
The Train From Boston To New York

B Phillips

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Abstract

I was asked on a recent train trip from Boston to New York, what I considered to be the "proper role and purpose of government" in today's modern world. I rambled off something about utopian mechanisms bounded by historical hierarchy and quickly returned to my copy of the Journal. However, as the train lumbered through the New England countryside, I began to consider the question more seriously and later on that evening (after a run through Central Park and a meandering stroll through the village), I wrote the following essay. What follows is my attempt to answer the gentleman's aforementioned question.

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The role and purpose of government can be viewed within a structural context. As such, I will use three differing political ideologies to define setting (points along a continuous, horizontal spectrum - if you wish).. If I am to learn anything at all from this little train trip of mine, I should place such defined "roles and purposes" alongside a brief discussion of the "nature of man",. My view of the 'ideology of democracy' shall be as the early writers suggested: Classical Liberalism. I understand democratic rule to "see" imposed government as a "necessary evil" which is established by the full will and consent of those it governs. It is created for the sole reason of maintaining a "social order". Rule is viewed as passive and reactive to social patterns, practices, and problems. Democratic governments recognize freedom and equality (at least, political equality - which is a major point

of stipulation, as we have learned through our cohort maturity) of its citizens. The "individual" has a realm of "private life" which is separate, distinct, and (theoretically) "outside" of governmental influence. Unlike other political ideologies, democracy (as rule) is not necessarily held responsible for "improving the life" of its citizens. Democracy exists only to maintain free markets and social peace by which the people are free to do as they wish to the extent that individual acts do not become harmful to others. I wonder, as I sit here this evening looking out at the Manhattan skyline, what the early writers would think of our "modern world".

Moving along the imaginary spectrum, one must stop to consider Marx's thoughts and opinions. I remember those long nights as a child by the fireplace, trying to read and understand his principles - now, after all of this time, allow me to see what I remember. I have always viewed Marx's interpretation of communist ideology beginning at a singular point: his consideration that government is an "arm of the ruling class". The dominant class controls and manipulates the "government" to keep both economic forces and the social superstructure as they are. In so doing, the dominant class maintains 'status quo' through the passage of time and thus retains authoritative power. Given this as society's foundational element, Marx then calls for a radical and sudden change in the social structure of government; he

desires the working class to be conscious of its true position in societal order. In such “class recognition”, the Proletariat would revolt against the established government and achieve the state's true power. With such newly-found power, these newcomers would destroy the superimposed “class divisions” and thus the inherent “class struggle” would dissolve. Following this decay, there would be no further need for governmental existence (since without “class struggle”, who can properly exert influence upon whom?), and the government would “wither away”. Man, himself as creature, would thus change in both approach and order. Unlike democratic philosophers, Marx views the “proper role and purpose of government” as a singular tool to overcome social tension. I believe that he considered “class” in, and of itself, to be artificial and thus worthy of obliteration via the proper use of state power (always an interesting theoretical argument - especially in today's “modern world”).

Let us now then, turn our thoughts to another point along our horizontal line: fascism. Fascist ideology views “government” as the sole reason for social existence. This entire political philosophy exists as a reaction against inherent societal chaos and conflict. Supporters “see” their state as the singular means by which to overcome individual struggle. Fascism, unlike the previous examples, views government as a “positive” force. As such, the state needs to be strong and centralized; to maintain social order (i.e. to limit and suppress social conflict), rule requires power - ultimately, complete power. The government is “glorified” because it is viewed as having its own “personality” and purpose (its purpose, of course, is to maintain social order). The government exists to seek and establish the ideals of its people - not necessarily the will of its people. Our other two examples only exist (theoretically) to supply the fundamental needs of their people - a key and critical difference.

Given these brief and rather personal views of differing political ideologies, allow me to place them in context with the “nature of man” and as such, in our ‘world of today’. Democracy sees human nature as “fixed and universal”. It believes that there are certain basic conditions which all men share (i.e. the existence of “natural rights”). Based on a philosophical premise that man is born into a “state of nature” and enters into society through an “act of agreement”, liberalism recognizes the “self-evident” fact that man is ultimately free. Government should not, and can not, take away freedoms or privileges that were once enjoyed in

an earlier state (prior to the establishment of societal rule). Democracy “sees” human nature as highly individualistic and persuasively anti-social; men act according to their own self-interests. The nature of man is to be free from other's influence and control, to exist by whatever means so long as it is not harmful to other members of the community, and to act as his own “best judge”.

Unlike democracy, communism “sees” human nature as constantly changing and developing. Marx believed that the “nature of man” changes over time and is always moving towards an increased level of human freedom. His foundation in this socialistic approach is that human nature is a product of its environment. By “improving” external conditions, the individual can thus directly “improve” human nature (either the entity itself or the manifestations thereof - is an argumentative point which I will leave for another night). This guiding principle when combined with Marx's understanding of the dialectical theory of history and the driving forces behind social change, explain the goal of communist ideology. If, however, human nature could not be changed (i.e. if it was some “fixed and universal” entity), then the end result of class struggle - class revolt - and class dissolution - could never be achieved. If “man” can not “develop” given a new perspective and surroundings, to an “improved” state of being (one where self-interest and self-motivation are nonexistent), then the state (i.e. government) will always be required to control societal chaos.

Fascism, as hinted to above, has a pessimistic view of human nature. Our other two examples are rather optimistic in comparison (in democracy, man is thought capable of self-rule; in communism, man is thought capable of “self-change” - both of these focus, ultimately, on the betterment of society). Fascism “sees” human nature as a struggle for power. The “state of nature” is viewed as a “state of war”. Men are in a constant and ceaseless struggle for power over others; this drive for dictatorial rule leads to conflict at large. As such, the only means to rid society of such tension and chaos is to yield to the state ultimate control by which it can oppress all manifestations of conflict. This political ideology views man as selfish and without the ability to self-govern (i.e. man, if left to his own desires, would rule by the need for individual power not by the need for social order).

Now, having said all of that and as evening turns to night, what do I consider to be the “proper role and purpose of government” in today's modern world? Well, my friend, that is indeed a very good question one that I encourage you to deeply consider!! I, myself, firmly believe in the importance

of our past and certain lessons that have been taught through life and experience. Allow me to ramble about utopian mechanisms bounded by historical hierarchy and similar such things - as long as you too, STOP for a minute and think.

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References

r-0. Just in case a stranger approaches you on a train the reader is encouraged to review definitive sources on each of the political ideologies mentioned.

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