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A postindustrial peasantry?

The contemporary state possesses practically invincible instruments of coercion and surveillance. The state's weapons and machines are enormously expensive and their operation requires specialized training. In this sense, the possibility for individuals to resist the state resembles the condition of the peasantry of an earlier age. For the peasant living in medieval Europe, it was almost inconceivable to challenge armored knights or besiege a fortified castle. Such weapons and fortifications represented an unimaginable (for the peasant) investment of wealth, specialized training, and more than anything else time spent on their development rather than agricultural labor.

Later, the peasants of the early modern period did rebel, sometimes with temporary success. Their inspiration ranged from local injustices to new forms of religious fervor. However, all of the peasant uprisings from this period share a similar fate: they were eventually crushed by the superior organization of the state. Kropotkin vividly describes the outcome of the sixteenth-century German Peasants' War:

And it was only by the stake, the wheel, and the gibbet, by the massacre of a hundred thousand peasants, in a few years, that royal or imperial power, allied to the papal or reformed church—Luther encouraging the massacre of the peasants with more virulence than the pope—that put an end to those uprisings which had for a period threatened the consolidation of the nascent states.¹

The power gap between the German princes and their peasants was not as great as in the medieval period, but still decisive nonetheless.

Today, the citizens of the most developed, postmodern states inhabit an eerily similar context. Instead of armored knights and fortified castles, drone aircraft, vast intelligence agencies, and professional standing armies loom over the contemporary citizen. As with earlier periods of history, these

coercive instruments represent a level of investment far beyond what any individuals could possess. The idea that individuals could somehow resist such powerful states is not credible. The power gap between individuals and contemporary states instead resembles a much earlier age. This observation raises an interesting question. If we resemble the early modern peasantry in this aspect of our relationship to the state, then what other parallels are there?

The usefulness of an analogy

Comparing contemporary individuals to the pre- and early modern peasantry may seem facetious. We currently live in societies with increasingly complex economic interactions linked by accelerating technology. The literacy levels of contemporary societies are a world away from that found in even the most developed countries prior to the late nineteenth century. Both the physical and social mobility offered by today's global economy are beyond what was available in even the early to mid-twentieth century. Thus, the idea of peasant cultural characteristics surviving or being replicated in the contemporary developed states seems like an inflammatory slogan rather than a reasoned critique.

Furthermore, it risks distracting us from thinking about the “real” peasants of our time in the developing world. Peasants are still engaged in subsistence agriculture in many parts of the world. We should also remind ourselves of the “peasant-like” conditions endured by immigrant labor living at the margins of the richest societies ever known. In this sense, comparing the living conditions of individuals in the most developed countries to peasants seems grotesque.

However, what we are considering is the possibility of a *postindustrial* peasant, living in postmodern states. Other observers have proposed this characterization because of the contradictions posed by postindustrial economies. For example, Leicht and Fitzgerald have used the idea for a broad analysis of the situation faced by the middle class in the United States.² Particularly striking to them are the high levels of debt US middle-class consumers take on, evoking memories of the always-indebted peasantry of early modern Europe. As they explain,

Stagnant incomes, rising taxes, the pocketing of productivity gains by the corporate elite, a surplus of available credit, globalization, privatization, and labor market changes have altered what it means to be part of the American middle class. This combination of factors has produced a “post-industrial peasant”—someone who is so in debt that those to whom they owe money (and the employers and economic elites who provide the investment and consumption capital for the system) control them.³

Leicht and Fitzgerald attribute continuation of this situation, in part, to the dominance of neoliberalism and supply-side economics in the United States. However, they are also critics of the culture associated with modern consumerism.

While structural questions such as the organization of labor are important for the analysis presented here, to a large extent, the possibility of a postindustrial peasantry is a cultural question. We know that the living conditions of individuals in the developed world are much better than those found in poorer countries. Stark statistics on child mortality and life expectancy suffice to show that the conditions we are looking at in the most developed countries are an order of magnitude better for human thriving compared to poorer societies. Nonetheless, this fact does not rule out the possibility that cultural similarities between the two examples exist.

Like the peasantry in an earlier age, citizens in many contemporary political systems feel little connection to the state and believe they are self-reliant. In public opinion surveys, individuals in the United States overwhelmingly identify themselves as middle class despite huge differences in wealth. Hostility toward welfare is another common finding of public opinion surveys in the United States. Despite the fact that a majority of individuals receive some sort of benefit ranging from farm subsidies, student loans, and mortgage guarantee programs to traditional welfare benefits, many citizens insist that they are self-reliant.

The most extreme outcomes of this pattern in the United States have been the rise of the gated community and incorporated suburbs that maintain separate police, schools, and other services. The appeal of such neighborhoods is that they provide better and more efficient services than traditional, local government. An echo of this desire for “self-sufficiency” can be found in the archaeological evidence of medieval peasant households. The long-term trend of that era was for peasant homes to become more elaborate (with the introduction of subdivided rooms) and attempts to enclose a private lot.⁴ In both cases, the desire for independence is reflected in these attempts to build a freestanding home.

Of course, today’s perception of independence and self-reliance in the American suburbs is highly ironic given that it is enabled by the state. In the United States, the state-backed mortgage lenders Freddie Mac and Sallie Mae (though quasi-independent) have funded the vast majority of mortgages across the country. Without government support from these two institutions, few individuals in the United States could have obtained financing for their suburban homes. Thus, the concealment of the state here carries a great deal of irony. Many suburban homeowners, skeptical about state services, would never have obtained their property without the vast infrastructure and state subsidies the US government provided. However, consciousness of this close dependency on the state is rare. Instead, the concealment of the state allows

individuals to ignore the question of why state subsidies are increasingly necessary for citizens to be able to afford homes.

