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INDIVIDUALS, STATE, AND SOCIETY.
Western Europe from 1800 to the present. An Overview

This survey focuses on the relations between state, society, and individual citizens in Western Europe in the last 200 years. It opposes the idea of “civil society” as a refuge for individuals against the state. Both state and “civil society” have threatened the freedom and autonomy of the individual citizen in different ways, but they have also filled protective functions in other ways.

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State and society have been in a conflict-ridden relation during centuries. The spokesmen of the state – once most often kings and some emperors, later mostly presidents or prime ministers or equivalents – up to the late nineteenth century looked in the first place at the security and the splendour of the state and thus focussed on foreign policy. Spokesmen of the society – a far more various lot than those acting as representatives of the state – wanted to draw the general public’s attention to domestic problems and domestic policy. Sometimes these spokesmen became leaders of new movements gathering an occupational group – for example, peasants in times of crop failure – or were elected leaders of a guild; on other occasions they opposed to the Church authorities. According to some discontented these authorities were characterised by slackness and introducing unwanted reforms of Church service (for example, Russian “old believers”) but others, in quite a reverse opposition, complained that Church authorities had no real understanding of the need of Church service reforms (for example, Swedish “free church movement”).

Please note that I use the term “spokesmen” for those who stood up as representatives of state or society. The spokesmen were individuals, but they were – and are – taken to represent a collective interest, which they were only articulating. In both cases these individuals were talking for networks of people. We have usually no difficulty to recognise the actors in society as “groups” or “movements” (spiritual or occupational) or “gangs” (political or illegal mafias) or associations living by their rules (like trade unions or sports clubs). We also find that all such associations or “social groups” have a fundamental nature of being networks based on an internal communication and most often with a message for society at large. I regard the state as another type of network where the network relations are fixed by juridical formulas¹, not quite unlike the voluntary associations of society (joint-stock companies as well as trade unions), where spokesmen of all sort have to obey internal

¹ Stråth and Torstendahl 1992.

rules if they want to hang on to their posts. In the state the rules are of course internally valid among the actors concerned in the network, but they have also an external function as the actors have to be – and had to be in the past – recognised as spokesmen of the state by the entire society and not only by the actors of the state. One may ask where individuals come into the picture. The answer is that they constitute the fundamental elements of all branches of society and the state. They also form the basis of policy-making in Western Europe today but not necessarily in the whole world. The subtleties of policy-making cannot be penetrated here, but development has generally gone from ancient autocracies in one or the other form to inclusion of conditions like consent of a parliament (elected or selected in one way or the other), and further to consent of the people. The form of the people's consent may be understood quite differently as we see today in countries like China, India, Russia, USA, Britain, and Germany. Even in Saudi Arabia and Iran the rulers today seems to claim consent by the people, but sometimes secondary to the claim of consent by God. This may seem to be an awfully general introduction to an article in a journal. If you are already thinking that it is more sociology or political science than history, I want to add that I will certainly be slightly more concrete in the following, but my ambition is not to examine the details of history but rather some large-scale changes over centuries.

What happened in Western Europe during the two centuries from 1800 to the present was that the networks of the state grew stronger and stronger, and so did the networks within society with no direct connection to the state. On both sides this development is closely related to the growth of bureaucracies. The hierarchical structure of bureaucracies should not overshadow the fact that in the past as in the present they can also include staff people, who are given a considerable freedom. But the very definition of a staff is that it gives only advice. Staff persons do not decide how a certain case shall be resolved, but they can give advice in individual cases as well as in matters of principle. Such staff persons have generally been professionals: physicians, nurses, psychologists, economists, sociologists, natural scientists, technical specialists, architects, geographers, archivists, and even historians. These staff professionals should not be mixed up with such economists and business administration specialists who go into firms and offer their knowledge in order to be able to direct the decision process. Their function is another and they are also often directly involved in the hierarchy. Professionals are distinguished by their insistence on their professional integrity and autonomy².

Professionals are very often individualists, which sometimes is difficult to keep within bureaucratic bounds. But the very essence of professionalism is that a professional is not allowed to obey anyone's orders in matters that

² This argument on professionals sides with Freidson 2001, and it goes counter to those sociologists who have wanted to include management specialists among professionals.

affect the profession. If a superior professional is to be obeyed, it should be because of his or her better arguments on the matter, not because of his or her higher rank. Professional autonomy is a cornerstone of all professionalism – that is a credo which I share with Eliot Freidson.

Bureaucracies are built from another principle. Their leading objective is to carry through a policy decided upon by the state's policy makers or, within civil society firms, the board of directors or the general meeting of share-holders. When the state is thoroughly bureaucratized, as the late Russian empire, the leading advisors of the tsar, whatever their title or specific function, made it their primary concern to carry through the policy that the emperor had decided on. Normally, they did not question the usefulness of the policy, not even in their memoirs, but looked only to the means for its realisation.³ At least this is what they say, and if they thought otherwise most of them have tried to conceal their insubordination.

