

Reconsidering the Idea of the State

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## RECONSIDERING THE IDEA OF THE STATE

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Michael Spicer's *Public Administration and the State: A Postmodern Perspective* (2001) stands in an American tradition (see for example Skocpol, 1985) of attempts to bring the state back in as the focal point of the study of politics and administration (Bartelson, 2001). Recentering political and administrative analysis upon the state concept seems to be highly problematic in the stateless American political culture, as the idea of the state as the centralized political apparatus placed above society does not fit too well (Nettl, 1968; Rutgers, 2001; Stillman, 1990). However, Spicer's invocation of the state does not concern the state as the political apparatus of society, but the *idea* of the state (or sometimes, vision of the state).

Spicer himself borrows this notion from the work of Michael Oakeshott, who understands the state as "representing the terms under which individuals understand their actions to be related to each other and to the actions of their government; that is, the terms of engagement by which individuals see themselves as joined with each other and with their government in a political association" (Spicer, 2001, p. 14). The idea of the state thus constitutes an account of the core values and parameters of a political community. Spicer argues that our understanding of government, including public administration, is contingent upon the idea of the state.

Though it is quite uncommon in modern political thought to take the state as an idea, Spicer's approach is not altogether new. He himself refers to Dyson, who holds the state to be "a category of mind" (Dyson, 1980, p. 3). Other authors have understood the state in this vein as well. Vincent (1987, p. 219) remarks that "the state is not primarily an empirical entity at all. We cannot touch or see a State. It is nothing but a mental category, although it may be an extremely concrete one. In some societies it becomes a customary disposition in the population." More recently, Nelson (2006, p. 127) asserts that "to understand the modern state means to understand it not merely empirically as a set of governing institutions, but as a conceptual and ideological structure that orders those institutions in some (constitutional) pattern." The most thorough and ambitious elucidation of the idea of the state however is

Peter Steinberger's work *The Idea of the State* (2004). I will follow his account in order to sustain and develop the concept.

A large portion of Steinberger's argument is devoted to epistemological issues. He associates himself with the post-Kantian consensus, which holds that human knowledge does not have an Archimedean foundation because the possibility of knowledge is contingent upon built-in concepts that together constitute a web. The content of these concepts is inscribed in and flows from the conceptual and linguistic infrastructure of society (Steinberger, 2004, p. 289).

This understanding of knowledge applies to our understanding and judgment of political and administrative phenomena as well. These cannot be accessed from an initial and neutral vantage point, as they are contingent upon the idea of the state. This idea constitutes an ideational structure, a web of beliefs or concepts, which reflects deep-seated notions of how the world really is.

Here, Spicer's and Steinberger's accounts are on par, both agreeing that the idea of the state informs our understanding of politics and governance. Steinberger, however, pushes this thought further, considering the idea of the state as the *foundation* of every state (or political society). As Steinberger states: social life "is deeply informed, shaped, constrained and underwritten . . . by the structure of moral and metaphysical presuppositions in which we operate" (p. 321). As the systematic structure of ideas on the basis of which individuals of society seek jointly to control the physical objects that surround them, the idea of the state makes social life possible (p. 21). The idea of the state constitutes the foundation of the way of life, the form of a political society.

This foundational role of the idea of the state must be understood in the context of Steinberger's larger institutional understanding of human activity. Institutions are structures of patterned human activity. Institutions, according to Steinberger, not only *provide* a certain collective way of understanding, but basically *are* collective ways of understanding the world (p. 21). Institutions are essentially structures of intelligibility; that is, structures of concepts, judgments and beliefs.

Society consists of different institutions and consequently ideational structures, like families, churches, firms, and schools. The state should not be taken to be just one institution among many. According to Steinberger, it is a larger, all-encompassing institution, composed by the various other institutions of society. As the source of their mutual connection and foundation and expression of their unity, the state is "the institution of institutions" (p. 22). Consequently, the idea of the state is concerned with the accommodation of the different institutions

of the state and the scope, the justification, and method of political action that is necessary for this. "Social disagreements can be resolved only with reference to society's broader view of the nature of things, i.e. the underlying structure of concepts, theories and claims . . . that make it possible for its citizens to interact with one another in a coherent, intelligible and productive fashion" (p. 37). So we see that the idea of the state is a complex ideational structure that enables the existence of political associations.