For different reasons, the world of the early modern peasant was also very far removed from the state. The key demand of the peasantry across cultures has been ownership of the land, and thus, an end to rents. For the peasantry the idea of ownership of land on which they did all of the work was always an alien, imposed law. Thus, the state was an impediment, a force supporting the landowner's claims. What was missing from the peasant's conception of the state was an understanding of what the state could be doing for the peasant. The possibility of influencing the state, or using it to redistribute the land, remained an almost religious hope.

In both cases, the state is something far removed from daily consciousness. Even in cases where the state provides some sort of assistance, there is little awareness of this link to authority. Instead, the state is viewed as a probable impediment. For the early modern peasantry, the state upholds the artificial claims of landlords to the fields the peasant maintains. If only the rents could end, then the peasant would be free. For the postmodern citizen, the state is suspected of always playing the role of a taxing, regulating, interference. Thus, if you can afford it, a gated community with private services is a better solution. If only the state would get out of the way, then people could keep their hard-earned money and pursue their interests in the market.

The idea of using the state, or changing its direction for the benefit of the peasantry, seems less realistic to contemporary citizens as well. For the early modern peasant, the hope that the situation would change was an almost mystical one. For example, in the Russian empire, generations of peasants hoped that the Tsar would one day grant the mythical "black reparation" giving the land to the peasants. The firm belief of many was that the divine Tsar would already have done so if not for the false council and corruption of his advisers.

Contemporary citizens are obviously much more sophisticated, yet what are their hopes for public policy? Increasingly fewer individuals belong to political parties in the West. In Great Britain, the numbers are particularly striking, "from respective figures of around three million and one million 50 years ago, Conservative and Labour membership is down to around 177,000 and 194,000; the Lib Dems are at 50,000, down from 100,000 20 years ago."⁵ The increasing expense of elections in the United States, and the huge amounts of money used to influence them, appears to be fueling cynicism about government there. In Spain and Greece, vast demonstrations opposing austerity policies have occurred. When these austerity policies are nonetheless implemented, most Greeks and Spaniards logically conclude that they have little influence over public policy. Why should such disaffected citizens hope for much at all from their distant governments?

Thus, the idea of describing contemporary citizens as a postindustrial peasantry is not far-fetched if our concern is examining individuals'

relationship with the state. In this way, the comparison of contemporary citizens to a peasantry serves a useful purpose. The analogy provides some insight into the current cultural dynamics that form the wider context for the ideology of concealing the state. This is an important source of support for the ideology's success since contemporary culture works against the creation of any political challenges to the state's concealment. For many citizens, the state is a remote entity that is perceived either as not having much influence on their "real life" problems or as a distant regime that fails to listen to everyday people's complaints.

Cultural similarities

A key characteristic of any peasant society is the lack of mobility.⁶ Depending on the society (and historical period) under consideration, this can mean either social mobility or an actual lack of physical mobility. However, the two are closely connected since individuals who are unable to move cannot seek out opportunities elsewhere.⁷ With peasant communities of the past and present, financial burdens and complex agreements tied the peasant to the site of his agricultural work. The web of debt the peasant enters keeps him rooted to this spot despite the possibility of better opportunities elsewhere.

How different is this from the fate of many current working-class people in the developed world who cannot afford to move? In the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, many mortgage holders found their complex financial arrangements now holding them hostage to a particular place. For many their home was no longer worth what they borrowed, or they simply could not sell a home in a market flooded with repossessed (and thus marked down in price) properties. In a complex postindustrial economy, success depends in large part on one's participation in an increasingly national, indeed global, labor market. Following the great recession of 2008, the inability to move, due to high levels of housing debt, has crippled the flexible postindustrial labor market in many developed countries. The nimble, ever-changing employment scene associated with the most developed countries demands a high level of individual mobility. Job seekers that cannot keep up are quickly left behind.

On a deeper level, there is evidence for declining social mobility in the most developed countries. Compared to even a generation ago, fewer individuals are likely to leave the class they are born into. Although various measures show that economic growth worldwide has increased overall incomes, the gap between the richest and poorest has also grown. This increase in extremes began in 1980 following a period from the 1930s in which the income gap closed worldwide.⁸ In the most developed countries, part of the explanation for this change has been the loss of manufacturing jobs. This

form of work provided an important career track for the middle class in the twentieth century. Now in our postindustrial economies intergenerational social mobility has declined.⁹

Another surprising parallel to the peasant past can be found in the sophistication of contemporary marketing and advertising. In the peasant world of early modern Europe, one's social status was visibly obvious through dress, food, and credit the peasant received, or not, from local merchants. In our world, past purchases and even the things we look at on the Internet can affect what sort of offers we receive and whether some companies bother to advertise to us at all.¹⁰ As the sophistication of this technology increases, we may find that the sorts of services we can easily access are predetermined by this filtering. Thus, in a technological parallel to the past, it is increasingly difficult to pass ourselves off above our station in the consumer hierarchy; we simply don't have access to the same goods and services.

Furthermore, contemporary and historical experience contradicts the assumption that a peasant population is incompatible with a modern industrial, or postindustrial, economy. In the case of Russia in the nineteenth century, we see industrialization adapting to the conditions of a peasant workforce.¹¹ Obviously, too, we find populations in the developing world today who can be described as peasants despite the effects of contemporary global capitalism. The existence of more modern economic organization and technology does not eliminate the possibility of individuals living in conditions of unredeemable debt, low or nonexistent mobility, and convoluted agreements over labor that characterize peasantry.

