of public office or a minister of the crown. Of course, the public at large probably adopts a much more amorphous definition of 'the government'. It is the body to be blamed for the price of oil [bread in Marie Antoinette's day], the late running of trains, or the appalling lack of skills in spelling amongst today's school-children. For them/us 'the government' embraces 'them in authority'; a whole lot of people who are office holders, elected and appointed, who are responsible or can be assumed to be responsible for acting in its name. And in these days of arms-lengthing, contracting out and what not, government may indeed have a woolly edge.

Government, it seems, can take on more guises than the enemies of Dr Who. Not that most individuals in most countries find government in any of its identities to be threatening. [Sam, an ebullient man admittedly, was confident enough to play games with its representative.] Most people, going about their daily business, know and need to know little about government in any of its guises. This is a happy condition for any government power-holders because it signifies that 'it' has successfully structured the public weal with laws and agencies that enable the citizen to go about his/her daily business without the need for let or hindrance by the state. On the other hand, if, like Emily Pankhurst and her Women's Suffragette colleagues in 1920's Britain, or followers of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament [CND] in the 1960s and 70s, or the Stop the

2 I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away".
Percy Bysshe Shelley



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War campaign in the early years of this Century, you have a specific quarrel with national governance as constituted, or with the behaviour of a particular government, you are likely to encounter government in several of its many-headed overt or covert guises. In which case, citizen, beware and watch what you say on your Facebook account.

Theory of the state

When, in what passes for intellectual circles, we want to talk about these matters we refer to The Theory of the State. This sounds as though it is one theory but the Theory of the State is cover for a plural and long running field of debate. It operates at an even more abstract level than everyday discussion of what is and isn't 'the government'. What is the origin of the state? Why does it exist? How does it work and for whom does it work?

These and other similar questions have exercised great minds over the centuries. For a sociologist or anthropologist in the functionalist tradition [which I am not but will go along with here] the reasons for asking such questions might be that, to answer them in any satisfactory way, is to justify the existence of state structures and powers and thereby legitimate those who wield such powers.

Of course none of the classical greats says as much. Aristotle ³ (384BC – 322BC) took the high minded view that the state enables the citizen to live the good life. Developing out of the family, the village and clusters of villages, which could only serve basic human needs for social reproduction, the state provided scope for a more sophisticated social existence. It was natural and good. His Hellenic contemporaries, the Sophists, took the opposite view, that the state is a man-made convention; a put up job and not a very good one, given the persistent social conflicts within and between the city states.

Contrasting views about human nature and its consequences underlie an ongoing debate about social order. They did not go away but re-surfaced as Europeans of the Enlightenment contemplated the matter. This time around it was Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1788) who could be regarded as the optimist when he invested the Social Contract with a basically benign understanding of how the citizen does a deal with the state in agreeing to be ruled. Thomas Hobbs (1588 – 1679) [of "nasty, brutish and short" fame] had earlier argued that the state is necessary because we, the citizens, are naturally bad and need to

3 Joseph Zarri, (2012). 'Aristotle's definition of Citizen, State, Constitution and Government' ScholarDarity, 16th December http://www.scholarDarity.com/?page_id=2410 [located 4th June 2013]



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be controlled. Both views however lead to the same outcome. They are an elevated version of a typical domestic discussion in front of the TV of a Friday night. News programmes flash pictures of disturbances on the streets of London, Birmingham, Stockholm, or wherever; occasioning an "I don't know. What is the World coming to?" followed by "What are the police doing about it?"

Cohesion versus conflict are underlying themes and they are still with us. Robert L. Carnerio in 'A Theory of the Origin of the State', ⁴ contrasts voluntaristic with coercive theories, the former suggesting that historically people will have come together peacefully, seeing common advantage in accepting a leadership structure, the latter theories based upon the assumption that state hierarchies are the outcome of war and subjugation. To a 60s Sociologist this is reminiscent of the functionalist versus the conflict theorists of social change that then prevailed. Carnerio does not resolve the matter but goes on to suggest that historically – Latin America provides his evidence – much can be explained in terms of the surrounding environmental or social constraints. In other words, state-like social order emerges when populations are squeezed together and have to find new ways of interacting, peaceably or otherwise; some form of centralised authority usually emerging.

