

Our Enemy, The State?

“Civil society” has become the talisman of the post–Cold War era, invoked by everybody from Vaclav Havel to Patrick Buchanan. While associations and volunteer groups are indeed essential to a society’s health, our author reminds us that a civilized society cannot exist without the civilizing authority of the state.

by John Lukacs

Our *Enemy, the State* is the title of a book by the American essayist Albert Jay Nock, first published in 1935 and reprinted three times since, most recently in 1983. Nock was a very intelligent thinker, an individualist of much learning, strong prejudices, and profound convictions. He was also a good writer, whose aphoristic style—of which the following instances are typical—amounted to more than superficial brilliance:

“Bureaucracy is ineradicable as a cancer, when once it gets well-rooted.”

“Probably not many realize how the rapid centralization of government in America has fostered a kind of organized pauperism.”

“The present state of public affairs shows clearly enough that the State is the poorest instrument imaginable for improving human society, and that confidence in political institutions and political nostrums is ludicrously misplaced.”

“The State is no proper agency for human welfare.”

Most of these notions were set down in the 1930s. Nock had nothing but contempt for the New Deal. Except for a few judicious readers, he was not appreciated

during his lifetime (he died in 1945), but among the recent generation of conservative (conservative, rather than neoconservative) intellectuals his reputation has risen; several of his books, in addition to *Our Enemy, the State*, have been reprinted, and there even exists a Nockian Society.

Nock was an idiosyncratic and extremely individualistic thinker, but his enmity for the bureaucratic (and imperialist) state was not singular. Unique as in many ways he was, he may after all be listed among such antistatist writers as Herbert Spencer, Hilaire Belloc, G. K. Chesterton (all English writers before World War I); Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek (Viennese liberals after World War I); and the Viennese neoliberal Karl Popper (after World War II)—except for Spencer, all of them heroes of present conservative intellectuals. While Spencer was an atheist, Belloc and Chesterton were Catholic anti-capitalists, which the Viennese were not, while Nock was an intellectual aristocrat of sorts. There were, thus, deep differences among their arguments, as there are contradictions within the antistate and anti-government ideologies of the present conservatives.

II

But, then, Alexis de Tocqueville (in the second, and originally less appreciated, volume of *Democracy in America*) had already foreseen the probable evolution of democratic government into a bureaucratic one. He did not use the words “bureaucracy” or “welfare,” but he was, as almost always, crystal clear. The principle of equality, he feared, would become more powerful than the principle of liberty, and the ideal of equality might sooner or later make people accept the practice of government extending itself to rule very large areas of their lives.

This was, of course, what happened. Fifty or 60 years after Tocqueville, liberals and progressives, especially in the English-speaking countries, were compelled to advocate government intervention to correct the vast (and sometimes brutal) injustices flowing from untrammelled capitalism and industrialism. This tendency led to government institutions, laws, and assorted affirmations of all kinds of material (and other) equalities, and to the eventual appearance of the “welfare” or “provider” state. This kind of government intervention was, for a long time, supported not only by its beneficiaries but by large majorities—until relatively recently, when the rise of “conservatism” led to a rather predictable popular reaction against some of the excesses (and sometimes against the very principles) of government policies and regulations.

This popular reaction has not been confined to the United States or to other English-speaking countries. Its symptoms have appeared in Scandinavia, Holland, Germany, Austria, Spain—in some places under a neoconservative label, in others under a neoliberal one.

The fuzziness of such labels is not the only problem in our political lexicon. There is, for instance, a difference between government and state. Tocqueville, who was

anxious about the future of governments entirely dependent on popular sovereignty, wrote about government and not the state. Indeed, in the 1830s he thought that the authority of the state in the United States was too indistinct and weak, rather than definite and strong.

By contrast, Albert Jay Nock’s enemy was not government but the state—a distinction that he would make at times. He wished that society would “deprive the State of power to make positive coercions upon the individual at any point in his economic and social life; for then *the State* will go out of existence, and what remains is *government*.” He was in favor of this, as behooves an old-fashioned individualist. Yet this is not one of Nock’s clearer obiter dicta. Nor did it occur to him that while the Declaration of Independence was a reaction against the exactions of the English government, the great achievement of the Constitution and of George Washington was the establishment of the





Horatio Greenough's George Washington

American state. It was in the defense of the state that Washington chose to suppress the antigovernment populists of the Whiskey Rebellion. (Would Nock have been in favor of the Whiskey Rebellion? We do not know.) But now, 60 years after Nock, and 200 years after the Whiskey Rebellion and Washington, we have conservatives who show sympathy for militias, armed cultists, and all kinds of rebels against the government—people who, in reality, are defying not merely the interferences of government but the civil authority of the state.