For example, some observers have pointed to the intriguing similarities between contemporary society and feudalism raised by the technology that makes our society so advanced. David Carr has raised the point that many social network companies and Internet content sites derive much of their value from the contributions users provide for free.¹² Yet, these contributors, much like peasants of an earlier age, only obtain the use of "space" given to them. Few of us own part of Facebook or Twitter, yet we are allowed to use the services for free in return for the content we provide, while the owners reap profits. Specifically, the profits for these services lie in advertising to a large audience, drawn by the content we all create.

Interestingly, in opposition to this monetization of Internet activity we find the open-source software movement. This call for creating alternative, noncommercial computing resources is oddly similar to the calls for empowering labor in an earlier age. In both cases, the call is to give away the tools and resources needed for productive labor through cooperative ventures rather than for profit ones.

Nor is education an absolute, objective remedy for peasant-like conditions. Increasingly in the United States, there is concern over an impending student debt "crisis." Some commentators worry that this area

of finance is as unsustainable as the real estate bubble that collapsed in the United States beginning in 2008.¹³ In an effort to provide guaranteed access to this credit, the US government has created increasingly draconian rules regarding this financing. Federal legislation prevents student loan debt from being forgiven by individuals taking personal bankruptcy. Individuals failing to pay back their student loans can have their wages garnered and be ordered to turn over financial information so that an amount to be paid from each paycheck is determined. Such modern arrangements to provide access to higher education include a level of oversight and absolute, unredeemable debt that seems more akin to the one-sided arrangements of a peasantry.

The experience of daily social interaction in contemporary societies also bears remarkable similarities to the peasant's world. The peasantry of the past was connected, intensely, to a local community.¹⁴ Inside that world, privacy was rare to absent under the surveillance of all. It was also a sphere in which information, and rumor, spread very quickly though locally.

Many of us use communications technologies that are beyond the imagination of early modern peasants. However, with this technology we lose much of our privacy and it empowers the spread of wild rumors and conspiracy theories. Social networks like Facebook and micro-blogging services like Twitter lead many of us to reveal our daily lives in depth to a large, though virtual, audience. Although we may live at a greater physical distance from others, we can instantly relay gossip to thousands of people at once.

Another intriguing parallel in this area is the rising problem of cyber bullying or cyber stalking. Although communication technologies enable us to link with more people, they can also empower local feuds and antagonisms. In the world of the early modern peasant, we know that the intense emotions of those isolated communities led at times to shunning and even the vilification of individuals as witches. For the individual in this isolated environment, it became impossible to escape from this relentless persecution. This experience is eerily similar to the isolation and intense persecution many individuals describe in our contemporary cyber communities by victims of bullying.

These pernicious side-effects of modern communications are very disheartening. It is considered a truism today that the world is more interconnected and that an individual can travel anywhere via the Internet. We are told the world is flat, that the world is a village, or another similar metaphor. The rise of network societies and communication technologies was hailed at the beginning of this century as the foil of authoritarian regimes and a way to put power back into the hands of the individual, allowing free association.¹⁵ The often-expressed hope was for a new era of enlightenment as individuals engaged in communication across not just political boundaries but life worlds.

However, this same technology provides new ways for individuals to segregate themselves and create their own boundaries. As one early critic pointed out,

Even as our media technology becomes increasingly global, seamless, and interconnected, it is also individualizable, atomising, privatised and commercialised.... Though the Internet and e-mail are changing what we understand to be communication and social interaction, replacing passive television viewing with networked dialogue, there is nothing automatically democratic about this kind of interactivity.¹⁶

Pariser has warned that some of this segregation is happening without our awareness, thanks to targeted Internet advertising.¹⁷ The most insidious form of this filtering to Pariser includes increasingly customized Internet search results so that we are seeing less and less of the total information, and by extension a narrower breadth of views, available online.¹⁸

The more commonplace form of this new boundary drawing is familiar to all of us who go online and consciously choose which media we will consume. How many of us still make an effort to listen to voices strongly opposed to our own beliefs? Increasingly, we choose narrower seams of information about our world and have less conversation with individuals outside of our cultural subgroups. Perhaps one of the most complicated of these new, chosen boundaries is religious belief.

In many of the most developed countries, those individuals committed to fervent religious ideals seemed to be a dwindling minority, concentrated in the lower class.¹⁹ The largest successes for most missionary organizations are concentrated in the developing world, especially among the poorest and most marginalized. Of course, for many individuals in the contemporary world, religious inclinations have become very fragmented. Yet the extent to which intense superstitions and beliefs can still take hold of individuals in the most developed countries is striking.

Consider the fervor with which some Americans in 2011 took up the cause of Harold Camping, a radio host and entrepreneur who predicted that the “rapture” would occur on May 21, 2011.²⁰ These fervent but odd religious associations are reminiscent of peasant characteristics described by Fossier. In his analysis of daily peasant life in the medieval period, Fossier explains that “peasant worship was irregular, their knowledge and understanding of dogma scanty in the extreme.”²¹ Thus, the peasantry in this earlier period lacked more thoughtful, theological knowledge, but also had a fervent faith that led to “feverish outbursts of millenarianism.”²²

Ironically, the advanced communications technology and ease of publishing in today’s world also enables individuals to segregate themselves. Again, religion is an interesting and complex case. In the United States, the evangelical denominations have, to a surprising degree, established parallel

institutions and cultural content that is disconnected from the broader arts and sciences.²³ This subculture spans institutions, including universities, and content like bestselling books and curriculum for home schooling. Thus, despite growing interconnectedness, we also find increasingly independent subcultures in contemporary society as well.