Philosophers, Political Scientists, Archaeologists or Anthropologists with an interest in institutional evolution such as Carnerio, are not Historians. Actual history of any state anywhere would have a tangle of apparent events and possible causes to decipher in the layering of dry bones and pottery shards, or within the letters of the literate classes. It would almost certainly find plenty of conflict as well as periods of stability. The origin of the state question is therefore not about any particular state but about statehood. The question as to where and when it might come about is a reasonable one but does not deal with the symbolic aspect of the thing; nor how symbols are used by the actual wielders of power.

Figure 9: Power: 'over', 'with', 'to', plus 'inner'

<i>Type of power relation</i>	<i>Implications for an understanding of empowerment</i>
<i>Power Over: ability to influence and coerce</i>	<i>Changes in underlying resources and power to challenge constraints</i>
<i>Power To: organise and change existing hierarchies</i>	<i>Increased individual capacity and opportunities for access</i>
<i>Power With: increased power from collective action</i>	<i>Increased solidarity to challenge underlying assumptions</i>

4 R.L. Carnerio, Science, 21 August 1970, Vol. 169, 733-738.



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Power from Within: increased individual consciousness Increased awareness and desire for change

Symbols of statehood, such as crowns, columns, orbs and staffs of office are about the administration of power. Power comes in three kinds, power Over, power With, power To and, according to some, including Rowlands, whose schema is set out above, a fourth - the most personal - power from Within.

The above table is to be found as a quote in an article about empowerment of the powerless; particularly addressed to issues to do with the perceive powerlessness of women in developing countries.⁵ It is about strategies for gaining power. Rulers of states and holders of office in governments might be assumed to be the holders of power against whom disadvantaged women and others have to struggle, using whatever strategies they can muster. But state power is seldom uniform or absolute. Most rulers have to make appeal to all three kinds of power to establish and consolidate their rule and do not get far without a touch of power within – the charisma that sometimes works when the other dimensions fail [see Chapter 11].

It is not for nothing therefore that the symbols of power represent the state as a trinity: an abstract thing above, as a person-like entity that can be represented by actual persons and as a collectivity that embraces the population. This plurality of representations of state is not a matter of inconsistency but of necessary complexity; necessary in the sense that it gives power-holders maximum scope for manoeuvre; necessary also in that actual state power is often rather weak. We may note in passing that the same plurality gives ordinary citizens; people without power such as Sampo Mngqmbisa, some opportunity for playing games with state identity, though the outcome will not always be in their favour.

For who?

The 'for who' question can be dealt with now. By breaking the assumption of anonymity in objectification it shortcuts the discussion and provides a different slant on the state as agent in society. 'For who' got an assertive answer from Karl Marx. The bourgeois state works to secure the interests of capital. [Note the elision of capital with capitalist; objectification goes back and forth in this discourse.] This synoptic view of the role of the state fitted quite well into a broad-brush interpretation of 19th Century trends; a step in the transition of Feudalism to Capitalism. This view still has some following in academe although

⁵ Cecilia Luttrell and Sitna Quiroz, with Claire Scrutton and Kate Bird (2009). 'Understanding and Operationalising Empowerment', Working Paper 308, ODI.



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capitalism has since transmogrified into a rather different kind of beast. Marx himself, in his later writings, came to recognise that the capitalist class was quite canny about seeking direct representation in government anywhere. The capitalist case has been made for them by political adventurers throughout Europe, kings, emperors or democrats creating space for expanding capitalist enterprise by pacifying the masses and colonising foreign lands.

In the early years of the 20th Century Antonio Gramsci found himself with time to contemplate these issues. He was a victim of Mussolini's clamp down on freedom of political association in Fascist Italy. Imprisoned, he pondered the issue of why it was that the working classes did not seem willing to think, organise and to act in the way that orthodox Marxism anticipates that they would. What earlier Marxist thinkers had simplified as 'false consciousness' he expanded into an understanding of what he saw as the pervasive, hegemonic, ability of the ruling [bourgeois] class to penetrate all aspects of organised institutional life, including the press, with its ideas and its interpretation of the social good. Diverse interests, including the labour movement, came to be actors within the capitalist domain rather than instruments of revolutionary change. Europe plunged into the Second World War not long after Gramsci's death in 1937. In its turmoil the working classes of all the European nations took up arms and fought, not for the abolition of capitalism, but for essentially nationalist causes; for and against the Fascist States. And this after the Great Depression had cast so many out of work – a clear case, one would suppose, of government or ruling class failure to protect the interests of capital.

