"The Associative State and its Implications for American History"

by

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During the next twenty-five years, the rise of the state will become the central concern of American historians studying the development of their own nation in the twentieth century. The "associative state" discovered by Ellis W. Hawley; the liberal state lauded by progressive historians and their neo-progressive descendants; the bureaucratic state that so distresses conservatives; the regulatory state that has become all things to all historians; the genderized state; the racially divided state; the police state; the warfare state: in these various academic disguises and others that will emerge, the American state will
obsess professional historians through at least the next generation.

Why do I predict this historiographical turn with such confidence? Surely, political history is now in eclipse. Culture is hot. Politics is not. Race, class, and gender are the politically correct subjects of the day. The only thing that seems more boring than legislative history is the history of executive administration. The only thing that seems more trivial than federal administration is state-level administration. Why should anyone "bring the state back in," if it is going to put us all asleep?

The answer is of course that the new history of the state will be lively, controversial (even "contested") and important enough to keep even the fullest full professor wide awake. How do I know that will be the case? Because this new history is already being written. It draws heavily upon the work that Ellis W. Hawley and his students have done for us; they were on the cutting edge with their studies of the early years of state-building in its associative form, and the new history of the state builds on and will continue to build on Hawley's ideas.

But the new cutting edges will be different. Indeed, some senior scholars will even feel that they cut too deeply and cut some of the wrong folks. Even some of them -- or rather "us." Let's look at some examples, turning to the work of relatively young scholars. They provide us with the best guide to where those cutting edges will be in the future. I hope you will excuse me for
starting with some of my own recent and present students. One of them is Brian Balogh of the University of Virginia. Balogh's book *Chain Reaction* examines the role of the federal government, professional scientists, and various non-profit and profit-making organizations in the post-World War II efforts to develop commercial nuclear power in this country. His analysis of what he calls the "proministrative state" develops a powerful critique of the leading institutions and actors in this narrative. If Balogh is right, then one of the tasks of the next generation of scholars will be to blend the "associative" and the "proministrative" states and to show how both intersect with the welfare, regulatory, and warfare states.¹

Balogh has, with good cause, extended his critique to cover those historians who have written white-paper accounts of government programs and those bureaucrats and politicians who have thwarted research in government records by manipulating classification procedures.² In this latter assault, he of course has numerous allies in this association, including Blanche Wiesen Cook and David J. Garrow, both of whom recently addressed this subject in a conference at Princeton University.³ As Cook,


Garrow, Balogh and many others have noted, the documentary record of state action must be retained, must be declassified in a reasonable way, and must be made available to scholars without unreasonable bureaucratic impediments if we are going to develop a better understanding of the process and implications of state-building in the modern era.

Meanwhile, there will be a great deal to do in the unclassified realm, and here I would like to mention some work in progress which bodes well for the future of the past. Margaret Rung has, for example, just completed an interesting dissertation which explores an entirely new seam of information, the records of personnel management within the federal government in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. As she shows, professionalizing personnel managers had to confront questions of gender, class, and race on a daily basis; they had to resolve the inherent tensions between unionization and the Civil Service -- all the while trying to buttress their own positions in the government hierarchy. The portrait of the state that emerges from her project mirrors in many ways the tensions that existed throughout American society during these decades. The bureaucrats she describes bear little resemblance to those characterized in Weberian sociology.⁴

As this type of research becomes more fully developed, we are going to have to change our concept of the state and the

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governmental process. We may find it hard to cling to democratic pluralism as an analytical framework for analyzing state behavior. One of my current students, Julian Zelizer, is examining the rise to power of Wilbur Mills in the post-World War II years. He places Mills and the House Ways and Means Committee in the center of a complex array of triocracies (or iron triangles), issue networks, and political parties held together in a loosely knit galaxy by a common technocratic language and culture. This particular galaxy, which Zelizer identifies with "commercial Keynesianism," defined categories of acceptable political action, set limits on the process of political change, and bestowed power on a technical elite. The elite, which Mills came to lead for a number of years, was privileged to deal with vital matters of fiscal policy which involved the pace and pattern of the development of the largest national economy in the world. The Arkansas-Washington axis thus long predates Bill Clinton, but as Zelizer's study demonstrates, Mills' particular galaxy was unstable. His power was beginning to decline long before he made his final big splash in national politics.5

Lest you think I only read Hopkin's dissertations, let me mention two other studies by relatively junior scholars, studies which also probe in new ways the evolution of the state. Daniel Kryder, a political scientist at the New School for Social Research, has analyzed state responses to racial friction during

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the mobilization effort in the 1940s. As Kryder shows, the state generated racial conflict, in part by moving large numbers of whites and blacks into new places and new social roles. The government attempted to handle this conflict by developing distinctly regional models of accommodation and repression that would enable it to achieve its manifest national security goal and certain latent political goals as well. Kryder places his narrative in a state-building rather than a reform context. His teleology points more toward the military-industrial-university complex of the Cold War than it does toward the Civil Rights Act of 1964.6

There is a similar bite in the work of Claire Potter, who has analyzed "A New Deal for Crime: the FBI is the 1930's." Potter takes the history of the Federal Bureau of Investigation out of the J. Edgar Hoover paradigm and places it in the paradigm of 1930s administrative development. Rejecting the blackmail-conspiracy theory of the FBI's evolution, she finds instead that the FBI developed along lines similar to those of other state organizations. The beliefs which allowed its abuses of authority were "a pervasive and permanent aspect of American

democracy...  

