

Hobbes, Durkheim, and Spencer: On the Emergence of a Supra-individual Realm

The formation and development of a supra-individual realm and the relationship between supra-individual entities and individuals have been continuous topics of discussion in the field of sociology. The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the arguments made by Hobbes, Durkheim, and Spencer on these issues. They viewed the society and the state as concrete forms of the supra-individual realm, and conceived their theories around these two distinct supra-individual entities. Following that point, this paper will discuss how these authors view emergence of a society and the state with regard to their relationships with individuals. The analysis is primarily based on the texts we read, but I will also try to address the historical contexts of their theories when it is useful to better understand the theories.

Hobbes

Hobbes was one of the forerunners who pondered the reasons for the formation of the state [Hobbes used the term “the common-wealth”¹ to indicate the supra-individual realm he pictured (Hobbes, *Leviathan*: 87), but I will use the term state instead, to be consistent with Durkheim and Spencer]. He tried to explain the emergence of the state in regard to the nature of man and his relationship with other men in society.

Before we examine his thoughts, let’s briefly look at the background of his work. He lived in an era in which England was going through a political chaos due to civil war. Radical parties were against absolute monarchism and tried to establish a constitution-based government (Chung, 1979). Hobbes was interested in preserving the authority of the monarch against the persistent threats, on the one hand, from the Roman Catholic Church and, on the other hand, from radical constitutionalism (Kim, 1999). His *Leviathan* emerges from this chaotic situation.

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes first explores the reason why people fight against each other by deliberating on the nature of man. In the book, he states that every man is equal in strength and mind and, accordingly, cherishes equal hopes in attaining his personal ends (Hobbes, *Leviathan*: 63). These ends are specified as gain, safety, and reputation (64). In order to achieve these ends, people cannot help fighting against each other. This causes the state of “[war], as is of every man, against every man” and in this situation, Hobbes claims, “there is no way for any man to secure himself” (p.64).

Hobbes’ claim that man cannot secure himself in the nature is based on two premises: 1) each man fights for his own desire; 2) one cannot achieve permanent dominance over another because men are basically equal in strength and thus have the ability to kill each other. These assumptions are central in his argument for the formation of the state.

¹ By using the term “common-wealth,” I think Hobbes wanted to deliver the message that the state has to be established for the good of people, not for the one despotic person.

Another reason that brings about the formation of the state comes from people's genuine desire to end the state of war and achieve peace. People may wonder how this desire for peace arises from the state of war of all against all. Hobbes' explanation is that people are afraid of being killed in the state of war. Such desire of people to obtain peace and security generates the agreement among people to erect a common power. The only way to erect such power, Hobbes maintains, is for the people "to [confer] all their power and strength upon one Man, or upon one Assembly of men." He states that after such election of one man or one assembly of men is done, and people agree to give up their right to that Man, the multitude is united in one person, and this state is called "commonwealth" (89).

Hobbes's argument gives us a useful framework to view the emergence of the state in relations to the nature of men, whether his assumption about the nature of men is true or not. His arguments, however, bring about some critiques. First, he doesn't give any explanation on the process of the state formation. That is, he doesn't clarify how people choose one man or assembly of men to confer their rights. How people move from war state to establishment of commonwealth is also unclear. Does it simply happen naturally? What is the momentum of people's making up their minds to establish a power? Also, at least in the text we read, Hobbes doesn't explain the preliminary form of social organization or a society that must have existed for people to agree upon what they commonly desired and how they were going to achieve it. These questions preclude the wide applicability of Hobbes' theory.

Spencer

While Hobbes thought that it is necessary to establish the state in order to secure peace among egotistic individuals, and suggested that the state can be established by conferring individual rights to one person or assembly of men, Spencer strongly opposed the idea that one great man can change society. Spencer states that society is a "growth" rather than a "manufacture" (Spencer, 1972: 56)². In explaining the emergence of a supra-individual realm, Spencer emphasized that the social organizations are "consequent of natural causes" (54).