Whether a distinction between government and state is unduly philosophic is arguable. What is not arguable is that to the present American critics of government, this distinction does not exist. The objects of their indignation, whether of the government or of the state, are selectively chosen. The same people who say that the enemy is government are in favor of every kind of armament or defense expenditure as well as of other imperial institutions of the state. During the antigovernment Reagan era, the White House staff was six times larger than Franklin Roosevelt's at the peak of World War II. Consider then

that the White House or the Pentagon or the CIA or "Star Wars" are government too; or that not only liberals but also conservatives are inclined, on numerous occasions, to legislate morality or to support gigantic boondoggles such as the Supercollider. Nor does the conservative exaltation of the so-called market economy mean its independence from government. Few conservative Republicans objected to the government bailout of aircraft manufacturers such as Lockheed. As Nock noted more than 60 years ago, "The simple truth is that our businessmen do not want a government that will let business alone. They want a government that they can use."

That may be as true of postcommunist Russia as it is of the United States, whether before or after the New Deal—or now.

III

The most corrupting lies, wrote Georges Bernanos more than 50 years ago, are problems wrongly stated. One—though only one—factor in such misstatements is that our political designations "liberal" and "conservative" are so outdated as to have become almost entirely useless. During the 19th century, liberals fought against all kinds of state regulations, ranging from censorship to restraints on trade. They wished to restrict and diminish the stringent authority of the state. Conservatives believed that the power and the authority of the state (including even its authority over religion) must not be weakened to a dangerous extent. About 100 years ago there came a change. Liberals—mostly because of their unquestioning belief in progress and in evolution—began to promote state intervention in economic life, to protect and insure more people—except when it came to the preservation of traditional morals. Conservatives (and please note that "conservative," as a political adjective, was unacceptable in the United States until about 40 years ago), unlike their putative ancestors, began to

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argue and campaign for the restriction of government—except when it came to the military and police powers of the state. Do not think that these are recent developments, results of the Reagan or Gingrich “revolutions.” In 1956, Section Nine of the Republican election platform called for “the establishment of American air and naval bases *all around the world.*” (The italics are mine.) These were people whom liberals at that time still called isolationists—only God knew why. Or consider a statement by the eloquent Christian conservative and Republican spokeswoman Mrs. Phyllis Schlafly in 1980: “God gave America the atom bomb.” Mrs. Schlafly! It was not God; it was Franklin Roosevelt.

During the 19th century, liberalism was young, representing reform, while conservatism was old, representing tradition; but we live now at the end of a century when most liberals have become senile, while most conservatives are puerile.

IV

The labels “liberal” and “conservative” did not become outdated only because their meanings changed. Nor did the liberal-conservative antithesis of the 19th century become superseded by a kind of Hegelian synthesis. More than 100 years ago, two great new movements arose in the world: nationalism and socialism. Their combination—and not that of liberalism and conservatism—has marked most of the history of the 20th century, continuing into the present. The most radical and extreme formula of this combination was Adolf Hitler; but the anathema of German National Socialism ought not obscure the recognition that we are, all, national socialists now, in one way or another. In 1996, there is not one government in the world that has not accepted some of the practices of the national welfare state. In the United States, the difference between Republicans and Democrats—and between conservatives and liberals—may be properly summed up by saying that the former are more nationalist than

socialist, and the latter more socialist than nationalist. The combination of nationalism and socialism has become universal. The ratio of its components may vary from country to country, but it exists everywhere; and of the two components, it is nationalism that often has the more powerful appeal to the masses.

Another gradual but profound change began a little more than 100 years ago, with the emergence of Populism. Of course, the Constitution of the United States established checks and balances against the unlimited sovereignty of popular majorities. (It is less known that many of the French radical republicans of the 1790s also expressed their doubts about popular sovereignty.) But the Populist movement in the United States, rising in the 1890s against capitalism and for radical government intervention in finance, economics, and education, demanded popular sovereignty without limits—in sum, more democracy, not less. For a while, Populists and Progressives were allied. Then, in the 1930s, came their hostile separation: the former were, by and large, nationalists, while the latter were not. By the 1950s, the formerly antipopulist (or at least nonpopulist) Republicans became more and more populist—with the result that now Republicans and “conservatives” argue that it is they who stand for “genuine popular sovereignty”^{*}—conveniently ignoring the checks and balances of the American constitution. (But then, our present “conservatives” oppose the conservation of land, too.)

