

## How to Think Like a State

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at the occasion of the anniversary of the WRR  
in presence of Queen Beatrix of The Netherlands*

Your Majesty

Ladies and gentlemen

Dear colleagues

What even the great philosopher Plato failed to build, the Dutch have been able to create and to maintain up to these days: namely, a completely independent “think tank”, the “Scientific Council for Government Policy”, that has been able to provide the different branches of government with topical advices while remaining simultaneously part of the machinery of the State and yet able to draw as much as possible from the powers of thought. Philosophy in action, philosophy for action.

If it is true that the nature of what is the State and what it is to gain knowledge have always been connected, we should welcome the occasion provided by the anniversary this afternoon of this carefully crafted institution to revisit the very notion of what is a “think tank”. We often metaphorically say that States have “Heads”, but we rarely inquire what sort of cognitive equipment they should be endowed with, not to mention the neurophysiology of those artificial brains... This is why, to honour this “thought reservoir”, I chose to treat the question of the sort of thinking the State is supposed to possess.

There is some irony (unwanted, I hope) in having invited a Frenchman to participate in this celebration, since not only France never was able to fulfil such Platonic dream as yours, but she is also the country where the cognitive functions of the State are very much in trouble. I won't go as far as saying that I am speaking to you as a representant of a *failed* State... but

almost —at any rate of a State which has a lot to learn, in matter of cognitive equipment, from yours.

Fortunately, I am myself a traitor to my own country since I am not only totally Dutchophile (even though the name, I am told, does not exist) but also a *pragmatist* philosopher. “Pragmatism” in this lecture should not be understood as a synonym of “worldly” or “practical” (nor as the name of a political party) but rather as this attempt made by John Dewey in the 1930s to redesign the tasks of democracy according to a *realistic* definition of what it is to know something scientifically.<sup>1</sup> As John Dewey said in *The Public and Its Problem* (a brilliant title for our present historical situation): « The State must always be rediscovered ».<sup>2</sup> Since a French pragmatist is a *contradictio in terminis*, this is why I gather the courage to address you on this serious but also feisty occasion.

How can we come about rediscovering the State this afternoon together ?

First, we should leave aside the idea that the State will wither and become irrelevant through the advent of various transformations coming from the Left or from the Right: revolution, communism, market forces, internationalism, networks of cities, regions, even Europe or the internet. Contrary to all expectations for its progressive obsolescence, never was the rediscovery of the State more important than today. We all know the reason: never was the State so busy, so overburdened than now. Everyday we discover to our great dismay *more* elements to take into account and to throw into the melting pot of public life, instead of *less*.

Not only law and order, not only commerce and war, not only industry and class struggles, not only city life and health, but also, or so it seems, the entire environment, from the quality of the air, to the remeandering of rivers, from the quotas of herrings in the North Sea to the slow disappearance of bees and thus of pollinated flowers (can you imagine Holland without herrings and flowers?! Not to mention The Low Countries under the sea...). What the nightmares of the darkest totalitarianism could not even anticipate, that a day would come when the State would have to manipulate the *climate* itself, the unfortunate, the unprepared, the fragile democratic States of today have now to take in charge —in addition to all the rest. Because of the various ecological crisis, the State is now burdened with the destiny of the entire *Umwelt*. The question of breathing freely into the atmospheres of democracy has become simultaneously a metaphor for freedom and the dire literal reality of *climate control* —to use a simile from Peter Sloterdijk (a great philosopher who, in spite of having the name of a Dutch train station, is actually German...)<sup>3</sup>

Fortunately for you, of all the nations on Earth who are struggling to rediscover how to redesign a State able to provide a breathable space for its citizens through « climate control », the Dutch are the more advanced. How fortunate you are, you Low Countries who have known about the ecological crisis at least a good millenary before it came to the public consciousness of other lands; who have known all along that the most important branches of local governments were the ones in charge of dykes, and polders, or pumps and mills, of flood and meanders, and that there was no distinction to be made between the government of

<sup>1</sup> A. Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*, New York, Norton, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> J. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 1927 1954.

