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Government Is Good

Governmentisgood.com is a website that captures our current plight. The work of Douglas J. Amy, a political science professor at Mount Holyoke College, it consists of essays written for a popular audience on such topics as “The Forgotten Achievements of Government” and “Taxes are Good,” as well as a more imaginative piece of writing, “A Day in Your Life.” Structured as a schedule of an ordinary day in an ordinary life, “A Day in Your Life” shows how every minute is made possible by government. We can wake to our favorite radio station because the government regulates the airwaves, we can turn on the lights without fear of fire because the government licensed the electrician who installed them, we can cook breakfast without fear of illness because government has monitored the water supply that flows to our faucets and the poultry farms from which we buy our eggs. When we leave our houses, we make our way through a world that has been built in large part by public works—highways, sidewalks, and parks—and we do so in the confidence that the government will shield us from the consequences of at least some unexpected events, providing hospital care to our elderly mothers when they break their hips and unemployment insurance to us when we are laid off from work. After cataloguing the many benefits that government provides, Amy speculates about why so many people are so reluctant to recognize them. He proposes two intertwined answers: we are repeatedly told by the enemies of government that government is bad, and we have trouble seeing that government is, in fact, good, because we have trouble seeing it at all. This is because the benefits that government provides become invisible as we become accustomed to them (we take the bridge for granted after it has been built); the benefits of government are often separated from its costs (we do not associate our visit to the park with the taxes we have paid); and the most significant benefits are often events that do not take place (the inspected building that does not collapse, the evacuation effected in time).

Douglas Amy is not the only scholar to defend government from attack; a number of literary critics have taken up this task as well. The most recent is Bruce Robbins, and the subtitle of his *Upward Mobility and the Common Good* (2007), “Toward a Literary History of the Welfare State,” retrospectively names the project that other critics have also been working toward, among them Michael Bérubé, Sean McCann, and Michael Szalay. (Lisi Schoenbach pays

similar attention to the administrative state.) These critics are not naive enough to assert that government is straightforwardly good. After all, they are writing from within an academic culture that automatically criticizes the welfare state from two sides at once: from a Foucaultian position that describes the institutions of welfare as totalizing and coercive and from a leftist position that describes them as compromised and inadequate. But while they do not deny that there is some truth to these default critiques, they argue that it is time for them to be set aside. Some do so for scholarly reasons: Szalay wants to show that the welfare state is intellectually coherent enough to justify analysis, and his *New Deal Modernism* (2000) explores how some authors responded to New Deal theories of art as process rather than product, just as McCann's *Gumshoe America* (2000) explores how others responded to New Deal revisions of classical liberalism.

For Robbins and Bérubé, however, the reasons are also political. Robbins acknowledges up front that the welfare state is inadequate, that it manages to do no more than sometimes "interfere with" the capitalism it generally supports. But he also observes that even this rather minimal interference has given rise to a "wrathful corporate will" to dismantle and defund, and he argues that, in the face of such dismantling and defunding, the Foucaultian critique of government should be "open to new and sharp questioning" (9). Bérubé makes a similar point in *Life as We Know It* (1996). Describing the social services the state provides to his family because his son has Down Syndrome, he acknowledges that such services do indeed have a long history of producing the very categories of abnormality that they present themselves as caring for. But he nonetheless sees the various therapists who come into his home as confirmation that the United States is still at least somewhat committed to making "some kind of communal provision for the care of their least able citizens." Criticizing these therapists, the academic Foucaultians are inadvertently supporting that combination of "libertarians, fiscal conservatives, and social Darwinists" who are seeking to bring such provisions to an end (101).

In offering a literary history of the welfare state, these critics are responding to the same problem that Douglas Amy's website is grappling with: the difficulty of perceiving government. This difficulty has long been a topic in political theory, as Schoenbach's research shows. H. G. Wells accused his middle-class contemporaries of lacking a "sense of the state," diagnosing them with a disorder he called "state blindness" (153), while Michael Walzer claimed that the state is impossible to see because it is invisible. This invisibility can best be remedied, he argued, by representation: the state must be

“personified before it can be seen, symbolized before it can be loved, imagined before it can be conceived” (194). Along the same lines, Irving Howe argued, in a passage that Robbins and Szalay both quote, that the welfare state has failed to create “strong loyalties” because it has failed to create powerful symbols of itself: “it seems easier, if not more intelligent, to die for the Stars and Stripes, or the Proletarian Fatherland, than for unemployment insurance and social security” (12).