To be more specific, however, it is hard to compare Hobbes and Spencer, because their main ideas lie in different milieu. While Hobbes focuses his discussion on articulating reasons for the formation of the state, Spencer is more interested in finding principles of development of a society (in Spencer's term, "social evolution"). Consequently, although Spencer critiques Hobbes by claiming that one great man cannot create or change society, he doesn't offer any alternative explanation to compare with Hobbes on what brought the formation of the state. He simply assumes a society is an aggregate of individuals and is naturally emerged.

Nevertheless, Hobbes' and Spencer's thoughts compliment each other because Spencer is touching upon issues of development or evolution of a society, which Hobbes overlooked in his *Leviathan*.

² Although I cannot say that Hobbes considers society (or the state) a manufacture, I find his state is more close to a manufacture than to natural growth. This is because Hobbes makes clear distinctions between the natural world and the world after the emergence of the state.

In Spencer's analysis of social evolution, he makes an analogy to the individual organism. Spencer states that societies have the following commonality with an individual organism: 1) that societies commence as small aggregations, augment in mass; 2) that at first they have very simple structure, but in the course of their growth, the complexity of structure increases; 3) that there are hardly any mutual dependence of parts at the early stage, but the parts gradually obtain a mutual dependence; 4) that "the life and development of a society is independent of ... the life and development of any of its component units." (57); and 5) that "the highest societies, like the highest organisms, exhibit them in the greatest degree" (58). Besides these general similarities between social organism and individual organism, Spencer also talks about the similarities in the system of control. He thinks that the state has a similar role as a brain of an individual organism. He states, "the cerebrum coordinates the countless ... considerations which affect the present and future welfare of the individual as a whole" (69).

He also elaborates on some differences between societies and individual organisms. Those differences are: 1) that "societies have no specific external forms" (58); 2) that "the living elements of a society do not form a continuous mass, but are ... widely dispersed over some portion of the Earth's surface" (59); 3) that social organisms are able to move from place to place³; and 4) that in society, all the members are bestowed with feeling (60).

Based on these analogies, Spencer further elaborates on social evolution. In the evolution of a society, he states, "a primary differentiation of analogous kind" takes place (62). At this primary stage of evolution, which can be found in the primitive society, there are only two groups that are differentiated: the governing and the governed. Then, as a society evolves, differentiation in each parts of organism takes place. According to the level of evolution, Spencer distinguishes lower types of society and higher types of society. He states that in higher types of society, organizations that have no relation to original divisions grow up (64).

Spencer's theory of social evolution is meaningful in that he tries to develop some of the principles based on which society works and evolves. He develops some idea of differentiation and integration between social organisms and, from that idea, builds up a possible way to explain the momentum for social growth. His thoughts give valuable points to reflect on especially when we compare his cooperative social organism with Hobbes' society of conflicting individuals. His theory, however, loses its persuasive power because it doesn't represent the view of people or society with less power. He attributes lack of social evolution to individual defects, but in reality, this attribution is not true. The development of a society often involves other social structural factors such as richer resources, accumulation of knowledge and wealth, and so on. He also doesn't go beyond biological reasoning in establishing his theory.

Durkheim

³ But he states that the difference is not so crucial because social organisms, too, are "fixed in their public capacities." (59)

While Hobbes explained the emergence of the supra-individual realm by laying out the reasons that lead to the formation of the state, and Spencer focused his discussion on framing the principles of social evolution, Durkheim was interested in finding the role of the state in coordinating and leading a supra-individual realm called political society.

His “political society” is defined as “[the] one formed by the coming together of a rather large number of secondary social groups, subject to the same one authority which is not itself subject to any other superior authority duly constituted” (Durkheim, 1992:45). As we can see in the definition, Durkheim takes into account multiple supra-individual actors that interact in a political society. The secondary groups are the groups that are between the state and individuals, such as family and religious groups. There is also a group called a “special group”. This group is an administrative group under the state and has executive power. Secondary groups are subordinate to this group. Finally, the state is defined as “a group of officials ... within which representations and acts of volition involving the collectivity are worked out, although they are not the product of collectivity” (49-50). Durkheim says we should not confuse the special group with the state, because special groups are different from the state in that “they alone are entitled to think and to act instead of representing the society” (48).