<sup>3</sup> B. Latour, and P. Gagliardi, *Les atmosphères de la politique. Dialogue sur la démocratie avec Philippe Descola, François Jullien, Gilles Kepel, Giovanni Levi, Sebastiano Maffettone, Angelo Scola, Peter Sloterdijk, Isabelle Stengers, Adam Zagajewski*, Paris, Les Empêcheurs, 2006.

people who could at any point riot and destroy and the government of seas and rivers who could at any point over flood and ravage the whole *commonwealth*.

On all these questions of political ecology, the Dutch, for sure, are very much ahead of all the other States: it is in your blood to know, with a very mordant type of certainty, that a failed State would immediately mean a flooded land and a disappearing country. The contrast between the Good and the Bad government, this contrast so magnificently painted by Lorenzetti's fresco in the Town hall of Sienna, is not for the Dutch, a matter of metaphor, but is literal indeed.<sup>4</sup> A matter-oriented democracy is also, truly for you, the little finger that the little boy of the legend put on the dyke to make sure it does not burst... Is your Majesty not also in some really new and very old sense the Queen of an artificial *Umwelt*, for the fragility and resistance of which you are simultaneously seal, symbol and warrant?

For all those reasons, one thing is certain: the State is not about to disappear.

Rediscovering the State as what has in charge the whole *Umwelt*, has one second important consequence: we might finally abandon the sterile and useless debates between a type of limited organisation, the State, and its "fully rational" alternative, the Market. From a pragmatist point of view in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the violent struggles over the questions of finding an alternative to the State, seem as remote as the discussions about the role of sacraments in the Golden Age in the Low Countries. It is amazing that such a dispute could have passed for so long as a serious intellectual endeavour, so obvious it is for us now, that there is no alternative to the State —on condition of *rediscovering* its realistic cognitive equipment.

The problem is to find what sort of knowledge the State is able to gather if we wish to rediscover it. To this search for the cognitive function of science *and* of the State, we give the name of "political epistemology". The idea is simple enough: every change in our conception of knowledge acquisition instruments must have huge effects on what we can expect from the State to envision and to foresee.<sup>5</sup> And vice versa, every inquiry into the limits of collective action, must throw some light on what we may expect from social and natural sciences.<sup>6</sup>

This is where John Dewey and his friend Walter Lippmann are so important for us today to rediscover the *Liberal* State. For them, liberalism has never meant the sterile opposition between State organizations and Market organizations (how can any one claim that "The Market" is not anything but a complex bundle of carefully devised and fragile organisations)? It is not State versus Market, but organizations in the plural (the State itself is not of course a single agent) on top of other organizations. True Liberalism consists in being freed from the Visible *and* from the Invisible Hands. In other words, the thinking State needs its right and its left hemispheres... We are rather faced with various modes of organization both at once partially visible (that is accountable) and partially invisible (that is unaccountable). Rediscovering the State means replacing the obsolete quarrel between modes of organization with another question altogether: what does it mean for any agent whose action has unforeseen consequences on other agents to be made *accountable*. And here I want you to be

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<sup>4</sup> Q. Skinner, *Ambrogio Lorenzetti : the Artist as Political Philosopher*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986.

<sup>5</sup> G. De Vries. "What is Political in Subpolitics? How Aristotle Might Help STS." *Social Studies of Science* 37, ??, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> B. Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (translated by Catherine Porter), Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 2004.

reminded of all the meanings of this word “account”: accounts are intellectual technologies that make visible to the collective eye of the State what it is to envision any state of affairs.

Why has this mode of organization so often failed as James Scott has brilliantly shown in his book *Seeing like a State*?<sup>7</sup> For a reason the French know alas much too well: because the “common good”, the “public good” was not supposed to be produced by experimental and carefully accountable procedures of inquiries. The “public”, the “common”, the “disinterested” is supposed to be *by nature and once for all*, radically different from the “private”, the “commercial”, the “selfish”, the “interested”. There are people who claim, because they are in position of surveying those accounts, that they know what is the public good without any *additional* empirical work of inquiry about the consequences of their remedies.

