

Afterword

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DURING THE VIETNAM WAR, many decided to selectively withhold that portion of their taxes that went to fund the war effort. They were aided and abetted in so doing by a handy pie chart still furnished annually by the War Resisters League. This year, it looks like this:

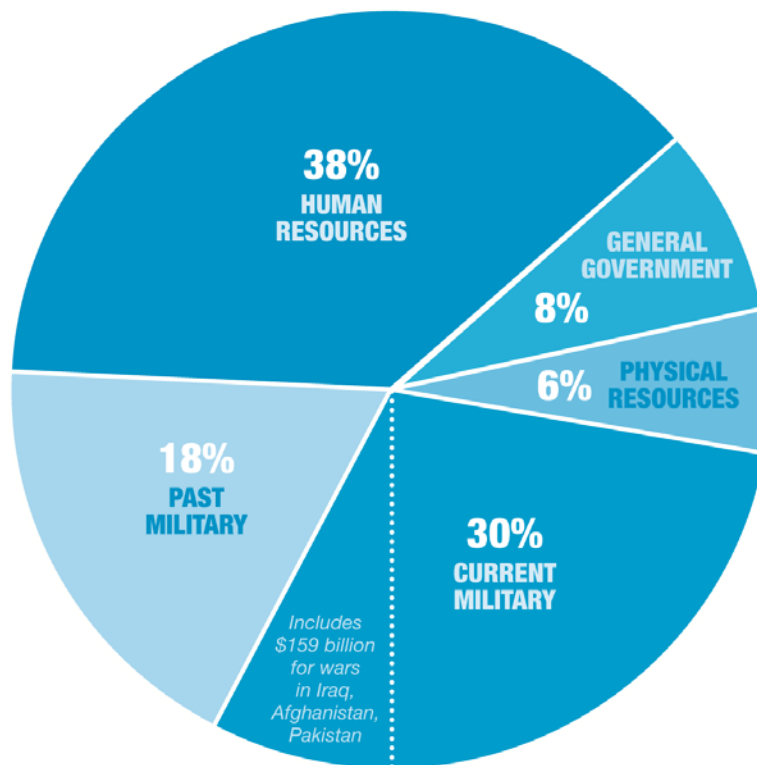


FIGURE 1 How the federal budget is allocated (from the War Resisters League Website)

Others have variously decided to withhold taxes that go to NASA, the National Endowment for the Humanities, multicultural or bilingual education, and many other “special interests.” Health care reform barely passed until the possibility of using any of the money for abortions was removed. Withholding a certain portion of one’s taxes is an interesting exercise in individual liberties (haven’t we all felt tempted at times?) but would probably be ruinous for the state if actually allowed (one can imagine tribunals to decide whether these acts of resistance were informed by real conscientious objections).



If the state were in a good and patient mood, and saw this as a teachable moment, it would give these objectors a civics lesson: no one agrees with everything the state does, and if you do not, change the system. Vote. But if we believe the Marquis de Condorcet and Kenneth Arrow, we see that voting does not solve the problem of ensuring that everyone has a voice in determining what the “common good” might look like or how it might be established and sustained. Both Condorcet’s Paradox and Arrow’s Impossibility Theorem have proven that it is impossible for the aggregate of individual preferences to be a real representation of collective preference. But Arrow does not apply his theory to comment on only voting—the title of the essay that contains his theorem is, of course, “A Difficulty with the Concept of Social Welfare.”¹

My math and logic skills are not nearly sharp enough to appreciate any more than the most general and watered-down thumbnail sketch of what these two have proven and the ways they have proven it. So I will use their findings rather as metaphors for a more general problem: how can a state’s “interests” in any way coincide (even by a simple majority) with those of its citizens? The state (and here I will be speaking now of the United States of America) seems interested in a lot of things—some beneficently and some antagonistically. This is captured in Bruce Robbins’s evocation of the DeLillo line from *Underworld*: “how can you tell the difference between orange juice and Agent Orange if the same massive system connects them at levels outside your comprehension?” Note that DeLillo says “system,” not “state,” and that makes for an even more interesting reading. The state may be “tentacular” (see John Clarke’s essay in this issue), but it is imbricated in a “system” that exceeds it. Note too the sublime unrepresentability of this system—it is “outside comprehension.” Maybe we cannot comprehend it, but we can see it at work in all sorts of spheres. The goals of this collection of essays are admirable, and I want to use this occasion to suggest ways they may be pursued further.

