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2. The Modern State

Robert L. Bloom
Gettysburg College

Basil L. Crapster
Gettysburg College

Harold L. Dunkelberger
Gettysburg College

See next page for additional authors

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2. The Modern State

Abstract

Nothing manifests the strengths and weaknesses of the contemporary institutions more than the modern national state. Because in this country it reflects the demands of all the people and at the same time affects them and all their other institutions, it is the prime example of institutional growth. It is not an exaggeration to say that all other institutions serve but partial ends, no matter how total they may try to be in their relations with their members. Designed to be small, it has become huge. Once limited to action which was mainly negative, it has become more and more positive. Conceived in amateur terms, it has become a professional bureaucracy. Viewed as decentralized, it has become highly centralized. Seen as doing but little, it has expanded until there is scarcely any area of life which is unaffected by it. [*excerpt*]

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Disciplines

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Comments

This is a part of [Section XIX: An Analysis of the Contemporary World's Search for Meaning](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

Authors

Robert L. Bloom, Basil L. Crapster, Harold L. Dunkelberger, Charles H. Glatfelter, Richard T. Mara, Norman E. Richardson, and W. Richard Schubart

2. The Modern State

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We have already traced the historical development of the contemporary state. The Enlightenment political demand was for liberty of some sort over against the powers of various absolutisms. But the same movement in the name of liberty has resulted today in the appearance of a political authority the size and power of which is much greater than Western man has ever before witnessed. Perhaps never before has citizenship meant so much.

There are many reasons for this development, some of which are important for us to note in this chapter. One reason for the increase in government is to be found in the growing importance of the political aspect of man's life. The idea of the economic man was successfully undermined by the twentieth century. For example, during World War I it became obvious that it was the political groups within a nation rather than the international proletariat which could and would unite. Or again, if anyone asks whether or not a large trust is to be broken up, the priority of politics emerges immediately

in the reasons that are given by both sides. There may be no economic reason for keeping a large corporation from growing. Yet we insist that there should be limits to its growth unless, like the telephone company, it appears to be a natural monopoly. And we insist in terms that are primarily political rather than economic. Small businesses must be protected from being swallowed up by our economic giants; but the reasons for this are socio-political rather than economic.

Another reason for the growth of the contemporary state is to be found in the demands that are made upon it. Western man entered into the latest stage of his development with the liberal idea that the state was his own creation, an artifact which he had made to be his servant. As there were no limits to his desires, so there could be no limits to what he demanded of it. Consequently, he asked more and more of his servant to fill the gap created by the loss of his older standards: it should establish law and order; it should assume the burden of educating his children; it should protect his products from foreign competition; it should grant him lands for homesteading; it should build roads; it should take care of his economic and physical welfare; and it should protect him from depressions. Man also, and in a different sense, asked for something more. By his unwillingness to limit his own desires, he made it necessary to have certain laws which would restrain him at the points where he would not restrain himself. Out of this situation grew the laws which regulate everything from food manufacture to the selling of securities, and the bureaucracy necessary to enforce these laws. The results have been that Western man, like the poor fisherman in the story of the genie, finds that his servant does not want to shrink back to size, but threatens to become his master.

But there is something even more important than the sheer size of our contemporary institutions, and that is the fact that they tend to produce their own standards and values. And, as there are no agreed limits for such values, there is nothing to keep them from becoming absolute and total. The state especially tries to build morale and demand loyalty. Lacking anything above it, creating its own laws, and giving expression to modern nationalism, the state also creates its own duties and values. Loyalty becomes its supreme value. Instead of public opinion, we may have policy and propaganda as the means of inculcating values and loyalty. The liberal order of values is thus reversed. The modern national state determines its policy and with it confronts the individual citizen, who is armed only with his private opinion. And this policy is justified by reference to the "people."

Most institutions, and the state supremely, refer to the people and what the people want as the court of last appeal. The "people" is interpreted as a self-sufficient society beyond which there is no appeal: Vox populi vox Dei. The only major question left is whether the voice of the people has been correctly interpreted, hence our current interest in public opinion polls.

This situation is greatly aggravated by the external relations of Western states. Without any international law or institution with power enough to check national states, the present international scene resembles most clearly a naked struggle for power. It is like Hobbes' state of nature, only the participants are now the power rather than individuals. We have now the spectacle of two huge states arming for a battle which they do not seriously want to fight. The additional power of nuclear weapons only heightens the power factor in the situation. It is not surprising that we often speak of "garrison states," or that we have called ours the age of anxiety.