

CAMERALISM  
ITS RELEVANCE FOR THE  
KNOWLEDGE-BASED SOCIETY

*by*

ADRIAN MIHALACHE\*

*The analysis of Cameralism attempted in this paper is meant to provide ideas for an effective regulation of the present-day knowledge-based society. Here are some interesting points of the cameralist approach, which seem promising. First, the cameralists embraced an empirical belief that a growing population is beneficial, owing to the increasingly fine division of labor that it makes possible. This is similar to the present-day belief that the expansion of cyberspace is apt to stimulate the 'new economy', as well as the development of new forms of property and new rules of behavior within virtual communities. Second, such categories that cameralists dealt with as principal, agent and property are identifiable now in the form of shareholders, corporate management and intangible assets. Third, the cameralists developed a system of *Polizeiwissenschaft*, which would account for the maintaining of reliable standards, order and public security. This is quite similar to the "surveillant assemblages" ICT makes possible today. Consequently, one may draw uncanny parallels between the economic, social and political values of the early 21st century and the problematic and practices of 18th Century Cameralism.*

**KEYWORDS**

*Cameralism, Polizeiwissenschaft, RFID, surveillant assemblages, order and security, reliable standards*

---

\* "Politehnica" University of Bucharest, Romania. amihalache@gmail.com

## **WHAT IS CAMERALISM? [1]**

The name Cameralism denotes a school of thinkers developed in the German principalities. They called themselves cameralists, since they formed chambers of advisers to local rulers. Their task was to devise the policies which would guide the ruler in economic policies in particular. Cameralism extends from late 15th century (the reign of Maximilian) to the early 19th Century, and had its climax in the 18th Century. The cameralists were not mere scholars, although they taught in universities and founded new disciplines, but practitioners, as statesmen, primarily from Germany and Austria. They range from von Osse to Seckendorff, Leibniz, von Justi and Sonnenfels. A forerunner of Cameralism was a Platonist of Greek nationality, George Gemisthos Plethon. He was active in the 15th Century in Florence, and developed the principles by which a proper government must deal with different sections of society - agriculture, manufacturing, and traders - in order to provide for the general welfare.

In the late 17th Century, these German political theorists developed a meta-notion of policing and gave it a name: Polizeiwissenschaft. This was a kind of economic 'pastorate' of men and things. By Polizeiwissenschaft the cameralists meant a science of endless lists and classifications, in the prospect of an inexhaustibly detailed and continuous control. The core concept behind cameralist statecraft was the fact that the prosperity of a state depended upon the adoption of policies which fostered the improvement, materially and spiritually, of the citizenry. This was a revolutionary idea at the time and in many parts of the world today. It meant that a ruler had to devise a means of increasing wealth by making the citizenry more productive, but not by looting them. It meant changing from a situation where the vast majority of the population were slaves, or virtual slaving beasts, to one in which people were assumed to be educable and improvable and therefore to a state policy which sought to implement such a policy.

## **CORE CONCEPTS OF CAMERALISM [2]**

The cameralists are known as the school of statecraft or economics which based itself on expanding population. This was directly related to their view that each individual was a net producer, rather than a drain on society, and

that the source of wealth in society is not raw materials or land, but the productive powers of labor of individuals. It was a short step from there to the requirement to improve that productive power, through education and infrastructure and technological advance.

The main ideas of Cameralism are synthesized by Johann Heinrich Gottlob von Justi (18th Century cameralist), in his book *Staatswirtschaft* (State Economics, 1758). According to him, a sovereign nation state must be dedicated to the education and improvement of its population through scientific and technological progress. This idea defined a positive role for the state not only as an economic agent, but also as a protector and educator of the population. The larger the number of people living in the country therefore, the greater will be the means and power of the republic. From here derives the duty of the ruler to promote an increase of population. The demographic situation of Central Europe was such that Malthusian obsessions were, under the circumstances, out of place. The involvement of the state in economy was crucial: "A wise ruler will not leave the food supply and employment of subjects to take care of themselves, but will see that they are systematically made abundant". This comes in sharp contrast with the Libertarian ideology of the free market ("invisible hand") that was developing in Western Europe, in Great Britain, to be specific. The cameralists believed in the state's involvement in the economy. They were misjudged as a type of mercantilists, but their philosophy went well beyond that. According to the Libertarian ideology, as formulated by Adam Smith, the central government has to play a role in defense, but should keep out of the economy and let the private entrepreneurs do what they would without interference. Unlike the common view, that the USA were based from the start on libertarian economic principles, the fact is that the American System of Economics was at direct contradiction with Adam Smith's libertarian ideology. For instance, in the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution the aim is stated to "form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity". Under Smith's philosophy, we had no right to talk about the "general welfare" as a conscious aim of government policy, much less put the federal government in charge of promoting it

## **GOVERNANCE THROUGH CONTROL IN THE KNOWLEDGE-BASED SOCIETY [3]**

The present day Information and Communication Technology provides the means for control that cameralists lacked and dreamed about. Everybody can be tracked and monitored remotely through the things one wears, carries and interacts with every day, through the use of cheap, ubiquitous and nearly invisible Radio Frequency Identification technologies (RFID). Freed from the need for permanent enclosures (to observe, record, shape and discipline) by iterating generations of smaller, cheaper, faster and more powerful RFID and GPS chips, the capacity for continuous observation, judgment and control of “men and things” becomes broader, and deeper. The Pentagon's National Security Agency, renamed, by the DOD, as “The Disruptive Technology Office” (DTO) and moved out of the NSA is funding research into the mass harvesting of the information that people post about themselves on social networks. And it could harness the forthcoming “semantic web” to combine data from social networking websites with banking, retail and property records in order to build extensive personal profiles.