If these political theorists are right and representation is what is needed, then literary critics are unusually well-equipped to defend the welfare state. And Robbins’ *Upward Mobility* shows us what literary criticism, at its very best, can do. Robbins argues that we can understand the welfare state by looking at upward-mobility stories, stories that he finds in novels, films, and memoir writings, in French, British, and US works, from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Gathering together these heterogeneous examples and revealing the structure that they all share, Robbins shows that the upward-mobility story is not, as we might expect, a story of autonomy, of individual merit and individual reward. On the contrary, the protagonist’s rise typically depends on a number of institutions and persons: orphanages, trade unions, and universities, but also the FBI and the US Air Force; social workers, therapists, and health visitors, but also worldly older women à la Balzac and sophisticated criminal mentors such as Abel Magwitch and Hannibal Lecter. In this way, Robbins makes an important contribution to narrative theory, elaborating the ways in which Vladimir Propp’s donor function can be performed. He also helps us to see that the true interest of the upward-mobility story lies not in the protagonist, but in the protagonist’s relation to the patrons or institutions who support him or her. Robbins does not claim, as we might expect, that these upward-mobility stories either caused or were caused by the welfare state. Rather, he uses these stories to draw attention to aspects of the welfare state that would otherwise go unnoticed, in particular, the many feelings to which it gives rise. Some of these feelings are unsurprising: shame over humble circumstances, guilt toward those left behind. Others are unexpected: an aristocratic boredom that is the mark of entitlement, an anger that can become a form of cultural capital, a perverse desire for unsuitable erotic objects. In uncovering these feelings and showing how strong they can be, Robbins makes newly palpable the centrality of the welfare state to our culture and to many lives within it.

Robbins’ *Upward Mobility* throws into relief what had been an overlooked line of argument in other critics’ works. Although Szalay and McCann are primarily interested in the political and economic

theories that undergirded the New Deal, they also explore attempts to represent the government it create. Szalay finds these representations in metaphor. He demonstrates that the origins of the New Deal lay in late nineteenth-century conceptions of the state as “mutual insurance company,” and he shows that the insurance agency became a favorite trope in the works of many New Deal writers. McCann finds these representations in narrative. He shows that the hard-boiled writers of the New Deal era revise the traditional detective plot to show the inadequacies of nineteenth-century liberalism and explore the newly-felt need for a society under the regulatory control of elites. In much the same way, while Schoenbach is most interested in exploring Henry James’ views of the administrative state, she also shows how he represents institutions by describing the buildings that house them.

Nearly twenty years ago, Homi Bhabha gathered together the essays for *Nation and Narration* (1990). A number of these essays, influenced by Benedict Anderson, argued that narratives create our sense of nationhood. In doing so, they established the nation as a central topic for literary scholars, but they also influenced public discourse—most notably in the more reflective reporting on Bosnia and Rwanda, which showed how long-dormant national feelings were being deliberately reactivated in the service of genocide. In recent years, however, the state has become a newly-salient concern. Not only are its governmental functions under attack, but the sovereignty on which it depends is being besieged from without by the forces of religion and global capital, as Wendy Brown has argued, even as that sovereignty is also being hollowed out from within. It should not be surprising, then, that a number of literary critics are now turning their attention from the nation to the state. This transition was marked by David Lloyd and Paul Thomas’ *Culture and the State* (1998), which introduced the category of the state to scholarly discussions of the nation by arguing that the modern state is best understood as the proper “representative of a national people” (3). Since then, the literary critics who attend to the state’s governmental functions have been joined by those who attend to the crisis of sovereignty, among them, Matthew Hart, who writes about civil war, and John Marx, who writes about failed states.

These scholars have not yet been recognized as constituting a movement, but I suspect that what they are publishing now will soon be recognized as the *Nation and Narration* of its day. And so it’s worth pausing to reflect on how their work on the state differs from earlier work on the nation. Instead of asking how literature can make an imaginary entity (the nation) seem real, they are asking how literature can make a real entity (the state) more visible. The answers

that they have offered so far are dazzling in their virtuosity. It is a mark of critical ingenuity to find government in a public library or an insurance agency, in a hard-boiled detective or a perverse patron, and it is a mark of critical brilliance to make these claims convincingly.

But finally we must ask, convincing to whom? Szalay and McCann, Bérubé and Robbins have succeeded in rescuing government from the default academic critiques, and, in doing so, they have made it a newly-vital topic for scholarship. But it may be too much to expect that ordinary citizens will see in *The Maltese Falcon* or *The Silence of the Lambs* an argument in favor of a government that is everywhere under attack. And so as we go on thinking about the relation between literature and the state, as these critics have persuaded us that we must do, we may find ourselves returning to the question that Douglas Amy has asked: how, in this era of cruel attacks on government, can we persuade our fellow citizens that government is good?

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