Bureaucratization has been a main concern for politicians and social philosophers and reformers since the middle of the nineteenth century. There is a popular notion of bureaucratization that visualises mighty half-human beings with paper bundles in their hands chasing poor “ordinary men and women” before them like sheep-dogs controlling sheep without actual violence, but the growth of bureaucracies was sometimes unobserved by contemporaries and soft in its practice. Bureaucracies have grown under all sorts of governments, independently of how these governments got their power and what have been the objectives of these governments. There is, however, a difference between different sorts of societies in how they relate to their bureaucracies. I have since long tried to typify social governance in Western Europe since the early nineteenth century in four phases:⁴

- 1) Classical Liberal Capitalism (from ca 1800/30 to around 1880) characterised by strong and strictly limited states with a small but forceful bureaucracy;
- 2) Organised Capitalism (from around 1880 to 1935/45) with growing bureaucracies in both private and public sectors – a period when the private sector had the initiative to structural changes;
- 3) Welfare (or Participatory) Capitalism (from 1935/45 to around 1980) a period when the state had resumed the initiative for changes, actively sought to engage citizens and private firms (welfare systems) and let its bureaucracies grow to manage the expanding state;
- 4) Negotiating Capitalism (from around 1980 to the present time) – with a shared initiative for changes between the private and the state sectors; the state primarily defending the reforms of the past and confronting an enterprising private sector with tempting news for citizens.

The dynamics of change may have been approximately the one that I have described. Seen from the perspective of individual citizens, however,

³ For the late imperial Russia and its servants, see Selunskaja & Torstendahl 2005.

⁴ This is developed in Torstendahl 1991, Chapter 1.

the last period has been one of both lost and regained freedom (again I must insist that I am talking about Western Europe). In that part of the world states have lost much of their authority, partly because of the new means that have materialised themselves through the digital revolution in society. But I will not try to make an analysis of the present situation, but rather to the roads that have led us towards the present situation.

The great mistake of governments wanting to lead society into welfare capitalism was their inability to keep bureaucracies in a close rein. They lost control in a society where bureaucracies tended to take initiatives on their own to improvements of practical nature and also to general changes, each of them on the matters that they were responsible for, such as, hospital care, physical planning of different regions, construction regulations, railway systems and railway speed differentiation, road traffic regulation, new motorways, and so on. Structurally this led to a de-politicisation, that is, that certain administrative organs took part of the command over questions that earlier were in the political domain, even if these bureaucratic organs were not created to handle such tasks. The opposition became strong against this development in the 1960s and 1970s but it was not united in what was useful and what should be the remedy. Many critics saw this as a new corporative society that had arisen on the ruins of social democracy in Western Europe, but others pointed out that similar trends were at hand in other parts of the world where socialist ideas had never got any firm footing (for instance, the USA).

Western Europe was not different from many other parts of the world as regards two traditional objectives of the state, but it added one more after 1800, “the people” as represented by firms, associations, trade unions, religious organisations, and so on. The policy in many states turned from the principle “keep them calm” to “make them happy”. All states have not had the same objectives and the differences are important for the different policies followed. When “the people” became a main objective for the West European state, it was in the first hand a liberal principle of the freedom of the individual to choose his or her way of life that was acknowledged. In the early nineteenth century social care was mainly a conservative theme, and it was derived from the patriarchal responsibility of the head of family to support the well-being of its members. From the middle of the century another argument for social care and welfare began to be voiced – the right of all members of society to lead a decent life. The road from the freedom of association to the right to a decent life went through religious groups and associations as well as through trade unions. Of course, political ideologists played a role, even though the most influential, Marx, did not especially stress the need of social welfare.

I cannot follow the changes within society as it usually was in Western Europe in the first half of the XXth century. In the period the two World Wars were fought, and most West European states were heavily involved in both. They caused enormous pains for individuals but no dramatic structural chang-

es⁵ except where political revolutions took place and their relation to war was only indirect. What I want to stress is the gradual development in the period of Welfare Capitalism of the big companies, of state efforts to organise the economy in a way that gave a guarantee for a decent life to all citizens, and of voluntary organisations trying to form lobby groups. During the period of Welfare Capitalism one evident change is the rise of the very large companies, the mega companies (a structural innovation imported from the USA), which embrace a lot of different types of products and services but have one common corporate board of directors and one chief executive officer. Their divisions may correspond to different products or regions and they seek to economise the production of the firm as much as possible.⁶ Alfred Chandler, who has written much on the change within industry and business generally, does not hide that this meant also a considerable growth of the bureaucracies in the large companies, an obvious parallel to what happened in state administration.

