Analytic Note #2:

Government as an Agent of Social Change

For much of America’s history, social reformers (particularly those on the left) have imagined that government would be the most important agent of social change. Since social reform objectives were often cast as moves in the direction of the common good, or in the direction of a more just society; and since it was government’s unique role to be responsible for assuring the general welfare and promoting justice; it seemed natural to think that government was the social institution that should be addressed when improvements in the general welfare or justice of the society were to be deliberated and advanced. Similarly, it was hard to imagine that any large scale, lasting, significant change in the quality of social life could be made without government not only allowing it to occur, but also lending those leading the change significant aid. Government’s capacity to raise funds for public purposes through taxation, and to pass and enforce laws requiring individuals to behave in ways that contributed to both the general welfare and justice were among the most potent assets and sources of leverage available to social reformers. The fact that democratic government provided many different avenues and opportunities for reformers to pursue their diverse aims meant that the leverage that government could supply was at least plausibly within reach.[[1]](#footnote-1) For all these reasons, it has been natural to reformers (particularly on the left of the political spectrum) to see government as the natural focus and locus of social change.

This view, of course, has never been entirely accurate. Government is often mobilized against reform and in favor of the status quo. When government has acted to change the status quo, it has sometimes brought its significant influence to bear on behalf of re-creating or re-inforcing some previously established rights and privileges that were being challenged by “progressive” social forces rather that to advance the progressive causes. So, government – even in liberal democratic societies -- is not reliably an agent of progressive social change. It is available for this use when citizens demand such efforts from government; but it is not explicitly designed for this purpose.

Furthermore, it has also long been true that some important improvements in the quality of individual and social life – things that could reasonably be called both positive and progressive social change – have come from private social actors and processes as well as from government. The relentless workings of technology and the private markets have made significant changes in social life – both positive and negative – with only modest, indirect support from government. The social and charitable aspirations that are channeled through voluntary social organizations have also often played significant roles in shaping social progress. Sometimes this effect was direct: voluntary associations, charitable societies, and philanthropists acted directly and independently to shape social conditions in particular places and times. Other times, the effects were indirect: ideas created within the voluntary sector moved across the boundary to shape government action; voluntary organizations provided some of the operational infrastructure that government used to achieve social that it had taken as a public, collective aspiration rather than a private voluntary desire; and voluntary sector organizations acted politically to build coalitions that demanded public, governmental action in domains where neither the voluntary sector nor government were active. Finally, insofar as one thinks that political action arises from private spaces and actors who become conscious of and begin taking voluntary action on behalf of particular political ideas, government itself is importantly guided and controlled by the actions of private actors expressing their more or less idiosyncratic and well founded ideas of the public interest.

So, to see government as the source of social reform has never been quite right – at least in liberal democratic societies. Somewhat paradoxically, to achieve social progress and create public value, a great deal of work had to be done in mobilizing a public from a sea of private interests as a condition under which government could act on behalf of social change and be able to achieve the desired results.

This critique of government as the source of social change emphasizes democratic government’s dependency on the “private- become-public” in defining particular purposes as public enough to be worth taxing and regulating ourselves to produce, and in legitimating those choices. If one didn’t think much more about it, one might assume that once a purpose was defined as public, then at that point, government would take over the efforts to produce the desired results. But that view, too, has turned out to be incorrect. What modern experience has revealed is that government has a great many different ways to pursue public purposes; and that these different tools give private actors many different roles in helping the government advance the purposes to which society has committed it. Lester Salamon has developed an elaborate scheme for characterizing the many different ways that government can act on problems. Michael O’Hare has produced a much simpler list.

If we are thinking about the ways in which government can stimulate social change, it is useful to keep in mind both that government may ultimately be dependent on the power of social and political movements to authorize and enable it to act to deal with particular social problems, and that it has many choices about how to use its assets as a government to ameliorate those problems. The different tools of government have many interesting properties above and beyond their simple efficiency and effectiveness in achieving a desired result. They give different social actors different levels and kinds of control over what is done with government authority and money. They give more or less standing to constitutionally separate social actors to re-define the purposes and means of those that government had in mind. The allow more or less diversity in the form that collective action to deal with a problem takes. The produce results that can be evaluated not only in terms of their efficiency and effectiveness in achieving desired social goals, but also in terms of the fairness with which they impose burdens and distribute the benefits of state action.

1. but at the same time required reformers to gain broad public support for and otherwise legitimate their particular ideas about how collectively owned government powers might best be used created the occasion for individual citizens to form themselves into a public that could become articulate about the public value they thought government should produce. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)