On the Analysis of Social Problem Solving Systems

Some part of the social and public life of liberal democracies focuses on the processes of nominating particular conditions that exist in the society as “social problems”, and mobilizing the social resources and capacities of the society to “solve” or “ameliorate” these problems. This sort of activity occurs at all levels of the society, and focuses on many different kinds of conditions.

Much of this activity happens in and around government, and is broadly occasioned by the existence of democratic states, as well as the existence of democratic rights that allow ordinary citizens to hold and act on individual political views of the good and the just, to assemble, and to make claims on the government and imagine ways in which the government assets could be used to advance their individual interests, or their more or less idiosyncratic views of the good and just.

But this activity happens outside the realm of government and politics in various forms of private action designed to produce socially important results. Civic action. Private commercial action.

This action occurs within a setting established and protected by democratic rights enforced by the state. It also occurs when private individuals seek to influence the aims of government

What drives the action is the interests and values of individual citizens, and the freedom they have to pursue those interests through many different means.

It is this that produces the myriad of overlapping, conflicting, large small efforts to define and act on social problems. From this roiling stream of individual aspiration, more or less aligned with others aspirations, all focused either on collective conditions, or on using the assets of government is what creates the social or public realm of activity.

Liberal society wants to see the public realm as one that is relatively small, and derivative of private life. But what we call private life, includes many activities that are both collectively organized, produce aggregate results on conditions experienced and enumerated at both individual and collective levels, or use collectively owned assets. So, private life leaks into public life.

Similarly, public life, leaks into private life, and not always on terms that the private individuals and associations would like. Sometimes the private individuals are right to resist the intrusion of the public. But other times, the public is making reasonable claims on the private – claims that private individuals would have to acknowledge if they could be induced to see the world from the point of view of all others in the polity.

An important question is how well societies perform in both identifying conditions as appropriate for collective action through economic, social, and political action that operates either within a framework created by government for enabling private action for the public good, or by using public assets to direct and guide private actors and public agencies to the solution or amelioration of social and public problems. Obviously, there is much to be said about the ways in which particular social conditions become the object of collective social, political, and government concern. And we will come to that. But let’s start with the assumption that some social condition has been so identified, and to begin asking the question how we might understand how that problem could be improved.