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The Almighty, Impotent State

Or, the Crisis of Authority

————— ◆ —————
SIGMUND KNAG

That government authority is in crisis is not a new idea. A book recently reviewed by me in this journal, Nicholas Kittrie's *The War against Authority* (1995), demonstrates that political authority must constantly deal with dissidents and rebels. But warnings of crisis have grown frequent and now come from many quarters. The high ambitions of modern government contrast curiously with the actual sentiments voiced by common people, which are frequently cynical and contemptuous.

Although agreement is growing that a crisis of authority exists, there is less agreement regarding its nature and causes. In the following discussion of the crisis of authority, I shall uphold the following contentions.

— Authority, properly understood and exercised, has a valuable social function that no credible political theory can neglect or deny. Its demise would spell the disintegration of society and the triumph of the rule of force.

— The very notion of authority has been gravely misunderstood in this century. Authority has been idolized, as in the interwar years, and thoughtlessly rejected, as in the student rebellion of the 1960s.

— Western governments now have more power than ever, particularly over economic relationships, in part because of the prevailing faith in the Positive State.

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— Despite the preceding contention, present government does not have much authority. The conspicuous contempt for politics and politicians in all Western countries is at odds with the idealistic official conception of government.

— The government of the “bad old days” was paternalistic, whereas the present kind of Western government may be called maternalistic. The old power was harsh and visible, modern power soft and all-pervasive. The emphasis is now less on justice and punishment and more on propaganda and intervention.

— Although present government has extensive powers, the exercise of that power requires negotiation with the corporate organizations of business, labor, agriculture, and other groups. In the political culture of the corporate-pluralist state, deal making has supplanted deliberation. Although government has wide powers, any decision it makes is open to challenge and negotiation, and every group must be heard. The authority of government is weak because its powers are great.

— The weak authority of modern government is particularly obvious and damaging in the governance of its own large institutions (hospitals, schools, and universities and, in many countries, broadcasting and arts institutions).

— The present kind of government fails in the crucial function of leadership; that is, it does not have the conviction to seize the initiative and give bold direction to the course of events. Maternalism or political correctness leads government to doubt itself. The consensus-seeking and deal-making components of corporate pluralism bind its hands and feet with a thousand vague promises to a thousand interest groups. Its activist philosophy makes it dizzy with the burden of conflicting duties. Incapable of acting vigorously in the public interest, it has power but lacks authority.

— We need to restore the authority of government. But doing so means rejecting the idea of the Positive State. More authority requires less government. It also means a more local government, whose citizens can better understand and influence it, even identify with it. And it means a more democratic government, where citizens can effectively protest, undo decisions they disapprove, and place limits on government’s powers.

The Nature and Function of Political Authority

As an element of political theory, authority is one of the few fundamental concepts. As an element of the social order, it performs a crucial function. Yet it is shrouded in mystery and surrounded by controversy. To discuss

authority fruitfully, we must know what we are talking about.¹ Given the complexity and fundamentality of the concept of authority, no brief definition will do. We must arrive at understanding by gradually recognizing its characteristics.

Authority is a special social status enjoyed by an institution or person. Someone in authority speaks with a particular weight that can move people to concerted action. Authority thus enables leadership and social order. It is not the mere possession of superior strength, or power: essentially a social and spiritual fact, it depends on attitudes and perceptions and rests on legitimacy, that is, on the consent or respect or awe of the people.

Authority can be tied to a person, position, office, institution, or doctrine. It can also reside in particular persons because of their character or background, perhaps their determination, farsightedness, justice, charity, charm, family, fame, or fitness for the times.

Authority is needed, and found, in many fields. Pastors have religious authority, based on their insight into religious issues, personal fitness for such office, place in an ecclesiastical organization (the ordainment lends authority), and commitment to their flock. Judges have legal authority based on training, impartiality, and place in a court system. Similarly, authority can be possessed by businessmen, teachers, landowners, and other professionals.