Yet most of their rhetoric and many of their political advocacies are popular. The majority of the American people are tired of the excesses of the welfare state. Whether they want less government or not is yet to be seen. Whether they want the weakening of the state is at least

^{*}As, for example, William F. Buckley, Jr., in a manifesto of an article (*National Review*, Dec. 11, 1995) entitled “After History’s Detour.” (Subtitle: “In 1914, History took a wrong turn toward totalitarianism, statism, and moral liberalism.”) Of course “history” does not take wrong turns. People do. Because of their minds.

doubtful, but this is what they seem to think they want.

V

We ought to understand that populism is inevitably nationalist. That was recognized by Hitler, who was most explicit about it. He said, on many occasions, that the state was but a framework, and an altogether antiquated one. “First came the *Volks!*” he said, “and only then the state.” He distrusted both the military and the administrative bureaucracy of Germany: “The state is the instrument of the people.”

We ought as well to rethink the imprecise and incorrect term “totalitarianism,” meaning the total tyranny of the state. To begin with the obvious: total rule of a state is impossible. Even at the peak and at the maximum extent of a modern dictator’s rule, there remain people and islands of life that are surprisingly untouched by the police rule of the state. The “totalitarian” adjective may be acceptable in one sense only—when it refers to the intention of a tyrant to exercise total state control over the inhabitants, even when such total control is in practice unmanageable. Sooner or later the successors to the tyrant recognize this (as at times tyrants themselves do). The result is an often arbitrary, illogical, and unpredictable reduction of police interference in certain areas of life. This was what happened—erratically, and not necessarily as the product of benevolence or good will—in the Soviet Union after the death of Joseph Stalin. After 1953, the Soviet Union became less of a “totalitarian” than an “authoritarian” state—even though such designations are never leakproof, and to some extent may overlap. Then, after 1985, the rule of the Communist Party and of the government (of which the former constituted a large part of its apparatus) was intentionally reduced by Mikhail Gorbachev, until (and it is to be doubted that he had foreseen this with all of its consequence) the weakening authority of the Soviet government debouched into the partial col-

lapse of the authority and of the actual control of the state.

Five or six years after these great changes in the former Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe, there can be no doubt that the greatest danger not only for these regions’ populations but also for the world resides in the weakness of the authority of the Russian state: the opposite of the Evil Empire syndrome that all the conservative or neoconservative ideologues talked about. The enfeebled authority of the central government of the Russian state threatens the living conditions of an entire population, while it affects Russia’s neighbors as well as far-away powers such as the United States. We are now witnessing the inability of the Russian state to maintain the security of its borders, leading to intermittent warfare along the edges; the inability of the government to enforce its laws and regulations; the inability of its police authority to maintain the necessary minimum of law and order—in sum, the inability to protect its people, which is, and must remain, the essential purpose of a state. From this failure (or is it unwillingness?) arises that opportunity for criminal or at least semicriminal elements not only to prosper materially but to enforce their own rule by their own means—in other words, to establish their own authority. It was thus that a new kind of barbaric rulership emerged after the total collapse of Roman imperial authority. Even during most of the Middle Ages, men were regularly enlisted to fight on behalf of their local overlords, though not for a cause so vague as their state. Something like this may soon happen again. While history does not repeat itself, a new kind of feudalism may be the prospect not only before Russia but also before much that remains of the so-called civilized world.

VI

An instructive example of what happens when the authority of the state is weak may now be apparent in Italy, a country whose society and history are



A detail from Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Allegory of Good Government* (1338–39)

profoundly different from those of Russia. Recently, the majority of Italian voters turned against the ruling political parties not only because of revelations of their large-scale corruption but also because the Christian Democratic governments proved unable to control the Mafia and, in some instances, to be in collusion with it. In other words, the corruption of the government was complemented, indeed enhanced, by the feebleness of the authority of the Italian state.