Popular conspiracy theories and other end of the world prophecies, which often trivialize or completely ignore scientific realities, reflect a tendency that harkens back to the pre- and early modern peasantry. Such theories and cult-like beliefs seem to be a projection, as they were in the past, of collective hopes and fears. Interesting examples include the various conspiracy theories in the United States that questioned President Obama's place of birth or the events of September 11, 2001. In these two cases, the fear of otherness directed at President Obama from a nativist, conservative leaning strain of politics and in the latter, ongoing suspicions of "big government" from more extreme libertarian outlooks coalesced into ornate conspiracy theories.

The transmission of these odd ideas across an educated society illustrates the ability of individuals, in our always-connected world, to use contemporary social networking and communications technology to delineate new borders. Despite the advocacy of philosophers like J. S. Mill and other advocates of free speech, the freedom of speech and instant availability of information found in much of the world does not lead to a coherent set of rational conclusions. Instead, we find societies drifting and subdividing into different cultural segments that can ignore one another. This outcome resembles the isolation of the homogeneous peasant villages of an earlier time, despite the fact that individuals are not as spatially segregated.

In contemporary culture, we see a widespread fetishization of technology. Devices are routinely adopted and updated by individuals not because of any intrinsic utility but because they are status objects. The rush to be a first adopter is related to status seeking rather than to exploiting the new possibilities of technology. By adopting the latest consumer device before others, many of us are trying to prove something about who we are. What is this something? It is the status that comes from being connected. Like other consumer-driven status symbols, it is constantly fleeting as the market rushes to create new status objects for us to buy. In his commentary on the meaning of gizmos and gadgets, Baudrillard observes that

In a world dominated by communications and information, the sight of energy at work has become a rarity.²⁴

Indeed it has, so how do we prove that we are working and that this work is important? We do so by being connected all the time. In daily life, we see individuals striving to show their importance by being tracked, connected, and "on." They are needed at all times and situations. This subtext is clearer if one examines the marketing behind such devices and services.

For example, Blackberry tells us that its phone, the Storm, “makes a great impression as you travel across town or to almost any corner of the world.”²⁵ Google’s latitude service allows for users with GPS on their phones to “see where your friends are right now.”²⁶ Facebook provides us with a handy widget so that we can tell everyone what we are doing “right now.” Another example that has elicited more commentary is Twitter. This popular service allows individuals to send constant updates about what they are doing moment to moment. On the other hand, cultural critics have noticed that it also seems to be a popular cry for attention.²⁷

The odd tribal allegiances to brands that we see in contemporary society appear to be at their most potent here. How often do we see individuals camping out now to be the first in line for a new electronic product? Are these items scarce? Only initially, thus conferring the status sought upon the early adopter. This behavior reflects an apparent desperation to distinguish ourselves within the cacophony of consumer noise. Yet, rather than distinguishing our individuality, this behavior settles for standing out as a member of a somewhat smaller, yet fleeting subgroup. As soon as one item gains cachet with consumers, another arrives to replace it.²⁸

We can consider cultural writing on the current generation of young people. Many of them express the opinion that technology gives them access to information in a transformative way. Yet, they do not seem able to explain how this transformation should translate into their education or into the workplace. Something is happening with technology and access to information, but it is unclear what practical difference this makes in their lives.

Thus, in many ways, the relationship individuals have to the technology around them is magical.²⁹ Objects seem empowering and important. However, these status objects are created and work through scientific principles that the general public is ignorant of. Ironically, we find much vocal, though at times incoherent or contradictory, opposition to scientific findings (evolution, global warming, etc.) while individuals rapidly embrace the technological artifacts and medical procedures this world of science provides.

While this modern peasantry objects to the science behind such improvements, the state quietly funds the research. In a pattern similar to the enlightenment of the past, the sovereign worries too much about falling behind the competition. Thus, the peasantry is reassured that various functionaries in government share their less rational worldviews, while the state quietly funds a scientific race against the rest of the world for future breakthroughs.

Thus, describing contemporary citizens in the most developed countries as a postindustrial peasantry is plausible if we consider two broad cultural patterns. First, individuals in these societies, despite their modern and postmodern comforts, are increasingly captive to a never-ending cycle of

debt. Like peasants everywhere, they have little hope of ever becoming economically independent. Debt also limits their mobility and is increasingly part and parcel with the pursuit of higher education.

Second, despite our access to technology, contemporary communities seem to be returning to a past of fragmented worldviews. We could use communication technology to reach out to people very different from us. Instead, most use this capability to associate with others “like us.” We can drop out of larger national cultures and embed ourselves within narrower subcultures. For most of us, our relationship to this technology is magical. We see the devices and services as transformational, but have not articulated quite how or why. Nonetheless, association with this technology confers status, so we rush to be seen with it. We are moving backward toward a time of vulnerable individuals living in fragmented cultural communities with little privacy.

Finally, the combination of debt, credit instruments, and technology is creating a daily environment similar to the peasant’s past. Access to goods and services (and even our ability to “pass” as someone realistically in the market for such things) is increasingly predetermined by our highly visible credit histories. This contemporary equivalent of sumptuary laws may even be determining which goods and services we see and know about in the first place.

Peasants and politics

The common thread to all of these developments is that our worldview is becoming narrower and our social mobility reduced. Aside from technology and esoteric beliefs, individuals also segregate themselves through more traditional market activities. The starkest example of this behavior is in the dynamic of suburbanization so prevalent in the most developed countries, and now spreading to the developing world. In an earlier age, the peasantry was separated by both cultural and physical boundaries from the upper classes. Today, we see a combination of these factors coming together to sort the population by income and the “private market” in housing.

Indeed, some political analysts looking at the United States attribute increasingly homogeneous communities, including electoral districts, to the mobility individuals enjoyed there before the market crash of 2008.³⁰ According to this commentary, the ease with which individuals could move in the United States did not lead to increasingly diverse communities. Instead, individuals tended to segregate themselves into communities with similar cultural, economic, and political outlooks. We see this behavior reflected in the political system with the ever-rising number of noncompetitive political districts of the United States.