John Dewey’s great insights is that, on the contrary, there is nothing more complex, nothing more susceptible of mistakes, nothing in greater need of specific and constantly refreshed inquiries than to detect what, at any point, is the public’s problem. I quote: “Observations of consequences are at least as subject to error and illusion as is perception of natural objects.” (p. 29). In this sentence, what is important is the word “consequences”. Whatever has been planned, there are always unwanted consequences for a reason that has nothing to do with the quality of the research or with the precision of the plan, but with the very nature of action. It is never the case that you first know and then act, you first act tentatively and then begin to know a bit more before attempting again. It is this groping in the dark that is so difficult to map, especially when it is done by millions of people over the life of millions of others.

What has ruined any Statist pretension to rule, is not the necessity of the institution itself, but its specific way of devising its *cognitive* competence, its epistemology, its theory of knowledge acquisition. The State, to paraphrase Lippmann, is not allowed to *think properly* in a way it can *learn* anything about what it is to *compose* the common good.<sup>8</sup> The Heads of the States, to pursue the metaphor, have never been furnished with any realistic knowledge-acquisition apparatus. They are portrayed either as seeing it all or as totally dumb. Political epistemology alternates between social engineering followed, when it fails, by cheap version of Machiavelism. The lessons of “distributed cognition” have never been learned.<sup>9</sup>

The multiplication of tentative mechanisms, on the other hand, has always been the forte of what is passing, wrongly, for the rational alternative to the wasteful folly of the State, namely Markets. Naturally, there is nothing especially rational in market devices, but what is so interesting, what is so much lacking in the claims to define the public good, are precisely the *devices* themselves, what Michel Callon and his colleagues call for that reason “calculative devices”.<sup>10</sup>

What is so great in the calculation of bottom lines is not their famed rationality, but the very simple effect of rendering *calculable* and thus *partially* accountable what it is to distribute

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<sup>7</sup> J. C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> W. Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*, New Brunswick, Transactions Publishers, 1927 [1993] and the commentary by N. Marres, *No Issue, No Public. Democratic Deficits after the Displacement of Politics*, Amsterdam, Phd in Philosophy, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> E. Hutchins, *Cognition in the Wild*, Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> M. Callon, and F. Muniesa, *Market Devices. Oxford, Blackwell, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 2005.*

roles, powers and to allocate resources. It is pure folly to imagine a macro-rationality that would cover the whole Earth and calculate the rational outcome of all the goods and services (this is an absurdity just as criminal when it come from the proponents of the Visible Hand — a totalitarian State of Earth-wide proportion— as it is from the propagandists of the Invisible Hand —a one World Market) but it would be even more foolish to imagine that we could do *without* any device to render accountable the exploration of the public good.

The Liberal or the Pragmatist State is not the one that engages in the absurd attempt of “limiting the State” —the State has no predictable limits known in advance since the public is always a *new problem*— but the organizations that are able to escape from the totally implausible situation of being deprived of calculating devices. How implausible it would be to imagine that, for the calculations of the goods we would need instruments and devices, but not for the calculation of the *common good*? For the allocation of wealth, we would need bottom lines and accounts, but not for the allocation of the *commonwealth*? The search for the *respublica*, the public thing, could be done at no cost in equipment, in inquiry, in exploration?! .

But the Liberal State is not only the one freed from the idea of a Visible Hand without any equipment in calculation, it is also the State freed from the equally silly idea that calculation could *replace* politics. This is the heart of the matter, the one totally hidden behind the smokescreens of the obsolete debate between State vs. Market. Accounts help in representing state of affairs at time  $t$ , not in deciding what to do at time  $t+1$ , nor in predicting what will happen. No calculative device is a substitute for political decisions (if decisions is a good word). The many catastrophes reviewed by James Scott in his book, have all been caused by this confusion between the map and the territory —give me the map, and I will reshape the territory!