First, we might combine the vocabulary of political economy (“interests”) with that of “culture”—“way of life.” For it is that last term that American presidents have habitually turned to for justification as they have unleashed various official wars, unofficial “conflicts,” and innumerable other nonmilitary (and sometimes illegal) policies that seek to maintain American hegemony. A “way of life” is an open signifier, and we/they do not even need to provide a signified as long as it performs its duty. “Ways of life” are normative, not descriptive.

It is the gap between ideological content and representative form that literature can work to unearth. It will be a densely and variously populated and contested space. The role of the state in sustaining certain ways of life over others is not just forced upon it by a zero-sum game—its decision making is a tool to adjust its interests and realize them in the lives of its citizens and non-citizens. Various essays collected here have addressed domestic systems—welfare, the prison system, education. I would like to see us also talk about things like immigration and health care—it is disappointing that neither of these hot-button issues is discussed much, if at all, here. How do both of these tap into different definitions of a “way of life” that they are to preserve, whether it be the “national racial-cultural body” or the bodies of those deemed worthy of preserving and maintaining? The interconnections between these topics and broader issues of economics, normativity, and productivity seem ripe for study in conjunction with the state. They bleed into, of course, national and border politics and economies and, deeply, into our sense of “human resources.”

¹ In Kenneth Arrow, *Social Choice and Justice: Collected Papers of Kenneth J. Arrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 1–29.

Second, what *are* our “national interests”? How does our foreign aid perform the task of furthering our interests as much as Agent Orange once did? How is aid to other countries packaged and what strings are attached? How is this sort of “relief” dispensed? And, in all fairness, what are its “orange juice–like” qualities? That is, if we are to look at both the “positive” and the “negative” activities of the state, where would we find them both domestically and internationally? In other words, what *is* the political economy of welfare, read broadly? When would we *not* want to give up the paternalism of the state? When do we want to be able to call a cop?

Finally, I believe it is important to see how, in the United States at this moment, Obama’s supposed new New Deal has been popularly perceived as a huge failure. Unemployment figures are still distressfully high; the “rescue” of Wall Street (with a disciplinary slap on the wrist in the forms of new legislation and popular excoriation) has not been felt on Main Street. The Tea Party is not alone in disdaining the big bailout, and that disdain has been fed not only by the tremendous cost coupled with lack of result but by a sense that not only are the “right people” not being benefited but that the system itself is designed to reward the undeserving, the non-meritorious, even the criminal.

I will end by going back to this idea that the system is too big to comprehend (too big to fail; too big to succeed). What I see around me these days is the sense that “bigness” itself is looked upon with fear and aversion. Big government, big spending, big corporations, big industry, big multinationals. I will set aside the notion that this has the tendency to idealize the “local,” making provincialism and narrow-mindedness acceptable if undertaken in a “small town” (think Sarah Palin). People now want to be able to comprehend something and will revel in comprehending even stupid things if graspable, and then inflating those stupid perceptions into global statements. The local in this sense endorses a program of anti-intellectualism and anti-thought. And this has profound effects on our sense of welfare, which, among all the “big” things that we attack, or at least suspect, stands out too as perhaps the best we can aspire to as a society.

How does this all connect to *Occasion* and its interest in working the boundary between the social sciences and the humanities? It is precisely in looking at how “ways of life” are imagined, narrated, enacted, and acted upon. How “welfare” is calculated within formulae that resist mathematical schematization. The “difficulty” of which Arrow speaks might be extended to the general problem of parsing out interest, preference, and utility in a nation that has seen an intensification of the concentration of wealth and power into the hands of a smaller and smaller number of people, who are intent on and likely successful in reproducing that status quo for their heirs. Such figures do not simply speak for themselves, in PowerPoint slides or pie charts. They become delivered to us in stories, accounts, and syntheses that weave together what we think to know. This issue of *Occasion* participates in and, I think, significantly advances ongoing discussions of exactly these topics and problems. A