### CIVIL ASSOCIATION, PLURALISM, AND THE IDEA OF THE STATE

The members of any functioning society share to a large extent, implicitly or explicitly, in the idea of the state. A certain amount of unity therefore characterizes the institution of the state. Apparently, this does not fit well with the idea of the state Spicer prefers—the civil association—which allows the members of a state to have conflicting interests and different accounts of the good life. Spicer argues that our "postmodern condition" renders this idea of political community as the only possible one because different language games that resist unity characterize society (Spicer, 2001, p. 89ff). This, however, raises the question of whether the idea of the state as foundation of social life could allow for such plurality. Can the idea of the state as civil association keep the state together?

To answer these questions, I turn to Steinberger's assertion that any society is held together by an underlying and widely shared structure of truth. This view does not mean to preclude the existence of matters of disagreement, but that in well-ordered societies, they are not fundamental, or only selectively and partially so. If there are fundamental conflicts for which "agreeable and substantive terms of accommodation cannot be discovered in an underlying structure of truth . . . then a state would cease to be a state in any meaningful sense. Here failed states come into the picture" (Steinberger, 2004, p. 232). What degree of difference societies are able to handle cannot be determined *a priori*. The difference between a functioning, orderly society and a society of anarchy and war is "the difference between two points along a continuum" (p. 232). Any political state is "more-or-less orderly . . . the consensus it enjoys is more-or-less widespread, the idea of the world that it represents more-or-less coherent" (p. 232).

Steinberger's elaboration of the idea of the state therefore does not preclude the state to be a civil association. Every political order allows for disagreements as long as they are not too fundamental and other

common beliefs allow for their accommodation. Moreover, common beliefs might justify conflicts of interests, in which case the differences are not fundamental. Consequently, an idea of the state as civil association could very well be foundational for the existence of political societies.

As any state, this social order can only function if the assumptions of this order are widely spread across society; the members of the state should, explicitly or implicitly, agree on this *particular* interpretation of the nature of their association. This understanding should be ingrained in the culture of a society, which gives that community a particular nature. Consequently, in order to make difference and plurality possible, the state as civil association is based on some kind of unity or communality. The notion of underlying unity generally does not fit in the pluralistic self-image and is consequently often overlooked.

Though Spicer clearly points out that the civil association needs consensus on the rules of the game, he gives the impression that the civil association is a natural solution, which is compatible with every account of the good life and any language game. However, it requires from the different institutions that make up the state (and different accounts of the good) that they agree on this role for the political and remain within its confines. Therefore, the existence of a civil association requires more community than its own pluralistic self-description allows.

### THE IDEA OF THE STATE AS PURPOSIVE?

The idea of the state consists of beliefs that underwrite political life. Do these ideas and consequently political society have a purposive nature? Even though much of American administrative thought takes this for granted, Spicer opposes this understanding of the state vehemently. He is like many pluralists skeptical of any understanding of the common good that transcends the rules to deal with diversity of interests and truth beliefs (Cochran, 1974). Instead of being purpose-based, social life should be rule-based, whereby these rules should not be instruments for fostering higher ends. These rules (or laws) should be independent of purposes, so that individual members of the state can decide on their own ends (Spicer, 2001, p. 23).

However, does it make sense to consider political societies as non-purposive? Not according to Steinberger, as the idea of the state is “an intellectual world, formulated so as to reflect and promote the social good” (Steinberger, 2004, p. 13). The most important claims that are part of the theory of the state concern the ultimate purposes of society, which are “fundamental to and at least partly constitutive of the essence

of political society” (p. 50). These purposes concern “an array of goals that, in the end always reduce to broad notions of human flourishing” (p. 182). Every functioning society therefore has an implicit notion of the common good, though different states construe this in different ways.

Steinberger’s assertion that the idea of the state is always in the end purposive clashes with Spicer’s categorical rejection of the state as a purposive association. In this disagreement, I will take sides with Steinberger. For three reasons, Spicer’s denunciation of purposes entails a distorted picture of the nature of political associations.

First, Spicer’s application of the term “(non-) purposive” for political associations is problematic. He strictly reserves the notion of (substantial) purposes of the state to “a common shared end or set of ends,” which are only achieved if its members “conform their own actions and their own ends” to them (pp. 17-18). Purposive associations are to Spicer collectivistic, as individuals are merely means to these aims that transcend their personal aims. Though history offers many examples of states that have indeed imposed such collective purposes, it would be a misrepresentation to consider every purpose of the state in such a manner. The ultimate purpose of the state does not have to concern the flourishing of the totality at the expense of the flourishing of the individual members, as the flourishing of the totality is *in* the flourishing of the members. We should not necessarily consider the purposes of individuals and those of the association as mutually exclusive categories; the purpose of the state should flow from the purposes of the individuals that make up the state.