In contrast, a number of political scientists, such as Abrams and Fiorina, challenge this claim that individuals in the United States are sorting

themselves spatially, with concomitant political effects.³¹ After reviewing various survey data, they conclude that

neighborhoods are not important centers of contemporary American life. Americans today do not know their neighbors very well, do not talk to their neighbors very much, and talk to their neighbors about politics even less. And they do not see themselves swimming in a sea of like minded people who have intimidated or cast out anyone who believed otherwise; they are aware that their neighbors differ politically.³²

However, Abrams and Fiorina also point to survey evidence that shows fewer Americans know who their neighbors are. In addition, when they do talk to their neighbors they rarely discuss politics. What is interesting about this last point is that many Americans still think they know whether they differ from their neighbors politically despite not talking about politics.³³ Though they may often be wrong, they think that they know their neighbors' political affiliation from other indicators.

What sorts of indicators tell us an individual's political affiliation? Cultural commentary indicates that brands of consumer products are one possible source. Increasingly, the choices individuals make in the marketplace, such as buying a hybrid car rather than a gas-guzzling SUV, are seen as a tell for their political sympathies. In an eerie parallel to the very visible economic sorting described earlier, many now think they can determine a fellow citizen's politics just by looking at them. Thus, the question of geographic sorting may be moot. Either way, citizens are increasingly not talking about politics with their neighbors. Yet, despite this lack of political speech, they think they know where their neighbors stand politically. The classic idea of politics as speech is subsumed by a cultural politics.

Nor is this trend limited to the United States. In quasi-authoritarian systems like Russia, there is a similar political stratification occurring. President Putin has attempted to paint opposition to his regime as the symptom of a Westernized urban class. In Ukraine, opponents of the Orange Revolution described its supporters as cappuccino revolutionaries, invoking the stereotype of the urban, laptop-carrying, and hence Westernized coffeehouse patron. In China, the recently fallen politician Bo Xilai attempted to inject an odd-class politics into his program by promoting "red culture."³⁴ This nostalgic movement for China's more communist past made Bo Xilai popular with many who resent China's growing economic inequalities. Yet, rather than openly addressing this politically volatile topic, the nostalgia of the "red culture" movement provided a largely symbolic commentary and outlet for these concerns.

It is at this point, where culture feeds back into politics, that we see the long-term consequences of this situation. Politics is taking a cultural turn within very different political systems. In some cases, like the United

States, the same political institutions are present, but behavior seems to be changing. Does this simply reflect the evolution of a vibrant culture and society? Or, does this shift signal an attempt to get by or make do with a shallower politics, one where I know my opponents just by looking at them? Are we changing our politics because of some deep shift in our culture? Or, are we trying to continue practicing politics in a cultural context that is inhospitable to political participation?

On this last point, much of the “culture war” in the United States seems to be a substitute for the state. There is much dissatisfaction in the population, but who is to blame? With the state increasingly less visible, the venom directed at “Liberal Democrats” or “Right Wing Republicans” seems to be a search for the guilty. Here there is an eerie similarity to the peasants of old attempting to take back control of their lives by finding the guilty witch or other scapegoat. In this sense, the deepening culturalization of politics in the shallows may reflect a search by a postindustrial peasantry for the real culprits, since the state has removed itself as a suspect.

Does our current culture in the most developed countries pose an additional hurdle for challenging the ideology of concealing the state? In an earlier chapter, I described the dynamics between the deep and shallow state and how this aids concealment of the state’s agency. Do we also face a set of cultural dynamics that reinforce these political maneuvers of state institutions?

Arguably, criticism of contemporary mass culture, and the preferences of most people, simply reflects an elitist strain of thought. From an anti-elitist perspective, one could argue that having more of the population behave like a postindustrial peasantry reflects progress in eroding antiquated social and class divisions. After all, from what possible foundation can one criticize these cultural trends other than one rooted in the false consciousness of asserting that some cultures (or aspects of culture) are higher and better than others? If politics seems shallower today, then maybe this reflects the progress we have made toward exposing the long-standing hollowness of our political systems.

However, the political salience of these cultural observations becomes apparent when we turn to a classic question. What does a citizen need to know, so that he can participate in a democracy? Perhaps for some of us this seems weak. From the anarchist tradition one could just as easily ask, what does a citizen need to know to be co-opted into a liberal democracy? However, from this more radical perspective, the question becomes even harder. What does an individual need to know to challenge their political system effectively? It is on this point, the political challenge presented by a postindustrial peasantry, that the previously presented criticism moves beyond elitist prejudices.

In various forms, what a citizen needs to know is an old question often used against participation. The claim for many centuries was that the

common person could not participate responsibly in government due to their ignorance about public affairs. For example, Edmund Burke worried that the expansion of suffrage in Britain would lead to the manipulation of ignorant voters by unscrupulous political entrepreneurs. For Burke, the dangers of expanding participation too quickly were all too apparent in the excesses of the French Revolution.

Despite the misgivings of Burke and others, revolution and reform expanded suffrage during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries across Western Europe and its settler societies. Eventually, the twentieth century saw some of the great promise of these changes reach minorities and women. Thus, the question, then, of whether the citizenry is capable of participating in a democracy appears to have been answered decisively long ago.

Yet, contemporary surveys of the public in the United States have shown widespread ignorance on a variety of topics: foreign affairs, political knowledge, historical knowledge, science, and basic health. Comparisons with other nations show different strengths and weaknesses across the developed world. The United States has become notorious for particularly striking examples, such as the widespread rejection of evolution and other basic scientific knowledge. As these policy areas increasingly come together in very complicated ways, the positions advocated by politicians seeking popularity in the shallow state can be strikingly disconnected from practical constraints.