Authority, as discussed here so far, is a broad social phenomenon. Political authority, which involves the right to use force, is a special variety of the broader thing. Needed for political work, it flows from persons and from their offices or positions. Its core is weight and tradition—we are more likely to defer to an institution of long standing. Other kinds of authority, such as spiritual or moral authority, rest more or less on the power of example, and do not presume the right to use force.

As a style of communication, authority lies between coercion and persuasion. In coercing, one says, “Do as I say, or else...!” In persuading, one says, “Look here, you really should...” One with authority essentially says, “Do it because I say so.” Authority does not give reasons, nor does it threaten; it speaks weightily and expects obedience. For example, a teacher who tells a pupil to be quiet and pay attention is exercising authority; she neither threatens nor pleads nor gives reasons; she speaks firmly and with a sense of conviction of her right to act as she does, and the pupil tends to do as he is told. Similar expressions of authority occur when an employer gives an instruction to an employee, a parent lays down the law to a child, or a jury renders a verdict.

1. For a particularly valuable discussion of authority from many points of view—legal, anthropological, political, and historical—see Friedrich (1958).

The word authority is of Latin origin. The Roman Republic distinguished among three related political qualities: *potestas* was the ensemble of an official's rights and powers; *imperium* was the power to issue commands in legal form backed by coercive sanction; and *auctoritas* was the right of the Senate to issue weighty counsel to the executive. In his *Römisches Staatsrecht*, Theodor Mommsen described the *auctoritas* of the Roman Senate as "less than command [Befehl] and more than consultation [Rathschlag]" (1888, 3:1033ff.). It carried significant weight but no absolute binding power.

Legitimacy and authority reflect each other: the legitimacy of one's rule confers authority on it. Authority is exercised by the ruler; legitimacy is granted by the subjects. A crisis of authority, then, is equally a crisis of legitimacy. In both cases the issue is the relation between rulers and ruled.

Both profound and highly readable, Guglielmo Ferrero's *The Principles of Power* (1942) is a commendable analysis of the social function of legitimacy. According to Ferrero, "Principles of legitimacy are justifications of power, that is, of the right to rule" (22). He defines government as "legitimate if power is conferred and exercised according to principles and rules accepted without question by those who must obey" (135). The two essential principles of legitimacy are the monarchic or aristocratic, in which power is transferred according to rules of succession, and the democratic, in which it is transferred according to election. Each can function well if adhered to correctly. Legitimacy's valuable social function is to civilize and humanize government by removing the reciprocal fear between the governors and the governed, thereby reducing their destructive mutual use of naked force to oppress or to rebel (chap. 4). Legitimacy implies a measure of mutual trust between the rulers and the ruled and largely replaces force with authority. Ferrero therefore calls the principles of legitimacy "the invisible genii of the city" (that is, of the political community). But neither principle of legitimacy is entirely rational and neither can remove fear and reduce force at a stroke. Each needs time to establish itself, being essentially psychological and subjective in its effect.

Political leadership is the exercise of political authority to seize the initiative and move policy in a certain direction. Political leaders seek to give direction to the masses, who cannot be commanded, only swayed. The leaders use the legitimacy of their positions to exercise influence on the course of political and perhaps social and economic affairs.

Pure force does not constitute authority; force and authority are different and complementary. We yield to threat because we wish to avoid extinction or grief. We defer to authority because we feel, however vaguely, that the person in authority has a right to sway us and that, at least in the long run, we are better off following his lead. Authority may be seen as the alter-

native to force, as the characteristic of a government that rules by legitimacy rather than by force. If authority—hence legitimacy—erodes, it will be replaced by force; either ordered force, meaning iron rule, or disordered force, meaning violent chaos. The key to a social order that is more than cold and merciless command met by sullen resignation and obedience, authority is the precondition of humaneness and civilization.