The difference between Italy and Russia derives, of course, from the historical differences in the characteristics of the two very different societies. “Civil society” in Italy has always existed because of the strong private bonds of the Italian family, with its humane (and often opportunistic) features. But while civil (or, more precisely, private) society in Italy has existed for a long time, the united Italian state did not exist until 1870.* And

*Consider now not only the difference between Italy and Russia but, alas, between Italy and the United States. In June 1992, a vast crowd of Sicilians demonstrated in Palermo for the enforcement of the laws, against the Mafia, and against the weakness of the Italian government in fighting it. In New York at the same time, a smaller but more violent crowd of Italian-Americans demonstrated in favor of the convicted Mafioso and assassin John Gotti, against the enforcement of the law, and against the authority of the state that prosecuted and convicted him. (Another difference: the Italian-American demonstrators in New York, all Republicans now, waved American flags, convinced as they were that they represented true American nationalism.)

here the example of Italy may be instructive, for it was in Italy that not only our “modern” civilization but the very idea and experience of the modern state began, five or six hundred years ago.

The concept, and the practice, of the modern state as we know it arose among the Italian city-states of the Renaissance (together with many other things, such as modern political theory and the practice of modern diplomacy). Despite ancient precedents, this concept was new and extraordinary then; the great historian Jakob Burckhardt, author of *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, entitled one of his famous chapters, “The State as a Work of Art.” The formulation of the ideal of the state and its implementation at the city level did not lead to the unification of Italian-speaking people into a single state; that idea and that achievement lay far in the future. Nor were the Medicis, Sforzas, and Estes liberal democrats. But the Italian-spawned concept of the sovereign state soon spread to Western Europe, as did other achievements of the Renaissance. The first Bourbons of France and the first Tudor king of England were no liberal democrats either, but the concept and the practice of the modern state were indissolubly bound to the rise of the sovereign (and, thus, in many ways absolute) monarch.

That rise of powerful monarchies included—strange as it may seem—a democratic element. It was, to a large extent,



"I am the state," declared Louis XIV.

propelled by a popular reaction against the aristocratic feudalism of the Middle Ages, with its capricious wars and exactions by feudal lords. The new monarchs were supported by the rising middle classes, whom they had seemed to protect. It is not wholly ascertainable whether Louis XIV really said, "L'état c'est moi." What is ascertainable is that he was less the incarnation than the principal representative of the state, the king being the first servant of the state rather than the state being the servant of the king. And then, a century or two later, came another change. The centralization of state power in the court of a king was becoming less and less efficient and less and less tolerable for the same middle and upper-middle classes whose ancestors had once welcomed the protection issuing from the untrammelled powers of a king. Some kings were condemned to death; other were rejected; still others were constrained to rule according to constitutions.

The supreme and unquestionable authority of monarchs was gone. But the supreme and unquestionable authority of the state was not. The American state was born and baptized not in 1776 but in 1789, after the ratification of a constitution was followed by

the inauguration of an elected president. He was supposed to represent the monarchical element in a constitution that had been composed to represent the checks and balances of a "Mixed Government," including (in the classical Greek meaning of the terms) monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic elements, all for serving the best possible purposes of the American state.

Presidential government, especially in the United States, amounts to a constitutional elective monarchy. In other states, especially in Western Europe, constitutional hereditary monarchies have continued to exist, together with elected governments with liberal and democratic practices not altogether different from those of the United States. That the actual powers of these hereditary monarchies have greatly diminished is obvious. Somewhat less diminished—though this varies from country to country—is the popular respect accorded to traditional heads of families representing the first servants of the state. So is the respect due to the father or mother of a family inseparable from his or her function as its first servitor. A family will not prosper under the absolute tyranny of a parent; but then, a family cannot really be said to exist if governed by the sovereign principle of populism. The restoration of the liberal and democratic states of Western Europe after World War II included the restoration of their constitutional monarchies, in Holland, Belgium, Denmark, and Norway, for example; the American acceptance of the continuance of the monarchy in Japan made the swift ending of the war possible; Franco's acceptance of the grandson of the last king of Spain as his successor has provided an element of stability, too. Thus it is regrettable that the restoration of a constitutional monarch as head of state was eschewed by the governments in Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, perhaps even Russia, during the period of anarchy that followed the collapse of their former authoritarian or totalitarian governments. But it is not my purpose to set forth the virtues of hereditary—and constitutional—monarchies. It is to suggest

that the authority of the state, like the authority of a family, is inseparable from the very idea, and practice, of civilization.

