Joseph von Sonnenfels, Principles of Public Order, Trade, and Finances (1786–87)

Abstract

Joseph von Sonnenfels (1732–1817) was an Austrian lawyer and cultural critic. In this general introduction to his volume *Principles of Public Order, Trade, and Finances*, von Sonnenfels articulated a cameralist perspective on the role of the state. Cameralism was a system of state administration that sought to encourage population growth, control state finances, and boost economic prosperity.

Source

General Introduction
Division of the science of state into its branches:

1. The individual human[1] is not the human in its natural state. This state would be a state of constant helplessness. But he is aware of his weaknesses and feels that he is capable of compensating for them to improve his situation: reason, that which distinguishes him from the animals, allows him to see the means by which he might achieve this better situation: this means is the formation of social ties with his fellow humans. The natural state of man is thus the state of society: the domestic, the marital, the parental society, are so many steps through which he comes closer to the society at large, which encompasses all these smaller associations, and which, because these smaller associations attend only to the welfare of their individual members, aims to facilitate the greatest good of all these societies at once.

2. The society at large is the state. The transition into this society earned the members a new name, brought them into new relationships as individual humans became citizens, creatures who are now, as a result of the nature of their choice of situation, parts related to a whole, as members of a moral body. The effect of this agreement is unity of purpose, unity of will, unity of strength.

3. Unity of purpose; or the welfare, the greatest good: which is now called the common good, although the good of the individual member, in other words, the private advantage, is subordinated to the former, and cannot be considered except to the extent that he is a part of the common, the entire body. In the case, thus, that the private advantage is not compatible with the common good, the former must cede to the advantage of the latter. Fortunately, however, when understood clearly, a contradiction between the true, long-term welfare of the individual and the general common good is unfathomable. For a mature consideration will always show that either the advantage of the individual will cease to be an advantage as soon as his actions prove detrimental to the common good,[2] or often, that something is seen to be contradictory to the common good which is not actually disadvantageous. Among the ancient Persians, no individual was allowed to appeal to the gods for his own favor unless “he asks, said Herod, that all Persians should experience favor! For everyone includes each individual.” The welfare of the individual is grounded in the welfare of the whole: but the welfare of the whole also rests on the welfare of the individuals.

4. Unity of the will, which, when there is something to be accomplished that affects the entire society, suspends all objections based on the principle that no one is able to desire and not desire simultaneously and subordinates the individual will to the collective resolution.

5. Unity of strength, to the extent namely that the individual forces are necessary to achieve the common aim, they are to be employed for no other cause than that which has been appointed for the collective strength. Anyone who withdraws his own strength for the accomplishment of an aim that requires a certain level of [collective] strength leaves the general ability to act too weak; and should he even employ his force in opposition to the general aim, the disadvantage doubles, for he the negates another force.

6. Depending on the variety of situations and circumstances, the institutions and rules for achieving collective social aims vary. Who suggests the establishment of these institutions? Who has the right to examine them, declare them to be worthy, or to disband them? Everyone: the right to public discussion is a common right of all members of a society. Only, in order for it to come to a proper resolution, then that which is decided should be binding for all members. In other words, it should become law. This requires the concurrence of all members.

7. This was likely the first form or way in which the developing state could declare the common will: transition from a t h r o n g to s o c i e t y, from a n a r c h y to the simplest form of d e m o c r a c y. A general consensus could not always, indeed only rarely, be reached. Public debates often ended without any resolution. The nature of the situation did not always allow for the sort of delays necessary for general gatherings, or until all the votes could be gathered, especially in particularly numerous societies and expansive countries. The understanding of those who vote, their share in public affairs, due to differences in wealth or other aspects of their situation, was unequal. At the same time, the voice of the more intelligent or the wealthier individuals did not receive any more influence or weight than that of the inexperienced, the impoverished. It was thus necessary to agree upon a method by which a common will might be reached that would avoid these difficulties. And so, as societies sought to solve these problems in different ways, various forms of government were created.

8. In order that there might at least be an outcome regarding public affairs, the principle was retained that every citizen could vote, but the majority of votes was decisive. States in which this method of regulating public affairs is employed are still called democracies, but in a restricted meaning. Not only is it that the majority of votes by an uneducated throng is perhaps not the more intelligent, in fact, that even the exact opposite is likely a safe assumption. And so the democratic form of governance avoids neither the delay nor the difference in their share in public affairs which were so problematic in the public debates.[3] For which reason calls came from the throng for the nobler among them to administer the common entity: from them these states received the name a r i s t o c r a c i e s. In aristocracies the law-making was likely entrusted to the more insightful segment of the population, but the interests of individual families were still present in the public deliberations and created chasms or guided the general affairs for the private advantage of a few. Other nations were thus attracted to the archetype of government as a family headed by a single father, and, trusting in the wisdom of one person, in his justice and love, entrusted everything to one, who should be their father, their lawgiver and councilor, their head, who, gifted with the necessary insight, should know no advantage separate from the general one. These are m o n a r c h i e s. All three forms of government are capable of different constellations, restrictions, restraints, and degeneration.