Used with scruple, authority fosters social cohesion and strength. In the best of cases, the bold and responsible use of authority lends strength to the weak, preserves order where chaos threatens, and provides unity and purpose where confusion reigns. Used rightly, authority benefits those led rather than those leading. Initiative by those in authority enables swift, decisive action when the seeking of consensus through deliberation is not feasible. Legitimate authority constitutes a bulwark against social predators or revolutionary despotism.²

Weakness or absence of natural authority leads to the unraveling of political leadership. Loss of leadership brings loss of direction and the threat of social chaos. And chaos may—indeed, most likely will—call forth strong and ruthless men who believe they can restore order. (In ancient Greek, tyrant meant essentially a strong leader who had risen with the support of the masses but who, because of the irregularity of his rise, lacked legitimacy. His modern counterpart is the populist dictator.) The larger and more complex the society, the more it depends on institutions of authority for its continued order, and the greater the chaos will be if that order breaks down.

The most fundamental causes of a weakening of authority are the loss of conviction by those in positions of authority and the appearance of doubt in the public mind as to whether leading persons or institutions have the right to their social positions, in other words, the loss of legitimacy. We know that authority has broken down when, after an authority has issued an injunction, citizens laugh in its face or reply, “Sez you!” or “That’s what you think!”—in other words, when deference disappears and is replaced by hostility, contempt, or derision. Authority must then assert itself, by becoming suitably nasty, or be lost.

Authority Crisis?

Is there an authority crisis? Well, everybody seems to think so: politicians and voters, pundits and journalists. In the Western world, politicians are held in general contempt more than ever. The position of politician, once considered a pretty important and admirable one, now ranks rather low in the credibility ratings, down there with journalists and lawyers. Voters feel

2. Of course, authority can be, and has been, abused or made into a false god.

free to make cynical statements about the political class in general, observing that government officials break campaign promises, waffle, double-talk, procrastinate, and feather their own nests. The politicians themselves complain that it is much more difficult to achieve voter consensus about policy than it was, say, twenty years ago. Voters seem to demand ever more of government, yet show less willingness to contribute, whether in taxes or in political support. Participation in elections is falling in all Western countries, although to an extent peculiar to each. In some countries, armed movements, thinking they ought to run things, pose obvious and literal challenges to authority. Youths idolize rebellion and insolence, and their tastes are eagerly reflected and reinforced by popular arts and fashionable journalism. Teachers have trouble keeping order in the classroom.

Yes, observers are right to agree that there is a crisis of authority. But agreement is lacking with respect to the nature and causes of the crisis.

Two Kinds of Modern Confusion about Authority

The twentieth century has witnessed two periods of confusion about authority. The first was the idolization of authority in the interwar years, when authority was defined inadequately and worshipped fanatically, resulting in the rejection of democracy and legality and in the condonation of dictatorship. The second was the postwar era with its New Left movement, which in various ways influenced the whole political spectrum. In the 1960s a remarkable awakening took place in academic and artistic circles, in which all authority was decried as tyranny, even the authority of the experienced over the novice, of parent over child, of teacher over student, of law over whim, of democratic decisions over sectarian goals. In conjunction with other developments, this trend created an aversion to the proper assertion of authority in Western countries and resulted in a tendency toward paralysis of society and government in the face of legal, economic, and moral disorder. Those in authority knew they should act but could not bring themselves to do so.

Both kinds of error are still with us, although the worship of political power has taken new forms. The fashion of regarding all authority as sinister or wrongfully inhibiting, whose history goes back at least to the French Revolution, has become a fixture in the modern worldview of certain leftists and certain libertarians.

If the first error consists of equating social order with coercively imposed order, the second error consists of neglecting the need for a social order or blithely assuming that order will come about solely from individual action. Some Rothbardian libertarians seem to embrace the idea of “spontaneous order” in that sense. And some Kropotkinian anarchists seem to think that in the absence of centralist government, some spirit will move indi-

viduals to coordinate their actions without the need for a hierarchy of leadership. Both are mistaken. Order may come about without central direction in more cases than commonly thought, but no order is spontaneous in the sense that it has no human agent or organizational form. Any extensive social order requires individual initiative—that is, leadership—and hierarchy, which implies authority (although not necessarily political authority) and deference by individuals. All cooperative social order requires individuals to restrain some of their own immediate desires in deference to the injunctions of authority. A concept of freedom that does not acknowledge this necessity must remain a pipe dream. No free society can come into being except by establishing authority and placing restraints on individual action. Political authority is only the most palpable manifestation of this general truth.