The response from the left and progressive areas of political commentary in the West has been worry over the “dumbing down” of the citizenry. Within various countries, the literature often focuses on specific manifestations of the problem. For example, in the United States, Barbara Ehrenreich has written on the popular belief and faith in positive thinking.³⁵ A more scholarly dissection of America’s self-help industry and obsessions is provided by Micki McGee.³⁶ In both of these examples, the authors follow a similar vein of thought. The cultural behaviors they document are linked to individuals attempting to cope with the vicissitudes of a complex economy, and an increasingly complex society beyond our control. Yet, much of the American myth rests on the belief that we are autonomous individuals, capable of forming a life of our own choosing. Thus, for the left, cultural degradation is linked to the tensions between our belief in individual autonomy and the reality of the pressures of global capitalism.

Drawing links between political activity and cultural patterns is of course fraught with difficulty. For example, Connolly in his attempts to unravel the links in American politics between the evangelical, Christian right, and the Republican Party quickly encounters this difficulty.

Does, say a corporate-Republican elite manipulate the evangelical wing of this assemblage, leading it to subordinate its economic interests to spurious appeals to faith? Or are leading parties to this coalition linked

above all by economic interests, with evangelical and corporate leaders together manipulating their followers? Or, alternatively, do the two groups share a general doctrine or creed, which defines common interests and allegiances? My sense is that none of these explanations, nor others like them adequately fills the bill.³⁷

These complications lead Connolly to pose a more complicated model of resonance rather than cause and effect. His difficulty with drawing firm links between two closely allied forces in US politics, one a party and the other a cultural movement and its institutions, illustrates the complexity of connecting culture and politics.

Nonetheless, if we focus on political participation, then this line of thinking returns us to an older, but also more solid, debate. Burke and many political theorists worried about the capabilities of the common citizen. More broadly, philosophers such as J. S. Mill also worried about the negative effects of a broader, popular culture. In Mill's case, he worried that the public opinion of Victorian England weighed down upon the most creative and independent individuals of his day. In the twentieth century, Ortega Y. Gasset voiced these worries within a continental European conservatism.³⁸ More recent worries about popular culture and its corrosive effects are found cutting across the traditional fault lines of left- and right-wing political commentary. In the United States, right-leaning intellectuals like Alan Bloom have fretted over similar concerns. For the right, cultural degradation is often tied to perceptions of a decline in cultural standards linked to the erosion of social institutions like the church or the family. From the left in the United States, there is criticism of a populist, anti-intellectualism associated with the right.

Such criticisms, then and now, often veer into elitism. On the other hand, they do raise the question of what minimum levels of education and civic awareness are necessary for democratic institutions to function. For example, James Mill and Burke argued that "common" individuals could serve in local-level institutions like juries. From this experience, they argued that citizens would gain familiarity with the law and governing institutions. More conservative thinkers also saw participation in juries as a means of forcing citizens to think more broadly about the social good or "national interest" as compared to their narrower individual interests.³⁹

It is difficult to imagine where individuals in the most developed societies are acquiring this experience today, other than juries. Declining rates of participation in political activity, aside from voting, show little progress from this earlier elitist suggestion of how to train the citizenry. Recent studies that show declining levels of "social capital" reinforce this disturbing idea.⁴⁰ As Putnam explains succinctly,

Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections

among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.⁴¹

Thus, if individuals are increasingly segregating themselves into separate subcultures, then where do they learn about their broader political community?

We can phrase this issue even more provocatively. What additional means of civic education are available to citizens today compared to the nineteenth century? Jury duty is still a possibility. Public education in many countries is now universal and typically provides some form of civic education. However, because of the contentiousness of school curricula, efforts at civic education are usually lukewarm. This holds true even for countries where schools are important agents of political socialization. In a study of civic education in Great Britain, Derricott describes the weak nature of the national curriculum. This noncontroversial approach to civic education consists of courses in “political literacy.” On closer examination, political literacy is primarily a passive discussion of issues such as voting.⁴² This blandness was intended to avoid the political controversy of more substantial political discussions. Not surprisingly, a large-scale study of civic education in sixteen countries found that while students understood the basic mechanics of democracy like voting, they had a much weaker understanding of other forms of political participation.⁴³ The authors’ explanation for this finding is that:

Although some schools attempt to foster discussion of issues, there are constraints on teachers against making statements that might be interpreted as politically partisan.⁴⁴

Thus, evidence from large studies of civic education in democracies show that teaching students about relatively noncontroversial political values is usually ineffective at improving students’ political knowledge and subsequent interest in political participation.

Similarly, political philosophers for at least three centuries have agonized over the question of how a common person could ever be informed enough to participate in questions of foreign affairs or weighty issues like war and peace. With the rapid rise of the phenomenon of globalization, we should expect this to be an ever-more pressing question. Much of the literature on globalization envisions the possibility of greater participation by individuals around the world as globalization creates connections between the international and the local. The use of new communications technology by various peoples in their efforts to bring down authoritarian regimes is often trumpeted as an example of globalization changing politics.

However, it is difficult to see where these new chances for democracy are becoming institutionalized. Common to all political commentaries is the assumption that individuals will be participating in state institutions.

In examples of people bringing down authoritarian regimes, like the Arab Spring of 2011, the goal of these movements has been to recapture the state. Thus, the core objective of such movements is to take the state back from someone else. In the most straightforward cases, this someone else is the strongman dominating an authoritarian regime.