9. These varying forms of governance did not change the essence of society but only the formality of how the common will was determined, which, depending on this difference, either takes place via the majority, the appointed elite, or the sole ruler, instead of via the general consensus as it would otherwise. And just as the resolutions passed by all were binding for each individual, so must the resolutions of those now serving in their stead be binding, as well. This binding character on the one hand means on the other the right to use force, the inability to resist, and this defines the relationship between the commander and the obedient, between the subject and the supreme power.

10. Formerly the will of all the citizens determined the use of the unified forces. Now, however, when the

supreme power determines the common will, it, too, is responsible for determining how the forces of the society can best be deployed for the common good.

11. The ultimate aim for which people enter into society is that good which they cannot achieve individually due to a lack of moral and physical capacities, in other words, for the individual good of each member. Because, however, this individual good is the goal of everyone, and every member, by promoting the greatest good of the other thereby shores up his own, it is called the common good. The ultimate goal of the unifying population was thus the individual good, while the ultimate goal of the unified population is the general: the sum of all the individual goods. In civil societies[4] this common good, this ultimate aim, was to ensure a secure and comfortable life, which together makes up welfare.

12. Security is a state in which we have nothing to fear. The state in which the state has nothing to fear is public security; when no citizen has anything to fear, it is private security. If the state has nothing to fear in the way of attacks from outside, this is called outer [security], and, if it fears nothing from its citizens, this is public inner security. And if the state has nothing to fear from the outside, nor from its citizens, and these in turn have nothing to fear, as well, this happy situation is called general security.

13. Comfort of life is the ease with which one can provide for oneself by working. This work will more easily provide a livelihood the more channels of acquisition are available. The general degree of the comfort of life thus depends on the multiplication of the channels of acquisition.

14. The social welfare with its various aspects cannot be maintained without effort. The outer security, for example, requires fortresses, armies, envoys; inner security, magistrates, courts, and the like. The ruler must be provided with an income that is commensurate with his dignity. This expenditure is made for the good of all the citizens: it is thus fitting that it be carried by all the citizens, but in such a way that is in accordance with the ultimate aim.

15. Following various observations and experiences, the varying measures by which the general welfare is maintained can be traced back to reliable principles that can be understood as a science, which is understood in the broadest sense as the science of the state [i.e., political science]: in other words, the science of regulating the welfare of a state, the science of governance. And even if the recorder of the conversations of Phocion[5] asked: Whether it is possible that, among the various changes that are constantly affecting the circumstances and frame of mind of the societies, the art of ruling nevertheless follows reliable, set, unchanging principles? It would appear from the insights of the century and the quantity of thorough writing that comes daily to light that this line of inquiry is superfluous. One is convinced that the presumed and changeable does not lie in the fundamentals of the science but rather in the circumstances and situations to which the principles are to be applied. The straightforward empiricist in politics can thus no more be viewed as a statesman than he might be seen in medicine as a doctor.

16. The empiricist should not be lumped in, however, with the practitioner. Routine, in other words, unguided exercise, creates political charlatans; theory, without knowledge of the circumstances, without experience, creates dreamers, utopians. True practice is the ability to apply the fundamentals to the individual case at hand. The experience must therefore build on the theory, on the knowledge of the fundamentals, and it is only the correlation of the former with the latter that yields a useful man for the state. Here the often repeated objection is sure to fall that in practice things happen much differently than in theory. Sometimes this deviation can be attributed to practice, where it does not acknowledge the fundamentals which should lead it. Sometimes the deviation can be attributed to a theory that does not take into account the actual and possible circumstances. But a faulty theory is not a theory, anymore than a faulty inference is an inference, or false gold, gold.

17. Perhaps the misconception that political knowledge cannot be traced back to fundamentals springs

largely from a mistrust of human insight. The scope of politics appeared too great, the number of things to be taken into account too large, for them to be considered in relation to each other.[6] Concessions were made to this mistrust to some extent both in the scientific treatment[7] and in the practice, to ease the course of the one and the other. For, when it became apparent that the ultimate aim of the state can be divided into four main categories, which are related to each other and must hold hands, but nevertheless stand alone as subordinated ultimate aims of a sort, one divided the science of the state into four sciences. These four subordinate ultimate aims are: outer security; inner security; the increase of foodstuffs and channels of their acquisition; and the collection of the necessary revenue for the state's expenditure.