With these various actors defined, Durkheim examines the relation between individuals, the secondary groups, and the state very explicitly. His basic statement is that all the actors are very important in building a political society and are interdependent. He states, “[the secondary groups] form the primary condition for any higher organization. ... the State presuppose their existence; it exists only where they exist” (45). But at the same time, he addresses the negative influence of the secondary groups on individuals and maintains that the state has a role to “[fend] off the opposing forces [of secondary groups] that tend to absorb the individual” (69). He also claims that the state provides “the milieu in which the individual moves, so that he may develop his faculties in freedom” (69).

In fact, Durkheim had the most favorable view on the state among the three authors we review. He claims, “it is only through the State that individualism is possible” (64). He also states that the state represents a “particular kind of consciousness” (50) that is higher and clearer than collective consciousness. As for the role of the state, he maintains that the state should not only protect individual rights but also institute them (57). These arguments are very different from Hobbes’ and Spencer’s. In Hobbes’ view, the role of the state is no more than to represent the collective desires of individuals to put an end to the insecure state of nature and to preserve peace. In Spencer’s view, the individuals are very important parts of a society and the level of social evolution depends on quality of individuals and how they differentiate themselves into different organizations. While Spencer and other individualists believed in inherent rights of an individual and thought that the role of the state is to preserve negative rights of the individuals by “[warding] off certain ill effects of the association” (52), Durkheim thought the state should lead the individuals with morals and higher consciousness.

Then how did Durkheim come to think about this active role of the state to support individuals? Durkheim explains that some of his reasoning evolved from the following dilemma: that “on the one hand we establish that the state goes on developing

more and more: on the other hand, that the rights of the individual, held to be actively opposed to those of the State, have a parallel development” (57). He states that the individualists’ claim that the rights of the individual are inherent and that the role of the state “should be limited to administering a wholly negative justice” (52) ignores the reality that the state is actually involved in various other matters, and thus cannot be the solution for the dilemma. He therefore maintains that the only way to solve this problem is to “dispute the postulate that the rights of the individual are inherent, and to admit that the institution of these rights is in fact precisely the task of the state” (57). His main argument is that “the stronger the state, the more the individual is respected” (57).

Another reason is that without the authorities who are above the local and domestic level (that is, above secondary groups), individuals tend to fall under the dominance of secondary groups (62). Durkheim states that this is because secondary groups tend to keep those individuals belonging to them under their immediate control (62). In Durkheim’s thought, the entity best suited for this role to liberate the individual personalities from the secondary groups and to provide a certain range of individual development (62) is the State.

Durkheim also explains how the State expands its functions. He states, the state must “enter into [individuals’] lives, [and] supervise ... the way they operate. And to do this [the state] must spread its roots in all directions. ... It must be present in all spheres of social life and make itself felt” (65). And the fundamental duty of the state in this intervention is, according to Durkheim, “to persevere in calling the individual to a moral way of life” (69).

Durkheim’s theory is very attractive in that it lays the foundation for extending the role of the state in regard to promoting individual human rights. As we think about our present society, we recognize not only basic rights such as right to life and right to property, but also various social rights that are established in the context of relationships between individual, social organisms, and the state. Without the state playing an active role in providing the milieu, these rights are difficult to protect. And, as Durkheim suggested, sometimes the state plays the role of liberating individuals from the oppression of secondary groups. For example, the right to education of a girl –this can be hard to achieve if certain family groups or religious groups impose their negative view concerning the education of females to individuals. The state, if it holds authority over these secondary groups as Durkheim argues, may liberate individuals from this oppression.

However, whether or not every state shares this morality or high consciousness to enhance individual rights still remains as a question. Spencer, although he was not a big supporter for a strong state, might have responded to this question by saying that it works out automatically because the state is like a brain and therefore cares for the parts of the body, which are individuals and other social organisms. However, by looking at some of the states that tread on individual rights, we know that it is not true. How do states develop their capacity to govern with high morals? How can Durkheim explain some of the states that abuse individual rights for the interest of a few people who have power? These questions need to be answered in order to validate his theory, and also to

strengthen his argument that the state plays a greater role than what Hobbes proposes in *Leviathan*.

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