The pessimistic voices to these events typically worry about whether the country in question is ready for democracy. Often these arguments have been phrased in the terms of “realism” about political development versus the needs of international security. Thus, the elitist thrust of such arguments has often been how to transform the citizenry so that they can participate in such institutions, rather than asking how to change institutions to meet the needs of citizens. Ironically, this seems to be the same debate from the early modern and modern period. On one side the question becomes, how can the people take the state back from the elites? On the other side, are the people ready or capable of running the state themselves? Thus, even when a popular uprising retakes the state from an authoritarian leader, we still find skepticism about democracy.

Leaving aside the long battle over this in Western intellectual history, our contemporary context presupposes some different rules. In democratic, developed states, the assumption is that all adult individuals should participate in governance. This assumption has expanded to include significant participation in national politics as well as local representation. The well-institutionalized political systems of the developed North and West have settled, long ago, on the structures for this political activity. Nonetheless, a fundamental contradiction remains. If individuals are participating less effectively within these structures, then what needs to change? Is the issue one of failing civic education? Or, is the explanation one of failing political structures?

In either case, less effective participation empowers the concealment of the state. If individuals do not effectively participate within the shallow state, then the ideology of concealing the state faces few conventional challenges. If our contemporary political institutions are failing to address urgent policy problems, then the deep state, under the pressure of maintaining sovereignty, will attempt to fill this vacuum.

For example, in the United States in recent years, there has been a large increase in homeschooled students. Although there are many reasons for parents to choose this option, the overwhelming majority of these students come from deeply religious, usually evangelical Christian, families. A growing body of evidence indicates that the parochial education these students receive is hostile to various scientific concepts. Religious hostility to evolution is the most prominent concern of these families with various lesser objections a distant second.

Given the guarantees of religious freedom in the United States, and the civil liberties protections expected in the society, there is little the state can do about this trend. And to a large degree, most citizens in the United States are

skeptical of state interference in this area. On the other hand, this behavior places the state in quite a bind. Increasingly, societies are facing pressing ecological and technological risks. If significant portions of the population turn their backs on science, then the state, for pressing functional reasons including the need to protect its sovereignty, will have to rely on the experts it does have at hand.

It is in this area of contemporary science that the tension between technocracy and the practice or ideal of democracy is most visible. However, can we expect states to sacrifice scientific progress, and by extension their competitiveness in global capitalism, based on the population's varying belief systems? Or, should we expect the state to do what it has come to rely on, redefine the scientific challenges as an area of "national security" and subsequently, an area to be managed by the deep state?

A postindustrial peasantry?

If this comparison between today's citizenry and the peasantry of the past is apt, then what outcomes should we expect? Should we expect to see similar political effects to the past if the situations of both groups parallel one another? In the modern period, the peasantry in Europe was excluded from politics. In much of the world and for the vast part of humanity, participation prior to the nineteenth century was limited to periodic bursts of political upheaval. Examples include both world-shaking events like the French Revolution and smaller *jacqueries*. Eventually, the European peasant made the long journey of becoming a voting citizen.

However, even this process can be viewed as something other than political. The great peasant uprisings in Germany during the sixteenth century and the more radical groups such as the "Diggers" and "Ranters" during Britain's seventeenth-century revolution and Civil Wars were inspired in large part by cultural change. The religious shock of the Protestant Reformation set in motion the ideas that inspired these earlier peasants to rebel.⁴⁵ In both cases, the state eventually triumphed over the peasants with its superior organization. As Christopher Hill has argued, the "Glorious Revolution" in England was almost superseded by a much more radical revolution that was stopped by Cromwell's new state and army.⁴⁶

Arguably, the peasantry had to come to the city before gaining political access. In cases like Britain, there was no smallholders party for the countryside's poorer residents. Instead, the new working class finds representation in the new and urban Labour Party. These developments emphasize the deep process of cultural and social change necessary for the peasantry of an earlier age to become political participants. In contrast, what economic development or cultural changes would politicize (or perhaps more accurately, repoliticize) today's postindustrial peasantry?

The continuing trend of suburbanization suggests that we will not see the public living closer together in the most developed countries, at least not anytime soon. Continued ecological stress may make this lifestyle, with its long commutes to work and heating/cooling expenses for large freestanding homes, increasingly expensive. Arguably, this separation of communities into self-contained spaces works against improving the social capital needed for more robust political participation. Would a countermigration back to city centers act as a catalyst for new political activism?

Perhaps the question of urbanization and social space is less relevant today, thanks to new communication technologies. Yet, as discussed earlier, these technologies appear to fragment the public as much as they can bring it together. The overall impact of these new technologies is still ongoing, but early signs are that social networking, blogging, and the ubiquitous presence of smart phones have largely been co-opted by marketing and conventional political campaigns. Thus, rather than opening up new avenues for political activism, these technologies are becoming another channel for the conventional electoral messages of well-established parties and groups.

In contrast to many hopes, the question of globalization does not appear to be radically transforming politics either. Contemporary examples of democratic struggle in the context of globalization have restarted the long-standing trope in political theory of two possibilities. The first is the progressive campaign and idea that the people need to take the state back from elites. Examples here include various “take back the state” movements in the developed world including the recent Occupy protests. A more recent theoretical twist to this type of political activism is the argument that corporations have captured the state. This line of political engagement ignores the ideology of concealing the state. Instead, it continues to insist on a distinction between the public state (which should be used for progressive ends) and private corporations attempting to “take over” this public state.

The second is a “realistic” concern with whether the people are ready or capable of such responsibility. Typically this line of political elitism is directed at politics in the developing countries. For example, in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring we find evidence of this commentary. Two decades earlier, similar “realistic concerns” were voiced about democratic upheavals in Eastern Europe. The political transitions of Spain, Portugal, and Greece were also received with such doubts decades ago.