Potter's work brings us full circle, back to Ellis Hawley and the associative state of the 1920s. As she demonstrates, the innovations of the thirties were, a la Hawley, solidly based on the organizational developments of the previous decade. In those years, J. Edgar Hoover built up the organizational capabilities of the FBI in a variety of non-statutory ways that (not so incidentally) broadened the Bureau's base of political support. The control of information was an important aspect of that development, as it was of so many other associative state programs. "Professionalization" was also involved in the changes which led ultimately to the New Deal's war on crime and to the emergence of the FBI as a major element in America's administrative state.

But what, you ask, can we learn of a general sort by throwing these five straws in the wind? What can the work of Potter, Kryder, Zelizer, Rung, and Balogh tell us about the future historiography of the administrative state? My answer is that their work suggests which way the winds of reinterpretation are likely to blow. For one thing, all of these young scholars display a profound cynicism about government. Their picture of the state is all too much like a picture of the American people during the twentieth century -- and by the people, I mean all of them, not just the ones who happen to agree with us. This is not what Theda Skocpol meant when she said we should bring the state back in, but

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that is indeed what has happened: government is being brought back into our history; it is being historicized, not romanticized.

None of these scholars describes a state subjected to the hegemonic control of capitalism. To the contrary, in their studies the agencies of the state seem to be acquiring more and more power to act independently, to innovate, to control information and shape public opinion in ways that raise serious questions about how our democratic government actually functions. Insofar as their critiques are radical -- and some of them are -- their brand of radicalism seems new. It seems to have deeper roots in the New Left of the 1960s than in the Old Left of the 1930s. It addresses questions of race and gender as well as those of class. It leaves room in our history for giant corporations which help to shape our twentieth-century polity and culture as well as our economy, but it acknowledges that power was shared and policy fractured.

Leadership too has a role in this history -- and the consequences of effective public leadership were apparently not always good for the "public interest." Without stating so explicitly, they are writing history that embraces the once widely accepted concept of the public interest. Many scholars have in recent years discarded this concept, proclaiming that they can not determine what the public interest is.\(^8\) Not so with these students of history. They are pumping some life back into this

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idea. Writing in the aftermath of Watergate and in the middle of White-Watergate, they appear in varying degrees to have decided that historians can and should judge the short- and long-term consequences of what their subjects were doing and how they were doing it.

Moreover, their concept of the public interest goes far beyond the ideas with which Hawley (or for that matter, Galambos) has worked. They are deeply concerned about issues that have been introduced or transformed in the past fifty years. These issues include questions of gender and of personal politics that involve more subtle psychological, cultural, and social elements than the old politics of interest groups and parties normally confronted. Environmental issues and the politics of race have had a similar impact on our concept of what the public interest is and what it should be.

During those same fifty years, the institutional setting in which these policy issues was discussed became much larger and far more complex. These changes have further complicating the tasks of the historian. As it turns out, all of us who have worked on the 1920s -- including, most prominently, Ellis Hawley -- actually had it easier than we understood. We thought we had too many pieces of paper to turn, too many collections to visit. But actually, our sources were still manageable. The federal government was still relatively small. You could still roll up your shirt sleeves and look at all of the documents. But with the post-World War II expansion of government in this country, the historian can no
longer study the state in the traditional manner. One of the consequences has been the same sort of specialization of function among historians that has taken place within the administrative state. Along with that has come a breakdown in communications that makes synthesis difficult even among practitioners who share the same concept of the public interest.

All do not share the concerns of the five scholars whose work I have mentioned and that adds a final twist (maybe even a contradiction!) that will, I believe, enliven the future debates over the administrative state. During the first three decades following the Second World War, the state and our concepts of the public interest experienced a great expansion -- as did the American economy. In the years since the early 1970s, however, the nation has entered a time of economic and political troubles that has convinced many public officials and scholars that the administrative state needs to be cut back to fit our resources. In an era of intense global competition, the objectives of economic efficiency and innovation have become more salient. Concerns for equity and security have in many cases been pushed off the negotiating table and out of the scholarly mind.

The triumph of the Chicago School of economists is far from

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complete, but this line of reasoning about the state, the public interest, and the American past has come to exert a powerful influence in this country. That influence is unlikely to go away during the next twenty-five years. This is especially true given the collapse of world communism and the end of the Cold War. The swing to the right is a global, not a U.S. phenomenon, and it ensures that every aspect of the history of the administrative state will be intensely debated in the years ahead. These debates alone will keep the full professors awake, the associate professors busy writing, and the assistant professors eagerly looking for new ways to chop up their elders -- including Ellis Hawley whose work made their work possible.

Thank You