

DEWEY ON THE STATE

There is no such thing as the State
And no one exists alone...

September 1, 1939

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In Chapter 1 of *The Public And Its Problems*, Dewey introduces his conceptions of a public and the state. This post discusses Chapter 1, and it might be helpful to read the first part of it. Chapter 2 is focused on the state. Dewey starts by pointing out that his views are radically different from standard ideas about the state.

The state is not created as a direct result of organic contacts as offspring are conceived in the womb, nor by direct conscious intent as a machine is invented, nor by some brooding indwelling spirit, whether a personal deity or a metaphysical absolute will.
P. 86.

Dewey doesn't think there is a perfect or ideal form of the state towards which all states are evolving, or such that we could measure each existing state against it to determine the quality of a state. States arise to meet situations, he thinks. Situations vary, solutions vary, cultural acceptance of solutions vary, histories vary, and each of these and more influence the form of a state. All we can hope to do is to measure how well that form meets the needs and desires of the related public.

Here's how Dewey formulates the connection between the public and the state:

The lasting, extensive and serious consequences of associated activity bring into existence a public. In itself it is unorganized and formless. By means of officials and their special powers it becomes a state. A public articulated

and operating through representative officers is the state; there is no state without a government, but also there is none without the public. P. 109.

It is the appointment of officers and the grant of special powers that forms the state. Through those officers, themselves members of the public, the state organizes the public. The state itself is just a select group of people given special powers. It doesn't matter who grants those powers. It could be by democratic vote. It could be by force of arms, as kingdoms were organized for centuries. Or it could be that a group of rich people arranges things to their liking. Or something else.

Dewey points out that there are many different forms of states across space and time. He claims that they exhibit traits which show that they are functioning in accordance with his formulation. These traits, or marks, relate to the consequences arising from the actions of a group of people, intentionally or not. [1] We can both check the theory and begin to study states by observing and studying these marks.

The rest of Chapter 2 discusses four such traits. They are: a) temporal and geographical contiguity; 2) the "... fact that the quantitative scope of results of conjoint behavior generates a public with need for organization." P. 94; 3) states are concerned with behaviors and outcome that are long-established; 4) children and other dependents are the peculiar concern of a state. [2]

The trait of contiguous territory is obvious. As to temporal contiguity, He says that discrete harms occurring at irregular intervals will not stir up demand for representation of the interests of a public that would lead to the creation of a public.

The second trait is more problematic. People in a territory experience a range of impacts from the conjoint action of other people, and those

impacts change over time. If there were such a thing as an ideal state, we would not expect different ranges of harm or changes that would necessitate changes in the nature of the state. But that is the case. Dewey sees this as confirmation of hypothesis about the nature of states.

The state is primarily concerned with established patterns of action. Dewey says that established patterns are engrained in members of the public, and that people resist changes. The state has helped in the establishment of those patterns. Innovation is essentially an individual act, and innovation is mostly resisted by the public.

About the most we can ask of the state, judging from states which have so far existed, is that it put up with their production by private individuals without undue meddling. P. 103.

This works better in some states than in others. [3] The point is that with old, established behaviors, there seems to be a psychological desire to make them uniform and official.

Dewey's fourth mark, that children and other dependents are a special focus, seems obvious. Children are the future, so the public sees the need to make sure that they are protected and supported. For other dependents, such as "the insane and the permanently helpless", there is a need to insure care and treatment as appropriate. Underlying this is the reality that when people are unable to protect themselves, the vast part of the public wants them protected.

Dewey discusses each of these four marks of the state with concrete examples, showing his view of the history of states. the kinds of things a state might do, and in the case of the fourth mark, a basic introduction into his ethical thought.

One of those sub-issues seems especially

current: the role of laws and regulations. Dewey points out that no one can calculate all the ways and different people who might be affected by an action or an innovation. That creates an insecurity among those who might be affected. They form a public, and create state officials and empower state action to protect themselves from possible future harm.

It is not merely that the combined observations of a number cover more ground than those of a single person. It is rather that the public itself, being unable to forecast and estimate all consequences, establishes certain dikes and channels so that actions are confined within prescribed limits, and insofar have moderately predictable consequences. P. 98.

Laws and regulations benefit the actor, the innovator, and the rest of us. They make it unnecessary for actors to work out every last detail of a proposed action, because there are regular forms which can be adapted to their needs and desires. The rules may be irritating, but at least one can predict with reasonable certainty the risks and rewards.

People persist in calling laws and rules "commands", as if they issued from some distant dictator. Dewey says that's wrong. He points out that this command view is the logical outcome of theories of the state based on will, or causality, whether divine or human. Dewey says that these views rest on the idea of a superior force imposing its will on others.

Rules of law are in fact the institution of conditions under which persons make their arrangements with one another. They are structures which canalize action; they are active forces only as are banks which confine the flow of a stream, and are commands only in the sense in which the banks command the current. P. 99.

To extend the metaphor: we have a name for a river not constrained by its banks: we call it a flood.

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[1] Pollution is a good example. The intent of a polluter is not to harm others, it's to maximize profits. But pollution harms others.

[2] This transition is extremely confusing. I'm not sure I have it exactly right, especially point 2.

[3] For example, I've heard a number of French people complain about the refusal of the government to permit innovation, and the tight constraints imposed on innovators.