18. The collection of those fundamentals which guide the outer security of the state constitutes the science of the state in particular (the so-called statesmanship or politics), but it is not dealt with here, as it falls outside the purview of this work.

19. Political science addresses the fundamentals of creating and maintaining inner security.

20. The increase in foodstuffs and the channels for their distribution by an advantageous return on that which the earth and industriousness produce is the subject of economic science.

21. Financial science, finally, shows how the state's revenues can most effectively be generated. The German authors understand the political, trade, and financial aspects under the concept of the state economy, or they call these the economic sciences. Under the last two they also use the name cameralistics, based on the chamber of the regents, where the decisive business is generally administrated.

22. Natural science, with all its branches, the mathematical sciences, geography, history, the rights, the languages, is partially to be viewed as an indispensable preparation, partially as a helpful resource for accessing the theories of politics, trade, and finances. But the man in business, in the actual practice, must understand the moral customs, traditions, and laws of the people, the mutual advantages and disadvantages of the countries, the political relationships of the states, and if he wants to be useful in helping to legislate, especially the people themselves.

NOTES

[1] The concept of an individual human being is perhaps a pure literary abstraction. The human always exists within society, and, as Ferguson astutely observes in his "Essay on the History of Civil Society," a wild man, caught somewhere in the woods, is not proof of men naturally living in isolation any more than a sheep that has been lost in the forest is proof that sheep do not live in flocks. [Translator's note: Sonnenfels has here liberally paraphrased the original, which reads: "A wild man, therefore, caught in the woods, where he had always lived apart from his species, is a singular instance, not a specimen of any general character." (Adam Ferguson, An Essay on the History of Civil Society, 4. ed., Gregg International: London, 1969, p. 5; available online https://archive.org/embed/essayonhistoryof0000ferg.)

[2] If a society brings wares to a ship to transfer them to another harbor, the common social purpose is the transportation of all the wares. A thunderstorm afflicts the travelers: the only way to keep the ship from going down is to throw the heaviest wares overboard. But the owner of these wares, conscious only of his personal disadvantage, opposes this decision, he insists, and the ship is not lightened. Due to his refusal to allow this measure, the whole ship is ruined. Did the momentary saving of the heavy wares truly bring the owner any advantage? Were not his wares lost when the entire ship went down?

[3] The riffraff in democracies are always daring because they have nothing to lose, and are always prepared to go to extremes and risk everything, for this is ultimately nothing.

[4] It is futile to seek the reasons for the initial civil assemblies elsewhere, in the superior strength of violent individuals who subordinated themselves to others. The fear of violence causes individuals to disperse more than to unite. No violence can be understood without the throng, and this throng itself is already a society, that, when it directed acts of violence against strangers, viewed such acts as means of ensuring its own security and comfort. But the submissiveness toward a conqueror? What motive could it have? To claim with this submissiveness a welfare that one would otherwise be incapable of maintaining. “Expansion,” says Montesquieu, “was the object of Rome, war the object of Sparta, trade the object of Marseille, navigation the object of Rhodos, etc.” Certainly not; but Rome saw expansion, Sparta, like our contemporary neighboring state, war, Marseille, like Holland, trade, Rhodos, like England, control of the seas as a means by which they could assert their welfare.
[5] Mably
[6] Resipsa (wrote Naude bibliogra. poli. §6 de decano. script) minus arte valet vigetque, quam experientia et usu, achominum legibus, moribus et institutia: et circumstantiis rerum, temporum & actionum particularibus, quas in artem & methodum vix possibile sit reducere.
[7] This might explain why, although there are so many writers who address individual aspects of the science of the state, there are so few in the list of those who have taken it upon themselves to address the subject in its entirety, although one might count [Johann Heinrich Gottlob] Justi’s *Political Economy*, [Jakob] Bielfeld’s *Political Institutions*, certainly also [Gaspard de] Réal [de Curban’s] *Art of the State*, and [James] Steuart’s [*An Inquiry into the Principles of*] *Political Economy*, in addition to various so-called outlines and sketches of political science and cameralistics, among the complete systems, and the Aristotelian, but also the Hannover edition of Wolff’s political books, and together give them the honor of declaring them as a sort of doctrinal system for teaching the science of the state.

Source: Joseph von Sonnenfels, *Grundsätze der Polizey, Handlung, und Finanz. Zu dem Leitfaden des politischen Studiums*. Vienna: Kurzbek, 1786–87, p. 3–22. Available online at: https://digitale.bibliothek.uni-halle.de/id/9666548.

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