What was put inside the thinking Heads of the State has always alternated between two equally improbable political epistemologies: first, the one I mentioned earlier, and so much derided by Lippmann, that you could know the difference between private and public once and for all and without inquiries; but second, the equally bizarre cognitive notion, that once you had the calculating devices, you could simply calculate the optimum automatically... This idea of an automated calculation is not only wrong when applied to politics but also to the very history of mathematics (but this is another question that would lead us back to Plato’s idea of geometry and his rather perverse application to politics<sup>11</sup>). In one case the Head of the Thinking State is a know-it-all deprived of any empirical knowledge; in the other, it is a moron who claims to replace the intelligence of the situation by a “mere calculation”. In both cases, politics disappear.

In one case, when the people doubt its intelligence, the State says “I know what is best because I represent the public good” (which is silly because in truth it has no representational tools of any sort); in the other case, when the people doubt the results of its calculation, it answers “*no one* has calculated, the result on the bottom life is the best possible optimum” (which is equally silly because there is no one to be accountable just at the very moment when you need to accept the really hard political responsibilities). True liberalism, the one of the pragmatist, is when you are freed from the two injunctions: “The State says” (and no one knows) “the Market said” (and no one is accountable).

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<sup>11</sup> R. Netz, *The Shaping of Deduction in Greek Mathematics : A Study in Cognitive History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003 and my commentary in *Social Studies of Science* (in press).

To be accountable, on the other hand, is exactly this: to be able to give an account, *and* to be made responsible for what you conclude from it. Without calculative devices, politics is emptied; limited to calculations, politics is gutted.

To sum up this point, I could say that the State was never allowed to *Think like a State* but always to think as if it had been struck by a stroke and left with only half of its brain intact. For this reason, it has always been in need of a regent or a tutor of some sort, provided by one science or another. This is why the pragmatist State—in Dewey’s sense of the word—is so different from the Modernist State. The later also believed in science, but with this crucial difference, that one of the sciences of the Whole claimed to replace the progressive composition of the common good. Law, sociology, economics, cybernetics, system theory, everything has been attempted to *replace* its own original thinking by another that would deprive it of the burden of thinking *politically* like a State... Pragmatism links the cognitive abilities of the State not to Science capital S, but to *Research*—and, as any scientist knows too well, this is not the same thing at all. Expertise and research are polar opposites.

By contrast, pragmatism wants to have the State be a grown up at last and finally furnished with a plausible version of what it is to learn, to think, to provide account, and to decide. Pragmatists show the way: you need equipment, that is, calculating devices (and it is great that markets organization have invented so many of them) without which there is no way to inquire over what is the public’s problem. But then, you cannot escape from the burden of being accountable just at the crucial point when the public is to be composed. At this point, no science (construed, wrongly in my view, as an automatism of calculation) will help you. In other words, *the whole has to be described, assembled and composed, not calculated*. Such is the difference I think that should be made between mere governance (a matter of organization), and politics (a matter of composition). Those who believe that governance will replace politics are the enemies of the Liberal State. Nothing can replace politics.

This is even more important now than it was between the wars when pragmatism had its brief heyday: as I said earlier, the “whole” has now taken a meaning that neither Lippman nor Dewey could anticipate, that is, the *Umwelt* itself the “climate control” of the very envelops of our life. It would be a catastrophe of major proportion if, just at the time when the *Umwelt* is to be granted a political expression, the State was being shrunk to nought and falling into disrepute (let me remind you that, this year, the Nobel Peace Prize has been given not only to Al Gore but also to the IPCC, the body in charge of detecting the link between climate change and human activity, a “hybrid forum” of science and diplomacy if any for a hybrid kind of authority). But it would be just equally catastrophic if, because of the ecological crisis, another science, this time ecology, was to lord over the State and to claim that it again knew how to calculate the common (that is, the natural) good without any interference from politics.<sup>12</sup> The undisputable laws of nature would, this time, wish politics away exactly as in the earlier period the laws of the market claimed to render the State obsolete. Ecology would destroy what economics had not totally obliterated, namely the task of composing the common good and rendering accountable those who do it.