Although authority is an inescapable necessity, we have choices about the way it is practiced. One choice is between democracy and autocracy. In a democracy, political authority is established in cooperative fashion; in an autocracy, it is imposed by a dynasty. Another choice in authority is between a monolithic and a pluralistic (a free) society. In a perfectly monolithic society, political authority is the only source of order; in a free society, it is one among many sources, the others residing in the spheres of community, association, and family. There is also, within a pluralistic society, a choice of centralized or decentralized government. Under decentralism, the units at local and intermediate levels govern their own affairs; under centralism, they are instruments of central government.

Curiously, in today's political ethos the two errors often appear together, as a naïve belief in government power coupled with a lack of deference to just authority. Indeed, it often happens that in a person holding both views, the stronger one is, the stronger the other is. That condition is the core of today's crisis of authority. A balanced view would be both more resistant to power in general and more prepared to bow to just authority. In matters of government, it would suspect quantity and approve quality.

I certainly do not mean to suggest that the only proper attitude of citizens toward their government is to shut up and obey. But some kind of authority is proper and necessary if human society is to endure. Either today's government represents such authority, in which case we should defer to it and the present rejection of authority is a foolish fashion, or today's government has gone astray and given just offense, in which case we are right to challenge its legitimacy. I dare say both views contain some truth. Nevertheless, just authority is needed. If we do not approve the authority we have, we must attempt to establish another. Doing without authority is not an option. The constructive, long-term approach requires that we identify the conditions of legitimate authority and seek to bring them about where they are missing or to strengthen them where they are impaired. We should

entertain both a skepticism toward power and a reasonable willingness to defer to authority. The present idolization of hostility, contempt, and derision does not point toward freedom or order. Neither do the prevailing daydreams of all the good the government can do.

The New Maternalism

In the twentieth century the citizens of Western countries have embraced an abiding faith in the Positive State: the active, expansive, benevolent state that aims to promote general happiness through copious taxation, regulation, and institution building. An earlier form of the Positive State, absolute monarchy, was paternalistic and authoritarian, acting to keep all classes, not least the lower ones, in their places. The modern form, the socialist or welfare state, may well be called maternalistic, as it claims to act for the elevation and empowerment of the lower classes: feeding, instructing, and protecting the weak. To achieve this vast goal, the new Positive State, like the old, wields power. Indeed the new Positive State is more powerful than the old one because, in its new maternal role, it has more responsibilities. Where the old paternalism chastised pointedly, the new maternalism smothers massively. Before, the tools were justice and punishment; now they are education and therapy (or rather, propaganda and regulation).³ But positivism and power remain as before. Hence Robert Nisbet (1975) speaks of “the new despotism.” So-called political correctness has its roots here.

Today, as before, when all look to the state to handle the big issues, the ability of ordinary people to deal with life grows feeble. They retain their appetites but lose their responsibility. Embraced by government, they become like children.

In the old days, powers independent of government—autonomous powers between individuals and the state—existed in local magnates and councils, clerical and professional bodies, spiritual and moral authorities. Important spheres of endeavor lay outside the sway of political provision. There, individuals and communities faced plentiful challenges on which to whet their moral and practical resourcefulness, and so become adult and responsible. Long the province of the church, the “mother-like” functions of education, sick care, and poor relief tapped into its capabilities and imparted vitality to it. The state’s capacity to control and provide was limited by its

3. The femininity of left-socialism as against the rapacious masculinity of German Nazism was brought to my attention by the psychologist and philosopher Ingjald Nissen’s study of Nazism, *Psykopatenes diktatur* (1974). Russian socialism, says Nissen, came about as a maternalistic reaction to economic chaos and need. (One might add that power politics soon changed the Russian variety into paternalism.) But Western democratic socialism, of similar inspiration as the Russian, remained maternal. The slang expression “nanny state” recognizes this maternalism.

primitive administrative technique and a narrow tax base.