Consequently, it is questionable whether we should consider the civil association as non-purposive at all. Such an association has a view on what it would mean for the state and its members to flourish, giving high value to individual rights, autonomy, and freedom. As such, the civil association is purposive, having implicit ideals that underpin its political and administrative practices. That the collective purposes leave much room for individual ends and consequently social differentiation does not mean that they have no purposes at all.

Second, it is questionable whether we can do without purposes that concern the association as a whole. Spicer’s civil association does only allow purposes that enhance the conditions of individuals to choose their own ends. However, there seem to be sundry purposes that are important but difficult to sustain from such a perspective. To give some examples: monetary stability, protection of the environment and the landscape, the quality of education (eventually including cultural

knowledge, such as history and literature), a good system of public transportation, and the integration of migrants. All these policies presuppose a vision of the good (and the purposes) of the state *as a whole*.

Here, I do not set out to diminish the importance of individuals to choose their private purposes. However, as single purpose of political association and sole criterion for the legitimacy of public policies, this does not do justice to the nature of political societies. As a consequence of the interdependent nature of society, one cannot completely separate one's own purposes from those of others and the association as a whole. The flourishing of individuals is tied with the flourishing of the whole.

Third, Spicer's rejection of purposes in political life could amount to the disappearance of politics in any real sense, as politics is fundamentally about determining the purposes that constitute a political community. Contrary to Spicer's assumptions, the purposes of a political association do not have to be imposed upon individuals in an authoritarian fashion. In "self-governing" political communities, citizens participate in the determination of the common good.

Steinberger's (2004) account of the relation between the idea of the state and the nature of politics is very helpful for sustaining this point. According to him, we should not represent the idea of the state as completely transparent. In reality, every idea of the state defies a final or complete grip: "the scope and complexity of the theory of the state [is] staggering [and] beyond what any single human intelligence could grasp" (p. 182). In any complex society a certain amount of ambiguity, confusion and disagreement at the margins is virtually inescapable. "The intelligent management of these uncertainties is largely a matter of determining which views are most compatible with the more central uncontroversial features of the larger background" (p. 261). This is the fundamental task of political life. Politics may therefore best be understood in large part as an ongoing and unavoidable struggle for the margins. "The state must be understood and must constantly seek to understand itself as an elaborate but fundamentally coherent idea" (p. 182).

Spicer's limitation of common purposes for political societies gives a distorted picture of the nature of politics. It would make superfluous politics as reasoned argument about what is in the common good. His account predetermines whatever may count as a political purpose and holds other interpretation of the state's communality illegitimate. Consequently, politics must refrain from what is essential for it: determining deliberatively the common good. Moreover, Spicer's account of political communities renders politics impossible. Common purposes are

taken to be absent or irrelevant in the civil association, while in my opinion, following Steinberger and an older tradition that can be traced back to Aristotle, politics and self-government is based upon things that are in common.

## ADMINISTRATION AND THE STATE

More than a century before Spicer's effort to bring the state back into administration, Woodrow Wilson (1887, p. 201) claimed that "the idea of the state is the conscience of administration." Does the idea of the state still have this bearing?

This paper has claimed—in line with Spicer—that the idea of the state should indeed be central, as the understanding of government flows from the idea of the state. The practice of public administration should be tied to the concepts and purposes that guide the political association, while administrative thought is contingent upon the larger vision of the state. As a consequence, administrative practice should take the idea of the state to heart ("the conscience of administration"), while administrative reflection cannot afford neglecting these fundamental issues.

Focusing upon the idea of the state prevents us from being unaware of our presuppositions. On the basis of this knowledge, we can argue more fruitfully on what would be the common good or, more concretely, what would be in a specific case a good public policy. In line with Steinberger, we think uncovering the idea of the state helps making better political judgments. Consequently, it is of vital importance to link administration with the idea of the state.

However, connecting administration with the idea of the state entails two dangers as well. In the first place, in our interpretation of the idea of the state, we could easily take a part for the whole. As I see it, Spicer falls into this trap. He is right in stressing the importance of individual freedom to follow one's own purposes, but goes too far to consider this the only purpose of political associations. The idea of the state is complex, sometimes apparently contradictory, and we do not do it justice if we interpret it one-sidedly. In this respect, Spicer does not differ from the purposive authors that he criticizes.

In the second place, we should take care with the application of the idea of the state. The purposes of an idea of the state do not directly legitimate administrative action. Part of the idea of the state is the way in which power is to be executed legitimately, consisting of the state's constitutional set-up and logic. Consequently, administration cannot



bypass its constitutional role by invoking the idea of the state because the constitution is the realization of the idea of the state.

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