

Government, Governing, and Governance

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Government: the office, authority or function of governing. Governing: having control or rule over oneself. Governance: the activity of governing. Accordingly, governance is a set of decisions and processes made to reflect social expectations through the management or leadership of the government (by extension, under liberal democratic ideals, the will of 'the people' as they rule themselves). There are many issues implicit in this set of relationships whose core revolves around the notion of citizenship as this defines the body politic over which claims of self-rule apply. In the most general sense we have the difference between a liberal democratic view that the government (state) serves citizens who have a natural claim on services as a benefit and right of citizenship on the one hand, and on the other the counter enlightenment view often associated with fascism: that the citizen must serve the state and has no rights other than those granted by the state. In what may be called the American model citizenship is a broadly endowed set of rights representing potential claims for benefits, as defined by the state. The result is that in the USA what constitutes a valid claim of citizens is contested, and then the question of who qualifies to have claims met is debated.

This offers us an opportunity to understand a number of pressing issues hotly contested: what is the proper role of government, who should have the right to make claims, how exclusionary or inclusionary we should be as a society, how are rights defined and defended, to name but a few. The current socio-political manifestation of these issues is struggles over immigration policy (and the recent reactionary policies passed in Arizona), the Tea Party Movement (if such a thing exists – perhaps more properly, a right-wing populism mixed with aggressive libertarian views), the ongoing debates over health care reform, and election finance reform (the last speaking to the issue of whose voice is loudest, and by implication who is a citizen protected by these generic rights imparted in the American model). Add to this mix the BP ecological, social and political disaster in the Gulf of Mexico and oddly we have an opportunity to critically reflect on government and governing.

Let us consider these separately. A recent US Supreme Court ruling found that corporations have the same legal rights as other 'individuals', and campaign finance laws

designed to limit spending by corporations violated the free speech rights of those corporations. A long tradition of trying to keep the level of resources from becoming the defining factor in local and national elections was suddenly turned on its head, and politicians most willing to align with corporate interests rather than those of their constituents now have an advantage. Laws in many states in the USA allow candidates to forego raising funds privately and instead use public funds to campaign for office. If candidates who opt out raise excessive dollars (defined in many ways) those getting public funds can receive additional dollars to create a more even playing field. But recent legal challenges working through the courts argue that by providing additional public support these laws have a limiting and chilling effect on the 'free speech' of those raising funds privately. Not only can corporations now flood the political landscape with funds to support politicians favorable to corporate interests, but now it seems the US Supreme Court may rule it is 'unfair' to provide additional public funds when some candidates raise even more money from private (corporate?) sources.

The recent passage of the Arizona law that allows police to demand the presentation of documents proving someone is a citizen of this country (when properly provoked by, say, the color of one's skin or other outward appearances suggesting non-legal immigrant status) has prompted many states around the country to consider the passage of similar state laws. The argument in defense of this action appears as some version of the premise that undocumented (illegal) immigrants create problems by

- a) taking jobs citizens would otherwise have,
- b) drain local resources by using up public services or crowding hospitals, or
- c) contribute to violent crime in the community.

In the end the common mantra is that the Federal Government is not dealing with the problem and so states have to step into the breach to stem this flood. Never mind that for each point

- a) jobs held by these migrants are otherwise not filled,
- b) undocumented immigrants tend to stay away from public services for fear of being 'caught', and use them only in the most extreme instances, and
- c) crime rates and statistics do not support the claims of rising crime due to these undocumented workers.

These laws proposed are little more than an extension of racial profiling to the extreme, and the disregard for rights is being extended (or at least laws are now being proposed) that will deny birth certificates to children born in this country to undocumented workers on the assumption that without a legal proof of birth one cannot claim the citizenship rights of children (and perhaps delay the deportation of non-citizen parents).

Healthcare reform legislation is little more than a boon to insurance companies who now will have new customers – with the added insult that the fine for an individual not having insurance as much as the greater of \$750 or 2 percent of income while insurers who refuse to provide insurance might be fined only a fraction of that amount. Yet, even this