The modern nation-state has suppressed or weakened the intermediate powers, claiming all for itself. Its administrative capacity is vastly increased, individuals now have fewer areas for which they alone are responsible. Individuals, families, communities, lay and holy corporations are largely emptied of functions, challenges, and vitality. Thus, individuals stand more naked before power than ever. Yet they fear it less.

The modern state confronts an irreverent and reckless, yet dependent and demanding, citizenry. Anomie threatens all. The exercise of authority is needed, but the sources of authority have shrunk to one. And the maternal character of the modern state saps its capacity to act with authority. To use restraining power is considered both too unpopular and too harsh: incompatible with the uplifting talk of solidarity and likely to offend this or that vanity. The essence of political authority—to tell people that they are not allowed to do certain things and that if they persist in doing them they will be restrained and probably punished—cannot be fitted into modern maternalism. The state's role may be likened to that of a single mother trying to discipline a spoiled, assertive teenage son. Both she and he secretly miss the father. She means well, but she can't handle the job.

The old state forbade and punished. Strong action came naturally to it. The modern state feeds and scolds. It cannot find it in its heart to forbid or punish. It does not curb the confused and contradictory appetites of its infantilized citizens. Having assumed all-encompassing power, it finds itself unable to exercise authority.

The political concerns of the old state were few and simple. A firm, even harsh or cruel, hand could maintain the order required. The governmental duties of the new state are many and complex. Its centralism chokes it. Disorder grows unchecked, as the inadequacies of the present state for tackling the complexities of actual, dynamic society become ever more obvious.

The Pursuit of Consensus

In a democracy you are both a citizen and a subject. That dual role puts you in a cleft stick. As a citizen, you participate in electing a government; as a subject, you must obey the government. As a citizen, you want a government strong enough to carry out your wishes; as a subject, you want to preclude oppression. You must come to terms with the tension between liberty and authority.

Under monarchy, the emphasis lay on authority. Under nascent nineteenth-century democracy, it lay on liberty, on the limitation of government power. Today, the emphasis goes to consensus. If the ideal of authority under monarchy led to unbalanced government because of popular recalci-

trance, the emphasis on consensus under modern democracy has also led us onto a wrong track. Authority and liberty must be balanced, but seeking consensus is not the way to achieve that balance. To satisfy democracy, government must be free to act efficaciously, yet accountable to its principals, the citizens. This balancing act is tricky.

In the times of monarchy, the difficulty was that the king's insistence on tight control made him powerful within his established sphere of powers, but made the people resist his rule and led them to limit its domain. The king ordained, but the people resisted as and when they could. This tension set a practical limit on how much power he could wield. In theory, he was all-powerful; in practice, he had to settle for a limited agenda.

During the ascendancy of representative democracy, a strange ambiguity arose. The logic of democracy led in two opposite directions. On the one hand, the emphasis was on limitation of executive power; on the other, in contradiction to the first tendency, it was desired that the power of the people to order society be strong. Giovanni Sartori has referred to these two aspects as demo-protection and demo-power. Moderate and conservative liberals tended to set the former goal (demo-protection) highest, whereas radical democrats and later the socialists held more to the latter (demo-power). Both could be rather single-minded. Although the socialist view definitely gained the upper hand, the puzzle was never really solved. The different and opposite goals of exerting power and limiting power fused, producing a new guiding principle: consensus. The functions of ruling and resisting passed as one into the same hands, those of elected representatives. The old power balance being impaired, the government agenda grew. The democratic government now aimed primarily neither to reduce oppression nor expand liberty but to redistribute wealth.

In the era of mature representative democracy, the confusion persists. The modern political mind has difficulty assigning a clear place to the functions of ruling and resisting. The results are paradoxical. On the one hand, government is charged with enormous tasks and wields correspondingly large powers in the interest of popular welfare. On the other, its operation is constantly and significantly hampered by the need to seek consensus, which in today's society means consulting interest groups, or rather trying not to offend any influential group too much. Government is strong, and it is weak.

