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The state as a work of art

Abstract

Extract:

Unlike Renaissance Europe, when human character, state forms, and international institutions were recognized as artistic constructions, we appear to be entering an artistically and philosophically frills-free era. History, literature and fine arts, for example, are becoming redundant items on the educational menu for growing minds.

Keywords

international relations, culture, foreign policy, education

VIEWPOINTS

THE STATE AS A WORK OF ART

by Rosita Dellios

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I take the title for this piece from Jakob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*,¹ the spirit of which was resurrected admirably by Hayward R. Alker, Jr. in his 1992 Presidential Address to the US-based International Studies Association. Alker spoke on 'The Humanistic Moment in International Studies',² in an effort "to recover the humanistic ideals and approaches which sometimes get lost in our modern strivings for scientific rigor".³ One might also add, the pursuit of superficial trends in education and in all manner of politics - from the personal to the national to the international.

Unlike Renaissance Europe, when "human character, state forms, and international institutions were recognized as artistic constructions",⁴ we appear to be entering an artistically and philosophically 'frills-free' era. History, literature and fine arts, for example, are becoming redundant items on the educational menu for growing minds. Shakespeare is being displaced

1 Penguin, London, 1990 (originally 1860).

2 Published in the *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 4, December 1992, pp. 347-371.

3 Ibid., p. 347.

4 Ibid.

by Gordon Gecko, an appreciation of Monet by 'impression management in the workplace'. How well can human character develop in a society becoming increasingly concerned with 'training' rather than educating young people? While both forms have their place in society, today we are seeing an increasing emphasis on the former, even in universities.

Or will human character benefit from the trend to assert rights over responsibilities? Again, both have their place in society. But even to the casual observer it appears that rights are more fashionable than responsibilities. That this can cause bother, even in a rights-oriented society like Australia's, was evident in the debate about whether the rights of teenagers have gone too far (along with government welfare payments to teenagers who no longer live at home and who 'qualify' for such an allowance).⁵ The rights/duties debate is also evident internationally, between the West whose political culture gives prominence to the rights of the individual, and the East Asian emphasise on the rights of the community over the individual. Singapore's former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew has been a keen advocate of the latter position. The domestic rights/duties debate and its international-cum-intercultural version converged earlier this year in Singapore where an American teenager was flogged by the rattan for vandalism.

There are further symptoms of how 'human character' is faring in the present era. There is, for example, a self-absorbed identification with the present, and the short-term future, to the neglect of the past or long-term future. Hence, the past is declared irrelevant and even dangerous because of its ideological association with elitist learning. Who but the bourgeois conservative elites would want to engage with the classical or feudal worlds? As to the long-term future, it is too distant to be worthy of serious consideration for those who live not by generational or ecological time. This category includes much of Western urban mankind. I say 'mankind' deliberately because womankind, by virtue of giving birth to new life, is more sensitised to the needs of the future generation - including its needs for ecological security in the long-term. Undeniably, there are many men who also think this way. But, like women, they do not appear to be swelling the ranks of decision-makers. Perhaps, they lack the traits required to do so - such as toughness and competitiveness. The acquisition of these traits, of course, would be self-defeating. Such people would then conform to the corporate and administrative culture they intended to transform.

Asian societies, when they are not modernised beyond recognition, also take a different view of time. If you are Chinese, for example, and come from a family in touch with its traditions, it is likely that the ancestral past is meaningful to you. It is also probable that the long-term future is meaningful because, after all, you are somebody's ancestor. You have responsibilities.

⁵ See Kate Legge, 'The Attack on Parental Power', *The Weekend Australian*, 13-14 August 1994, p. 23.

Moreover, just as time was an ally for Mao Tse-tung (the more he had, the better he could 'bog down' his enemies), so too history is a companion to Chinese in all walks of life. Anyone teaching Chinese students might have noticed their facility with dynastic history. It is part of their repertoire for analysing contemporary politics. Reg Little (who writes the other *Viewpoints* article in this issue) has told me of a similar experience with a Chinese taxi-driver - a profession which seems to share a cross-cultural propensity for political analysis. The incident occurred at the close of the Mao era. Reg asked a taxi driver in Beijing what he thought about life in China without Mao. The taxi-driver, guarded in his remarks about the current regime, simply referred Reg to Han Dynasty history. The message was clear. Mao was like that other great unifier, the Qin emperor, who had to be ruthless to unify China, thereby setting the scene for the subsequent more moderate leadership of the Han.

Paradoxically, the current era's disdain for history in the long-term is not matched by its thirst for predicting the future on the basis of trends. So keen are some practitioners that they consolidate trends by simply identifying them. In other words, if enough people believe there is a trend, even if empirically there is not, then a trend is nonetheless formed if these people behave in accordance with its requirements.⁶ It does not take a great deal of imagination to see that this is only a small step to dictating trends which suit one's own special interests, be they political utopias or new product lines. There should be a course in trend management for up-and-coming entrepreneurs. It is sure to attract large enrolments and provide jobs for unemployed historians.