paean to the bottom line of insurance companies (our new citizens!) seems to be too much government involvement for those who identify as Tea Party activists. The irony (perhaps more a tragedy of political ignorance) is that their zeal for lower taxes and no government involvement in their lives ignores the fact that for the vast majority of them taxes actually decreased, and major government entitlements like unemployment insurance, social security and Medicare sustain these anti-government protestors. No one in the crowd seems to appreciate the irony of slogans that demand the government stop meddling in citizen affairs and keep its hands off Medicare! Citizenship, it would seem, does not warrant any claim that government provide collective goods even as the very notion of citizenship rights is hotly defended in the assault on immigrants crossing the border for menial work at pathetic pay (of course, we do not really worry about those graduate students overstaying their visas to work as professionals – unless they are Muslim or from ‘enemy’ countries!). The Tea Party apparently stands for, if nothing else, a demand that governance disappear along with government – though the recent pronouncements of Rand Paul clearly demonstrate that this political ‘movement’ is defined more by what it is against than what it is for, and even on that level there is scant agreement over what they are against (isolationism clashes with military adventurism, social conservatism on issues like abortion clashes with true libertarian ideals of no restraints, and some even want to end all entitlement programs which many want to preserve – like Medicare!).

The recent and ongoing disaster commonly called the ‘BP Oil Leak’ brings all this together. By the time this issue is printed (November 2010) we may be experiencing a full blown ecological disaster with destroyed shorelines, habitats, fishing grounds and the like that will have altered the entire political economy of the inner Gulf Coast region. Furthermore, if ocean currents and projections are even marginally correct the world’s third largest coral reef off the Florida coast will have been severely stressed if not destroyed, tourism in Florida will have been trampled and the major economies, livelihoods, and future of the coastal residents of the five states bordering on the Gulf of Mexico as well as into the Atlantic will be in shambles. This is based on the current spill into the Gulf (underestimated as it may be) and on the expectation that the flow of oil will stop soon. The tragic ironies are two: the total amount of oil we might have gotten from the well is a fraction of the daily US oil consumption; and Florida, a state which has waged a decades-long struggle to resist off-shore drilling while Louisiana embraced it, will nonetheless be significantly impacted. There are no political boundaries to ecological disasters.

Governance in this oil disaster is effectively non-existent. The major blame is being tossed about like the proverbial hot potato from one corporation to another and two of these players (BP and Trans Ocean) are not even US corporations but no doubt get all the rights and privileges given to them by the US Supreme Court as corporations doing business in the USA. Our government fulminates (perhaps not as thunderously as we would like – that may yet come) and sends the Department of Justice to investigate. Governing manifests itself ineffectively, as we learn day by day, and increasingly after the fact, BP routinely subverts, misleads, or inaccurately responds to government regulations designed to protect the public good. Indeed, recent data revealed BP to be in violation

of safety standards many times more often than the other oil companies being monitored. Politicians long the recipient of oil industry largesse continue, in the face of contradictory evidence, to minimize the disaster, trivialize the concerns, and even go so far as encourage more off-shore drilling (lest we forget, our 'change' president did authorize more off-shore drilling just weeks prior to this disaster). We, as citizens, are assured that the government is acting on our behalf and that BP will be held responsible for all costs. The wonder is that no one seems to concern themselves with the legal maneuvering of companies like Johns Manville that effectively left all product liability claims (then due to asbestos) behind through bankruptcy proceedings. Wall Street is already calculating how to partition BP into 'good' and 'bad' entities, the former retaining all that is of value while the latter holding all the liabilities from this disaster. And the US Congress stalls as it ponders the wisdom of removing absurd liability caps of \$75 million to cover the costs and consequences of this disaster.

We may well ask: are we governing? Does a government exist that represents all of its citizens? Have things changed so much that we do not even concern ourselves with any semblance of legitimacy – perhaps settling that old debate over whether or not the state is relatively autonomous from capital? We are left to ponder whether or not our definition of 'citizen' is too broad, and whether there are effectively two classes of citizens: those who manage to get government support when no competing claims are presented, and those whose wealth and corporate ties ensure that governments act on a narrow definition of 'the public' as it governs.

This issue provides a conversation between Tamara Nopper (2010), whose article on Korean immigrant entrepreneurs appears early this year, Pyong Gap Min and Kyeyoung Park over the issues raised. The current debates around immigrants, their roles and the barriers they face make this exchange an important one. The remainder of this issue contains articles by Raewyn Connell on managers and intellectual work in a neoliberal world, Richard Sullivan about the opportunities and constraints of labor organizing and its movement building potential, and Peter Kennedy who questions the premise that the knowledge economy represents a significant shift in capitalist production, and the way labor power continues to be exploited under what he calls late capitalism.

Reference

- Nopper, T.K. (2010) Colorblind Racism and Institutional Actors' Explanations of Korean Immigrant Entrepreneurship. *Critical Sociology* 36(1): 65–85.