This problem cannot be solved by reference to democracy in the narrow sense of deciding who wields power. To solve it, we must attend to the issue of limitation, to the question of how much power should be wielded by whoever wields it.

An efficacious government is not one that can easily carry out any

scheme it wishes, but one capable of acting decisively to promote what is in the common interest, and incapable of acting against that interest. (By common interest, one should here understand that which is in the long-term interest of all, as opposed to temporary or particular interests.) In short, a good government should have adequate power to do good and little power to do bad. The challenge lies in adjusting the powers of government accordingly.

The Political Culture of Corporate Pluralism

Today's representative government has great trouble discharging its essential duties satisfactorily because it tries to do too many things and does not sufficiently distinguish between what is vital to social survival and what is merely desirable from some particular or temporary point of view. Under present arrangements, both the government and its constituents demand that the government be all things to all people. Two consequences ensue. First, the more it tries to do, the worse its overall performance, because less time and attention are available for each and no amount of organization can alter this reality. Second, when many goals are embraced with little discrimination, some must be inconsistent with each other; merely by setting out to do one task, one ensures failure in the accomplishment of another.

In the nature of things, a hierarchy of government aims must be respected if government work is to promote the common interest. This fact is being ignored today, and the mechanical cause of the neglect lies in certain tendencies of modern representative government itself, particularly those associated with the term corporate pluralism.

Representative government takes the form of corporate pluralism when it sees itself, and is seen as, an ambitious general provider of collectively financed services and transfers to the people. Each transfer will be of intense interest to a particular group, which will therefore tend to organize a lobby to secure an effective influence on policy in that area (e.g., income support for farmers). Other groups do the same thing. Thus arises a new informal channel of influence in addition to elected representation: the lobby system, or the corporate channel.

Under corporate pluralism, the art of government largely becomes a matter of deal making rather than deliberation. By deal making, I mean the concern with practical—sometimes cynical—compromises arrived at through robust give-and-take negotiation between groups with conflicting interests and principles. By deliberation, I mean the careful collective weighing of different courses of common action by representatives committed to a common interest, people divided in opinion but united by principle.

The danger to democracy is that the spirit of deal making dominates

the entire sphere of government—even the areas outside the “safety net” system—to the extent that all groups receive consideration, even groups who care little about the rules needed to sustain society, even groups of spongers, wreckers, and whiners. Every corporate-channel objection is welcomed with a diplomatic smile and a show of goodwill; every angry protester is someone who must be appeased in the name of consensus by being tossed at least a tidbit. In the world of corporate pluralism, no rascal is ever thrown out on his ear. To achieve status as a recognized minority is to acquire the right to importune, inconvenience, and intimidate everybody else. A government meaning to serve all groups in all respects is nervously afraid of offending, and instinctively shies away from saying “no,” preferring “perhaps later.” It soothes, promises, stalls, coddles, wheels and deals. In all its affairs it looks over its shoulder and calculates which interests can be sacrificed to which others and in what way, and how to get away with it. The policy of such a government can never be decisive or coherent; it will necessarily be a melange of compromises, a shambles that must be covered up with talk, pretense, or deceit. Masterful government becomes servile.

Deal making, with its weighing of the interests of classes and regions, is inescapable in matters related to the practical distribution of burdens and benefits but is utterly inappropriate in central questions of defense and civil order. These touch on government’s core function, that of upholding law and order, or, put more grandly, guarding the social order—the order of rules for social intercourse that make beneficial human cooperation possible. That responsibility must not be set aside in any smoke-filled back room in order to strike a deal.