~~A trend manager appeals to people's fear of being 'left behind'. There is a sense of the inevitable. Even if such inevitability entails lemming-like behaviour, no one would have the courage to reverse the trend. There is even a scientific, and therefore authenticating way, of speaking about trends. Projections, extrapolations and simulations make the future a virtual reality. Like good propaganda, there needs to be a slice of (perceived) truth. This gives it an air of plausibility. I speak now from experience - experience in teaching a course on the subject. It is not, I hasten to add, a course on how to be a trend manager or effective propagandist (though the possibility cannot be excluded), but on how the future is professionally catered for in the field of international relations. And how students of international relations might themselves think critically - and creatively - about prospects for global affairs. The first lesson is about thinking in the long-term.~~

Otherwise we are likely to re-enact the delusions of our forebears. "It seemed that every time we were beginning to form teams we were reorganised," complained a Roman, Gaius Petronius Arbiter, who was Proconsul of Bithynia in the first century AD. "I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet every situation by reorganising, and a wonderful

⁶ This subject is well covered by Max Dublin, *Futurehype*, Viking, Markham, Ontario, 1989.

method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency and demoralisation."⁷

Today this condition may be called *utilitarianism without the ends*. And if its practitioners have ends, then they are often inconsistent. *Utilitarianism without the ends* is like 'getting down to the bottom line' without knowing what 'the bottom line' is (or should be). Thus the question settles, somewhat heavily: Is being efficient - or, for that matter, productive, competitive, marketable, and even relevant - the best means to achieve one's purported ends? And is it for the best reasons? In other words, does one's 'goals' pertain to anything more than gaining economic advantage in the mode of 'economic animal'? The successful economies of Asia have flinched at this label. Australia might do likewise if its motives for being part of Asia are purely economic.

Does Australia understand the nature of its goals and the processes they entail? It is not enough to want to avoid economic decline? One must want something positive too. Like most nations, Australia wants a role in international society. Such a role will depend on how it conceives the world. Some nations conceive the world more artistically than others, and in doing so more constructively too. Is it not better to deter war by threatening the evocative 'mother of all wars' than to disguise the human harm that will be afflicted by calling for a 'surgical strike'? To this contrast between Arab and American expressions of foreign policy intentions may be added China's traditionally poetic conception of the international political landscape. What we would call the periphery (in the centre-periphery image of International Relations), the Chinese used to call the 'region of tranquil tenure'. Further still, it became a 'wild domain'.⁸ To speak, as is the norm today, of power balances and vacuums, does not help us analytically or constructively. It treats power in the simplistic measurement mode, like a child at play with blocks or spade and bucket. Balancing entails no one block being able to overturn any of the other blocks used to build an ediface; vacuums are created when one power (the sand) is removed, and another power (the sea) rushes in to fill it. This method of understanding how 'things work' suits children but not world leaders. It is a mode which lacks relationship subtleties. Again, this is a situation to be expected of small children, but hardly among their elders. Relationships of power, as distinct from 'balances', are such that vacuums are not necessarily created or filled, but augmented or transformed within other levels of relationships. Moreover, the power balance mentality displays no artistry in devising the best means (or stratagems) for the desired goal. Sometimes such 'lateral thinking' entails indirect approaches.

⁷ Quoted in Robert C. Solomon, *Ethics and Excellence: Cooperation and Integrity in Business*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1993, p. 8.

⁸ These poetic descriptions are noted in K. J. Holsti, *International Politics: A Framework for Analysis*, 6th edn, Prentice-Hall, 1992, p. 20.

This is well illustrated by the classical Chinese strategist, Sun Tzu. His book, *The Art of War*, is about the desirability of not fighting a war if one wishes to employ the best means of winning one. To resort to physical force is the crass option: superior strategy lies in attacking the *mind* of the opponent or, better still, disarming it. It is also a matter of whether one's stratagem can be performed with deliberation, the deliberation that comes from a contemplative mind, as distinct from a regimental/instrumental one. This brings to mind Australia's 'challenge' in the face of its earlier Anglo-American tutelage, under which 'security' was another name for 'defence' and 'defence' unequivocally pertained to military matters. From this inherited perspective, extramilitary factors (those beyond the military) are not among the prime considerations in questions of 'security'.

Not only the societal, but the foreign policy implications of a strategic culture based on insufficient reflection are immense. Unfortunately, they are probably unappreciated. The 'state as a work of art' referred to the state being "the outcome of reflection and calculation", to the state's "inward constitution, no less than [its] foreign policy".⁹ Has Australia engaged intensely in this art of reflection and calculation?

Recently, notions of comprehensive engagement with the Asian region are beginning to be taken more seriously by Australians, who are starting to realise that they need to comprehensively engage themselves as well. Mabo is a manifestation of this. So is the resurgence of the republican debate. A country's internal relations directly impact on its identity and external relationships. In this respect the Keating government has understood the basic principles of political *virtu*. The notion of reflection and calculation might yet take root.

I once heard a Chinese dissident say that everything is culture. Economics and politics are culture. This concept is familiar but often not understood. It suggests that *utilitarianism without the ends* is a culture of confusion. Insight into its condition is required. Self recovery as a work of art may then be possible.

⁹ Alker quoting Burckhardt, *International Studies Quarterly*, op. cit., p. 352.