

## Why Do Social Causes Get Governmentalized?

Lecture Outline by Stephen Davies  
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1. Today we seem to face an unending series of ‘social problems’, from obesity to nuclear weapons. We are inundated with messages that have two parts, diagnosis and demands for action. The pattern follows a fairly strict template.

- X There is a problem - a threat to all that is good and true and beautiful etc.
- X The problem is desperate and getting worse.
- X “Something must be done!”
- X Something must be done by the government.

Often, events unfold as follows:

- X Activists voice the diagnosis/argument.
- X There is a demand for legislation & action (i.e. some kind of spending program) by the political class.

‘Something’ is done.

The point to emphasise, is that this kind of process and argument began around 1890.

2. Although the identified ‘problems’ are sometimes real they are often imaginary and are almost always inflated as regards both their extent and severity. The usual pattern is for concern about a social problem to become acute only when that problem is *actually diminishing* (This is known as ‘Spencer’s Law’ after the person who first made this point, the nineteenth century British sociologist and political philosopher Herbert Spencer). There are a number of reasons for this-the creation of a social cause which then produces governmental action of one kind or another. This is not logically entailed by the diagnosis or panic. Also, until relatively recently such panics did not lead to governmentalization.

3. Until the very end of the nineteenth century in most Western countries, a diagnosis of some kind of social crisis would lead in the first instance for calls for private action through charity, voluntary collective action, Church action, and individual self-improvement, *not government action*. The common outcome was the appearance of a private institution of some kind or some type of social movement. There were sometimes calls for government action in the form of legislation but not for direct government programs. What we now have is an assumption - that once a problem has been identified, a cause such as conservation or child protection brought into being, the only proper response is for government to take over the cause.

4. Governmentalization is disappointing in several ways, not only to the detached observer but *from the viewpoint of the original advocates*. However, this does not usually discredit the original argument or make others more cautious about pressing new causes or demands.

5. So, what's the explanation? Why did social campaigns so often result in successful calls for government action after circa 1890 but not before? What, if anything had changed? And why did this phenomenon show such a marked acceleration after about 1960? Any explanation has to work for more than one country. The phenomenon can be discerned in almost every developed state. An explanation must be able to identify something that has changed or appeared at a certain time and has thereby produced this result.

6. Here are some possible explanations which I will look at. These are not mutually exclusive, in fact the most likely explanation is some combination of these.

(A). Government always would if it could, but couldn't before 1890. Governments simply have greater capacity to act after the later 19<sup>th</sup> century and so they do. In other words the phenomenon would have existed before but for structural limitations on the capacity of governments. Also, social activists are now naturally drawn to government - it's the biggest honeypot around. However, there are chronological and other problems with this.

(B). Changes in the way politics works once modern mass politics comes into being. Notice what this says about the motives and nature of most campaigning/pressure groups. Is this always true? A sub-variant of this stresses the crucial role of the mass media in political communication since about 1890, and even more so since the advent of television.

(C). An intellectual explanation. There is a change in the dominant ideology, and in particular in the way that government power is conceived. The critical thing here is the appearance of the idea of a 'therapeutic' or 'healing' state, which is quite different from older ways of thinking about political power. (This is often understood in gender terms as the move from a 'paternal' to a 'maternal' state). A related explanation is the persisting influence of an older idea, that of the tutelary state, according to which most of us are children/incompetents.

(D). A sociological explanation. What we observe is a decline of civil society and informal institutions and a corresponding growth in the role of formal institutions, above all government. This explains changes in the composition and nature of social movements and why the indifferent mass puts up with things.

(E). A class based explanation. This explains it in terms of a particular view of the class structure of modern industrial societies and the way these produce a particular kind of dominant ideology/false consciousness that serves the interests of the dominant class.

What do I think?

What do you think?