But where the spirit of deal making prevails, this prime government function indeed risks being compromised. Where the question of providing more police officers on the beat (to choose a conventional symbol of law and order) must compete on equal terms with the establishment of a government program to support amateur rock musicians, to promote the greater consumption of whole-meal bread, or to provide instruction in clowning for unemployed youths, the central function (here represented by the police officer) must receive insufficient attention and emphasis. Politics becomes a grab bag, and government takes on the aspect of an overworked, peevish Santa Claus besieged by a horde of insatiable, rampaging kids. By giving groups what they want, government defrauds citizens of what they need. In the extreme, this development threatens the entire social order. In the absence of authority, the ship of state will be a ship of fools, slowly sinking while its crew and passengers haggle over who will sit at the captain’s table.

Government’s Weak Authority over Its Own Institutions

Consider major government institutions such as universities, schools, hospitals, and (in many countries) arts institutions and broadcasting companies. As the people's instruments of felicity, these institutions ought to be governed by the people through their elected government. If not, the institutions will be run by their own staffs, whose goals may or may not be those of a majority of citizens.

Unfortunately, democracy is not suited for such governance. Management of a complex institution requires a firm grip, clear definition of responsibilities, and speedy decisions—in other words, the rather autocratic style of management typical of business, the very opposite of democratic decision making. Democracy can carry out only a few complex operations, such as a war, and even then it must set most other things aside for the duration.

Besides, institutions such as universities and hospitals, by the nature of their activity, need self-governance—freedom from detailed goals and daily intervention from outside—to operate efficiently. Other relevant matters include the freedom of inquiry and of education, the integrity of the medical profession, and the freedom of the media.

The practical outcome of all the considerations (for elected government can be practical) is that these major government institutions are left largely without democratic control in the blithe hope that somehow all will turn out well in the end. They are left to run themselves, that is, to be run by their staffs and managements. The only control comes through budgets, which must be passed by the elected government. But the government doesn't know any more about the appropriateness of each institution's budget submissions than it is told by the administrators submitting them. Each manager has a practical monopoly of essential information about his institution and its activities, and a pronounced vested interest in slanting that information.

Hence the almighty ambitious modern state, like the Roman Empire of yore, falls apart into little fiefs, run by local cliques who use the institutions so gratuitously provided them by government for their own aims, material or ideological. Well-organized bodies of journalists, academics, teachers, nurses, and doctors (all highly articulate) are led by the most politicized, domineering, and demanding individuals among them. The phony ideology of "workplace democracy" promulgated in the 1960s and 1970s assists and legitimizes this outcome.

The result is a pulverizing of responsibility, a feeble cost control, and—most damaging of all—a drift of purpose and the substitution of size and bureaucratic methods for quality and vitality. Huge institutions, built for heavy duty, chock-full of expensive equipment, and staffed by highly paid specialists are rudderless, rolling with the swell and going nowhere. A simple principle of administration, that whoever pays should decide, is breached.

The people pay, the government owns, and the inmates decide. The shattering of responsibility is complete.

The present situation in a Western welfare state bears an uncanny likeness to that in the Soviet Union during the Brezhnev Era and afterward, and not by accident, for centralized common ownership is a principle Western and communist states have in common qua welfare states, though they differ in the extent of its application. Great pieces of the state are up for grabs by those closest to them by dint of employment or political connection. Citizens enjoy neither the supposed benefits of democratic governance nor the blessings of institutional self-management. Instead they get a perverted version of both.

Real self-governance would be a splendid thing. But that would require an employee buyout with subsequent institutional self-ownership and self-finance, with no bountiful treasury to supply capital and shore up deficits. It would mean risk and competition and harsh contact with reality—a world very different from today's cozy little fiefs, where the foot-dragging, brainstorming, coffee-sipping inmates reap all the benefits of ownership with none of the effort or risk, playing shop with the nation's resources.

These conditions manifest the crisis of authority. Here again, the powerful centralized state would wield its power to do great works but ends up as the pawn of its own servants. The positivist mountain quivers, and gives birth to a mouse. This state of affairs mocks democratic ideals. It is a shameful and costly farce.

The Brave and Modest Republic

If we desire authoritative democratic government, capable of acting efficiently in the common interest of the citizens who elected it, we must seek a government with fewer and better-defined tasks.