To render the cognitive abilities of our State experimental (or pragmatist) is even more important now that even the former Nature has been included in the purview of our public

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<sup>12</sup> T. Nordhaus, and M. Shellenberger, *Break Through. From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility*, New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007.

existence. To put it may be too bluntly, politics is always about blind leading blinds. To remind you of this might be a strange and slightly egregious way of celebrating the anniversary of your think tank, but I don't have the feeling that you believe in providing your government with the kind of knowledge that Plato claimed to possess, namely *foresight*. The cognitive landscape of today is much too different. Fumbling collectively in the dark through the multiple canals of feeders and sensors, reflects more the ways in which a Pragmatist State may acquire knowledge today about what is the public and its problems. Which means of course a very lively and diverse set of social and natural sciences, a new type of statistical instruments, a free press, but more importantly, the building of the core institutions of the politics of the future, namely the sites where the whole maybe composed instead of simply calculated. What I have invoked many years ago through a metaphor (but this was before the IPPC got a Nobel prize!), namely "the Parliament of Things", is very precisely today the site where nobody is allowed to deprive us all of the task of defining the "we" that we form together, which is at the heart of political existence.<sup>13</sup>

But there is another reason why it is so important not to lose the politics of the whole. This time it is not because of the ecological crisis, but because of the claims of the "globalizers" to *already* know for sure *what* is the whole –by which they usually mean a narrow provincial idea of what the universal values should be. In every country of Europe, and also of course in France and Holland, a large part of the bad feelings around politics, the markets and the State, turn around the very simple idea that we have been "abandoned by the State", this time construed as what should be able to provide us with a breathable and protective envelop (to use Sloterdijk again). The screams are the same everywhere: "We have been abandoned by the State, we are no longer protected". How to doubt that those who scream in such a way are right? Is it not obvious that those who talk about the great winds of globalisation, of opening to the world, of taking risks, of abandoning the safe haven of Statism and nations, are always blatant hypocrits safely protected from any risk by golden parachutes and a fat reservoir of stock options on which is written "take no risk ever". Globalizers have a very provincial view of what the "whole world" is, what they write about is not the global at all but a lot of "globallonneys". A State that fails to protect is no longer legitimate. But it does not mean that we know what is a State and what sort of protective envelop it should be able to compose. It simply means that the alternative is certainly not between the archaic nationalist attachment to the land and the "great winds" of the global imperium. Here too "The State has to be rediscovered".

To conclude, I'd venture to say that the name for the politics of the future is clearly that of *cosmopolitics*, not only in the banal sense of being cosmopolitan (that is culturally diverse and international) but in the sense of being a politics of the *cosmos*, that is of a "good disposition" of people and things.<sup>14</sup> The Dutch have always been pragmatist and CC (I did not say PC), that is, *cosmopolitically* correct, since they had the immense chance of beginning the building of their State, literally, from the ground up, first by the "*Waterschappen*" and then by the water

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<sup>13</sup> B. Latour, and P. Weibel, eds. *Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy*. Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> I. Stengers, *Cosmopolitiques - Tome 1: la guerre des sciences*, Paris, La découverte & Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 1996.

bureaux, the '*Rijkswaterstaat*', from the land itself, by pumping the sea and the salt away. The Dutch will not be surprised by this sudden extension of the duties of the State to encompass the daily natural existence as well as their overcrowded populous multicultural cities. When the sea can flood your house while fanatic mobs threaten your MPs, you gain of political life a truly realistic picture...

I wish I were Dutch, not only would I be the subject of a most gracious Queen but I would also have friends in the "Scientific Council for Government Policy"... this think tank Plato would have envied and which to function even better should simply turn its political epistemology from Platonism to Pragmatism...