VII

Note now the title of Burckhardt's great work: *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. It should suggest something that has been greatly obscured: that the concept of civilization is something older than the modern concept of "culture," and that the former appeared about the same time as the modern institution of the state. During the last 100 years we have, by and large, come to accept an idea of German provenance: that culture is something higher than mere civilization. This was a romantic notion. Civilization meant a certain material and governmental order, a bourgeois ideal. Culture meant the higher things of the mind—and of the soul. The English, said Germans both before and during World War I, were a nation of shopkeepers, civilized, yes, but without much *Kultur*. The Germans were a *Kulturvolk*. We know where this exaltation of *Kultur* over *Zivilisation* got them. But elsewhere, too, this positing of the superiority of culture took root: among American intellectuals who lamented the inadequacy of American culture (while richly profiting from American civilization).

This belief in the superiority of culture to civilization is a dangerous one. The Greeks had no word for culture. They had other concepts and words: "civic" and "civility," which, like "polis" and "politic" (wherefrom many of our words such as "city," "citizen," "urbane," and "urbanity" derive) were the opposites of barbarity and barbarism. Culture

in English and other European languages originally referred to cultivation. For a long time it was inseparable from agriculture; then it was applied metaphorically to the cultivation of minds. "Civilize," in English, appears first in 1601: "to make civil; to bring out of a state of barbarism; to instruct in the arts of life; to enlighten and refine." In other words, the notions of civilization and civility preceded the later, and still present, notion of culture. Culture depends on civilization—not the other way around.

There are reasons to think that the chasm dividing conservatives and liberals in this country now is cultural—that is, deeper than the differences over taxes and welfare. But again: the problem is



Celebrating cultural roots: The model of a Viking boat is part of the pageantry on the Nazi-inspired Day of German Art in 1939.

wrongly stated. Those who—in my opinion, rightly—are worried about "multiculturalism" do not see that the real problem is, rather, multicivilization: the breaking up of standards of civilization that in a state must be sufficiently unitary. Culture may be tribal. Civilization is not.

So now we face something new in the long history of mankind. We can now have culture without civilization. With this achievement, the progressive notion of the great chain of evolution—from primitiveness to civilization to culture—has become absurd and laughable.

Yes, you cannot have civilization without some culture. But when civilization breathes and lives and is strong, culture

will arise; it will take care of itself. Must government promote culture at all? That is at least arguable. What is not arguable is that government must protect civilization. When it fails to do so, government as we know it dissolves, with first anarchy and then barbaric tyranny succeeding it.

When a civilization functions, so do its public institutions. One hundred years ago, American public schools, public hospitals, public parks, and other public facilities and services were among the best in the world. Since that time, the very sense of what is “public” has decayed: our public schools, public hospitals, and public transportation are shunned by many people. (Notice only the debasing suggestion of the license plates of buses in many states: MASS TRANSIT). What the “privatization” of these institutions has meant is nothing but the replacement of one bureaucracy by another—and, almost always, the latter is of an inferior nature. (The same applies to the relationship of federal to state bureaucracies.) There is absolutely no guarantee that the bureaucracy of a health insurance company will be more humane, or even more efficient, than the federal civil servant looking over your Medicare records, or that the Nevada Department of Revenue will be more accurate, or considerate, in computing your taxable income than the Internal Revenue Service.

The purpose of government includes the protection of domesticity and privacy through the maintenance of sufficient law

and order to guarantee the safety of citizens so that they can prosper freely. But we have long forgotten that it is more difficult to be free than not to be free. Liberals as well as conservatives have contributed to this kind of amnesia. The former have been taking civilization, and its progress, for granted; the latter seem not to understand that freedom is not the root of civilization but its fruit, and that civilization means the restriction of many a freedom. Primitivism, pornography, and multiculturalism have been promoted, or at least defended, by many liberals. But we face another phenomenon, too: barbarism promoted by people who call themselves conservatives. Emerson wrote that “The corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language.” The reverse is true; and the much vaunted Information Explosion may accelerate the corruption.

The danger that threatens us—yes, here in the United States—is the breakdown not of culture but of civilization itself—which, in turn, depends on the proper authority of the state and on the proper practices of government. These practices may be bureaucratic rather than democratic, exaggerated as well as constraining, abstractly humanitarian yet in reality inhuman. Still our enemy is not the state, and not even government itself. It is the misconception of such terms as Progress and Freedom—confusing masses of people in the name of an antigovernment populism, leading to anarchy first and to tyranny afterwards, or to a future novel mixture of both.