Some libertarians place all the emphasis on removing power from government. They dislike talk of establishing good government or restoring authority. They wish government would just go away. But libertarian sentiments should not lead us to fear authoritative government in the sense employed here. Authority is the cement of that political society on which our liberty depends. What we should fear is overbearing, oversized, meddling government. Such government has much power to harm but little ability to serve us all in the long run. Its power is a quantitative phenomenon. Such government is wasteful, exerting vast power but to little constructive effect.

There can be little doubt that the happy and constructive periods in mankind's annals—few and brief as they may have been—occurred where people felt a justified pride and confidence in their social institutions, including government, a moderate and quiet pride that did not tempt them

into haughtiness or cruelty; and that those periods ended when power had accumulated enough to inspire sentiments of grandeur. Neither should we doubt that thinking individuals in today's Western societies no longer see themselves as dwelling in such a blessed state. The happy governments were typically the product of a tradition of civic self-government, slowly grown and cultivated under relative peace interrupted by limited wars, kindled by free inquiry and debate, nourished by patient industry, and stimulated by trade. The Athenian democracy witnessed such a moment of glory, until it ended in imperial pretensions and vainglorious rivalry. Similar glory was achieved in medieval European city republics, before they were engulfed by power. Yet another tradition of local self-government took root in North America and lasted longer. For a time, it seemed that the nineteenth-century triumph of representative democracy in European nation-states would bring an era of sustained progress; but the foot slipped, and the momentum was lost. The federal democracy of Switzerland, although now "streamlined" by modern political thought and practice, perhaps most closely approximates a realization of the ideal of civic self-government, proof that it need not be doomed to brief, hectic life but can prevail and endure.

The solution to the dearth of authority is not more authoritarian policies in the nation-state, not more right-wing paternalism or left-wing maternalism. It requires, instead, the transfer of powers and functions from the central state to other agencies: back to the local governments, back to the smaller communities, back to the corporations of civil society, back to individuals and families. If we are lucky, the state of tomorrow will retain but a fragment of its present powers, and act with all the greater authority within its diminished sphere. There is no contradiction here. The contradiction is to believe that government can spread its ambition and power widely and still command authority.

The art of good government lies in balancing accountability and initiative. It preserves liberty by not attempting to do for citizens what they can and ought to do for themselves. It is capable of authority for not having to please, not being beholden to special interests. It is not denied the ability to rule, which is what it is there for. Powerful when it acts within its modest assigned scope, it is powerless elsewhere. The salient point is to keep government within its powers, and to keep those powers in line with a well-informed public opinion. In a full-fledged democracy, this containment is ensured by the rights of the people to elect the government and to protest its acts or even unseat it, through the open, organized collective procedures of initiative, referendum, and recall. Another component of good government is the realization that only a reasonably sized polity can be effectively controlled by the people, and therefore that any great state must be articu-

lated into autonomous units.⁴ By these means, citizens endow their government with power where and when they think it needs it, and remove power when they find it has too much. As for the proper measure of identification of citizens with their government, that is achieved by letting the system of government spring from the local community. Thus are laid the foundations of trust and loyalty, perhaps even pride.⁵

If such a government disappoints, as it may, at least we citizens will know that the fault is ours alone, and that we must look to ourselves for the mending of our ways. Such government will be something we lack today: for better or worse, it will be our government.

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4. Kohr (1986), a charming classic of size theory, makes a persuasive case that subdivision is the key to good government; see especially chapter 9. For a political science study of democracy and size, see Dahl and Tufte (1973), wherein the authors note that small states have low defense costs and successfully find ways to compensate for smallness.

5. Two recent works with related views of citizenship, focused differently from this article, are Bryan and MacClaghry (1989), which supports localist democratic government in connection with a federal constitutional proposal for the state of Vermont, and Bookchin (1995), which reviews the fortunes of citizenship and advocates direct democracy, municipal autonomy, and a confederate commonwealth. Though vague, opinionated, and harboring some inadvisable communistic notions, Bookchin's work has glimmers of a rare understanding of the deeper meaning of human-scale democracy and traces historical patterns others might pursue further.