In the 21st Century, protecting the interests of capital through support for free trade remains high on the list of priorities of any government, be it Western Neo-liberal, post-Soviet, or liberalising Communist. Another part of Marx's broad brush picture – the increasing immiseration of the working classes leading to the overthrow of capitalism and the withering away of the state – has not worked out as forecast. This changing scenario has left flag-flying [but these days not usually card-carrying] professors of a Marxist persuasion in a quandary. Do they support the state as tool of the bourgeoisie class that must fulfil its destiny before being swept away or do they – recognising current contradictions – work within the state to exploit its weaknesses and achieve change? The ambiguity in their intellectual position is not necessarily a bad thing. Some have useful pragmatic things to say. Others continue to mouth the theory and take their pay and pensions from state funded institutions – their plea; 'may the state wither away, but not yet please'.



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Demystification

Grand schema seldom fit the facts. Always there is room for alternative frameworks and interpretations. Theories of the state and what it does for whom are however, particularly vulnerable when the state seems to be failing.

Whatever way the citizen thinks about his/her relation with the state - social contract, some other fiction, or simply the ubiquitous 'it' - the expectation has become well established that the government of the day will provide a range of public goods within which the private self may prosper.

- ◆ A Central Bank will control the value of the currency that bears the head of Sovereign.
- ◆ The Chancellor of the Exchequer will so juggle the tax system that all will have incentives to work while the money-pots of the state remain healthy.
- ◆ 'The government' will see to it that the elderly will be supported, the poor granted a basic living, the vulnerable protected to some degree.
- ◆ And the Prime Minister will be believable when he stands in Parliament to say that "such and such will never be allowed to happen again" [Chapters 12 and 13].

But in the meantime the public domain has become a global domain within which the ability to act of any one state or government has become severely curtailed:

- ◆ Currencies cannot be isolated, banks become too big to be allowed to fail but too big also for national governments to rescue without effectively bankrupting themselves.
- ◆ TNCs escape national jurisdictions, place assets in remote islands that live off their transactions, build commercial 'empires' that work to their own rules, and hide behind the language of corporate social responsibility.
- ◆ Executive pay, justified in global reference, knows no restraint.
- ◆ Immiseration of the working classes is pushed into the garment factories of Dhaka or the unregulated open mines of the Congo or Zaire.
- ◆ Global warming, climate change, the drivers behind flood, drought, and the death of the seaside resort, instigates panic, simplistic posturing and policy paralysis.



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- ◆ The World Wide Web creates cyberspace; a frontier for exploration without personal inhibition or social constraint, feeding back angst, perversity and home-brewed hatreds into the real world. ⁷

Even within their domestic domains present day governments are proving increasingly powerless:

- ◆ changing demographics undermine the logic and viability of welfare regimes;
- ◆ capital goes where it wills. Like the cat that goes next door when its owner does not provide enough cream, it seeks out the least tax, most concessions government; and is without a notion of loyalty;
- ◆ the media does not serve to hold the government of the day to account; rather the reverse, government bows to the populist whims whipped up in the media;
- ◆ alienated sections of the public ferment dissent

Is the state about to wither away? Will our symbols be without meaning? Will "the lone and level sands" stretch out from the cast iron gates of Downing Street or the colonnades of Whitehall? Will the government of the day be just a predator on the private good?

It is no "colossal wreck". It will not go without a fight, I guess. The fight may be ugly because the underlying problem is that much of the public good/bad is now a global good/bad, not deliverable by national governments alone. National governments lacking ability to solve the public good/bad issues of the day tend to divert attention into foreign adventures. That is bad.

Good governance, we can conclude, must be a global good, achieved through overt collaboration between national governments or through governments/states ceding power, if not to some form of super-state then to other common interest bodies; civil society writ large, global citizens active in netting a web of care between themselves through which to hold in check the rampant destroyers of the common good, whether they be TNCs, rogue states or terrorists who deploy through similar networks but to destructive ends [Chapters 16, 21].

⁷ This before Edward Snowden blew the whistle on the UK and USA government's agents having hacked their way into the fibre-optic channels of the web giving their governments an ability to monitor and scan billions of private communications.