The impact of these changes on the life of the individual citizen was primarily better and more food, better housing, and more spare time. These changes were of another character if we compare to the changes that took place in the last quarter of the XXth c. and the following decade and a half, the period of Negotiating Capitalism. Then growth of companies was met by another trend, outsourcing. It started from purely economic grounds but it soon turned out that delegating certain services to companies outside of the own enterprise made decisions considerably easier within the large company. When HR (human relations) was outsourced instead of constituting a department inside the company, there were several possibilities to avoid hiring certain persons, who might claim discrimination of colour, sex, or appearance. In addition, persons who applied for posts in the company could not get any answers to their questions, why they were not hired, as the administrators of the middleman company, who had been given the HR functions, were saying that they did not make decisions but only ranking from different variables. When earlier departments that handled complaints about products were outsourced, this also meant a way of getting around complications for the company. When complaining customers and consumers submitted their complaints, they found that they met people who had nothing to do with the production and sometimes did not understand what the core of the complaint was.

Companies have also tried another strategy on a grand scale. They offer the possibility to get some reduction on prices if the consumer agrees to become a “member” of the company. This also leads to a closer bond between the customer and this company (reductions are often progressive to sum of bought products) and it also entails a possibility to map individual patterns of

⁵ I have developed this theme in in Torstendahl 1999 (esp. 32-34) transl. to Russian in Torstendahl 2014, pp. 182-201, esp. 185-191.

⁶ Chandler 1990), see esp. part 1, pp. 1-46.

consumption among customers. Thus individuals have been tempted by slight advantages to facilitate marketing and selling procedures for the companies.

Another big change in society and the patterns of living among people in general was the breakthrough of the TV in the 1960s and 70s. This changed the family life for many, as the most popular TV programmes were available only at certain times of the day. The popularity of the TV had repercussions on the newspaper market. Even if newspapers adapted their contents for TV consumers, giving programme surveys and interviews with TV stars, their position as first-hand informer of political and other news has been fundamentally undermined gradually. The latest period that we can analyse has brought “social media” into the focus and many young members of society take their information exclusively or almost exclusively from such media discarding newspapers. The new so-called “social” media have had their own history. What started as a by-product to other sites as “chat” opportunities has grown into an enormous industry, where Facebook currently is at the very top position. People as individuals share with each other their lives and interests. An arena has thus become opened that had no counterpart earlier, but its effects are visible on other forms of social life. According to traditions from before the Second World War the family was a centre where children could – and sometimes should – discuss their education, successes and failures and their attractions to the other sex. “Chatting” and “mate groups” took over with a beginning in the 1980s and later expanding enormously with picture exchange and showing details of one’s own family life and adventures. It was also easily used to harass others. When mobile phones became the centre of information, family members often became less bound to each other than earlier just by missing information of the other members’ problems and aspirations.

In many important ways life for the individual has become easier than it was before 1800. Primarily with the increase in standard of living. Better food, fewer fatal illnesses, greater possibilities to travel are among the effects of this new standard of living. But as all coins this has a reverse. Control functions have also grown and these flourish in both society and state. The individuals have to take into account several types of controls, some of them based on voluntary decisions, others being brought in by structural actors. We buy by credit cards which make it easy to trace our steps from one shop to the other and, also, make it possible to see some of our preferences. As this has gone on for a period, we can see some of the effects. Advertising becomes more individualised and takes up the things that may be inferred as preferences. Registration in social media is (in principle) voluntary, but many young persons cannot really opt out of this, when all their schoolmates participate. Both young and older persons sometimes feel that they are herded as sheep into one direction by leading participants in groups. Some are in fact suffering from the control that is part of the group existence. There is also a real mobbing going on in “social media”, even if most participants enjoy media only as

providing a sense of community and togetherness. “Social media” are, however, also an efficient extrajudicial form of punishment, when former prisoners are hanged out with name and address to make their neighbours scared of them and to make it difficult or impossible for them to get a place to live or a job to earn their living. This use and other misuses of “social media” has given rise to serious questions of the responsibility for what is published there.

That the state is a controller of what individuals do is perhaps less surprising than society’s control functions. The state has social security registers, census registration, tax registers, and registration of legal offences of all sorts. Contrary to what people often think the trend has been to limit state registration in many countries in Western Europa, while society in the same countries is expanding control rather than the opposite.

To conclude: In the year 1800 only members of the élite in their daily life met a bureaucracy, and that is valid for Europe and most other parts of the world. In 1900 bureaucracies were numerous but ordinary citizens rarely met them in Europe or elsewhere. Further one hundred years later individual citizens could hardly avoid meeting the demands from bureaucracies, public as well as private, in their daily life on the workplace or at home via internet, phone or mail. The control of the individual has increased. From the state this is mainly a control of legality of the individual’s actions. One may say that it is much more difficult now than a hundred years earlier to hide from state controls that one has transgressed the bounds of legality. At the same time it is far less possible to escape from societal control of one’s private life in the year 2015 than a hundred years earlier. For citizens state controls are often intended to protect citizens against illegal activities, which they want to be protected from. Many West Europeans seem to find private sector control worse than state control, but yet they like to be part of social networks that make social control possible.

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