Can the people take back the state? Are the people capable of democracy? Both of these questions are false choices. They suppose two political outcomes that have arguably never been fulfilled. Which state in human history has actually been administered by “the people” versus various elites? When has a democracy ever been safely introduced after careful analysis of whether the citizenry was ready for it? Obviously, these questions ignore the reality of our common historical experience. At best we can ask to what degree the population held the state accountable in a specific period of time.

Since the nineteenth century, the anarchist tradition has argued that society's reliance on the state has pernicious effects. From this perspective, the state's organizing role is a hindrance to social cooperation. Rather than resolving problems in society through free, individual collaboration, the state becomes a crutch that grows ever larger as we abandon more and more initiatives to it. Our contemporary situation, with the state's agency increasingly concealed, compounds this moral dilemma. Not only are we ever-more dependent on the state, but this dependence has reached such a pitch that we not only deny it, we do not even recognize it.

In the nineteenth century, the anarchist concern was with the ability of the state to move into more and more areas of social policy. This expansion came with the cost of innervating alternative forms of social organization and cooperation. State oversight of workplace conditions immediately removed one motivation for union participation. Public education supported by the state undermined the efforts of worker organized education. Arguably, this trend has now taken on an additional dimension of complexity. Not only are we more dependent on the state today, but many of us prefer to ignore this fact as well. If we are pressed to think about policy innovation, then we immediately turn to the one alternative the ideology of concealing the state recognizes, the market.

For example, the United States has seen its rankings in international standards of education plummet. The response has often been attempts to spend more per pupil in public education or spend money differently. More recently, budget cuts have undermined many public schools, leading to calls for unleashing market innovation. As in other cases described in this book, market innovation translates into shifting taxpayer money into less accountable areas of private enterprise. In this example, we find private companies rushing to offer consulting services for establishing charter schools, turnaround services for failing schools, packaged curriculum content to replace current offerings, or offers to run entire school systems on a contract basis.

We can compare this contemporary trend of "privatizing" public education with the innovative approaches of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There we see an explosion of innovation such as Montessori and Waldorf, as well as ideas driven by the needs of various religious communities. The pedagogy of these new schools often reflects Godwin's call for experiential and noncoercive learning.⁴⁷ Arguably, the Sudbury school model represents the most coercive-free product of this movement. In contrast, today we find across the United States Colleges of Higher Education that are geared to producing teachers for an increasingly standardized public school system. The alternative to this failing state system are various "market solutions" where the concealed state funds similarly trained, or less trained, individuals engaged in similar efforts, but contracted as "experts."

This pattern of undermining and innervating institutions is deflected in part by relying on the political ideologies of another age. We have come to live inside vast nation states interconnected with one another through global capitalism. Our older ideologies of representative democracy seem increasingly inapplicable to these contemporary Leviathans. The classical ideals of independence and liberty seem increasingly implausible given the degree of social organization that contemporary capitalism requires.

Faced with this situation, the concealment of the state allows our political systems to continue drawing upon the symbols and ideals of representative democracy. We continue to vote in regular elections, despite the fact that increasingly obscure organized interests provide massive funding to political campaigns. In the popular mind, and among quite a number of our elites, our political debates are organized into the categories of the nineteenth century. For example, we find supposed left and right positions on the usefulness of the market, the role of religion in public life, and the size of government. Concealing the state, and its growth beyond the boundaries of such debates, allows this political culture to survive.

In addition, the risk of catastrophe faced by all societies has deepened our dependence on the state's coercive and regulatory powers. Concealing the state allows us as individuals to carry on believing in our autonomy and that progress in life comes solely from our abilities and efforts. Many of us are rabidly committed to lifestyles, beliefs, and cultural interests that obscure our dependence on the state. The intensity of our commitments seems to increase with the risk of exposing these activities and comfortable ideas in one of two ways. We fear seeing them as either dependent on or undermined by the state.

The ideology of concealment relieves these tensions, but at a cost. Just as the anarchists in an earlier critique of the state warned that reliance on the state has pernicious social outcomes, so too the concealment of the state leads to corrosive consequences within contemporary culture. The long-term effect of concealing the state is that individuals are beginning to resemble a disconnected peasantry rather than a politically active citizenry.

This trajectory seems self-fulfilling. If the state's agency is increasingly concealed from the population, then we can expect that the state is receding from the citizenry's consciousness. The state becomes an increasingly remote entity from individual, daily experience. Another source of strength for the ideology of concealing the state is the dynamic of the state's withdrawal followed by the adjustment of our contemporary culture to this fact. In this sense, the comparison of today's population to the disconnected peasantry of the early modern period is more plausible than we would wish.

Regardless of one's ultimate political preferences, all of these scenarios suggest that the outcome most likely to draw a postindustrial peasantry back together into a stronger citizenry is crisis. We have seen crisis bring

down a number of authoritarian regimes. As argued earlier in this work, crisis can also bring out authoritarian behavior from more democratic regimes. Political history shows that crisis is the time when the largest political changes occur for both good and ill, much like the state itself.

If waiting for a crisis is an unappealing idea, then is there another option for challenging the state? The contemporary ideology of concealing the state presents a formidable challenge. If many of us today are living in conditions that resemble the structural challenges of an earlier peasantry, then what should we do to expose the state's agency? Furthermore, once we expose the agency of the state, how can we change what is done with the enormous power of contemporary, postmodern states?

To address these questions, we need to think about political activities that expose the hidden agency of the state. We also need to think about how to challenge the state's use of this agency. The suggestive idea of a postindustrial peasantry shows the need for new political tactics to address the cultural dimension of concealing the state. Arguably, this is a key need missing from the arsenal of modern political tactics. What sort of politics can supply this missing need?

Notes

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