More than three centuries later, the actual, possible and probable use for “an Internet of Things” has met the knowledge production requirements and governance agenda of 18th Century Polizeiwissenschaft theorists.

The industrial society had little to do with cameralist thinking. This was a disciplinary society, based on distinct closed environments. Freedom was relegated to the public space. The individual used to pass from one closed environment to another: the family, the school, the barracks, the factory or the office. On the contrary, in the knowledge-based society, a continuous computer-mediated control is made possible, so that there is not any more need for clearly delimited disciplinary places. A “cameralistic” feature of the knowledge-based society is that perpetual training replaces the school, and continuous control replaces the examination. “Permanent education” is a fashionable term that barely disguises “permanent control”. Now, the numerical language of control is made of codes that allow or disallow access to information. Access replaces property as a measure for social distinction. The operation of markets is now the instrument of social control, short-term

and rapid, but also continuous and without limit, while discipline was of long duration and discontinuous.

### **CONTEMPORARY POLIZEIWISSENSCHAFT [4]**

The cameralist period and ours share the obsession of the perceived competitive decline. The Eighteenth Century Prussian soldiers lacked “the health, stamina and intelligence” to match Continental antagonists. This was not correctable at the point of initial conscription. Instead, it reflected systemic deficiencies in the environmental conditions of the general population. Similarly, in the knowledge-based society, there is a major concern over the issue that the workforce lacks the necessary skill base (basic literacy, math and science proficiency) and the work ethic to compete with industrious, adaptable and efficient East Asians, in manufacturing and white-collar, back-office and technical fields. This is not easily correctable at the point of entry into professional work. Instead, it reflects systemic deficiencies in the overall institutional environment of public schools. Under the cameralist approach, government took on the function of “estate manager” in the trust of the monarch. Myriad classification schemas for diagnostic and assessment purposes were generated with the aim of imposing environmental modifications that would enhance productivity, security and the consolidation of political authority. Centralization was to replace the profuse patchwork of laws and customs in the 300 German principalities, in the name of enhancing military efficiency and security. Reliable standards for quality were developed in order to improve competitiveness and to diminish the risks. Nowadays, the government becomes the primary “education manager”. The training and education imply greatly increased surveillance and data-collection and analysis (via the frequent high-stakes testing of students, the conditional qualification of teachers and sanctions for low-performing schools). These measures discipline students, teachers and administrators. The frequent rounds of accountability and “continuous improvement” reporting generate an explosion of time and energy in the process (and the production) of documentation. Then and now, governance aimed at profit-maximization and risk minimization. However, only now, a consumption-driven, security-obsessed, Polizeiwissenschaft is perfectly possible, in its digitalized form.

Several parallels between the cameralist doctrine and the principles that govern the knowledge-based society are strikingly peculiar. In both cases, society is perceived as being made up of individuals, not of groups. In cameralist times, those groups inherited feudal identities, which had to be demolished. Nowadays, unions and established minority interest groups are regarded as dysfunctional antiques to be marginalized and de-legitimated. The Prince or King functioned as the “unitary executive”, reflecting the notion of a benevolent despotism. The state was an idealized factory and had to be run like a business. Now, the top governmental executive acts as “CEO”. Subjects are de facto employees, not citizens. The resolution of tensions between individual and state interests was harmonized via the postulate of “enlightened” self-interest. In our times, the fiction of the “invisible hand” plays this harmonizing role. An interesting novelty as far as state-subject relations are concerned is the rise of “branding”. The loyalty of subjects is based on marketed “brands” (such as state schools) and the branding of political candidates is similar to the promotion of consumer goods. Risk management was and is a major issue. Its fundamental assumption is the primacy of state-defined security interests over individual interests. Under the rubric “security in an age of terrorism”, the state-defined interests, invoked in the name of security, have primacy over individual rights to be protected against the abuses of the state. This is evident in such phenomena as rituals of “coerced compliance” such as airport screenings and surveillance. The economic strategy and ideological propaganda of the cameralists have also strong resemblances to present-day politics. Cameralists took, just like libertarians, a strong anti-tax stance and promoted business subsidies and unrestricted consumption. The prolegomena to laws, read in public spaces, played the part of the present-day multimedia messages delivered to news outlets or posted on websites. In both circumstances, these messages prescribe the moral obligations of a subject within the economic and political order. The explicit goal is to produce a “moral uplift”.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS [5]**

The cameralists embraced an empirical belief that a growing population is beneficial, owing to the increasingly fine division of labor that it makes pos-

*A. Mihalache: Cameralism - Its Relevance for the Knowledge Based Society*

sible. This is similar to the present-day belief that the expansion of cyberspace is apt to stimulate the 'new economy', as well as the development of new forms of property and new rules of behavior within virtual communities. Such categories that cameralists dealt with as principal, agent and property are identifiable now in the form of shareholders, corporate management and intangible assets. The cameralists developed a system of Polizeiwissenschaft, which would account for the maintaining of reliable standards, order and public security. This is quite similar to the "surveillant assemblages" ICT makes possible today.

**REFERENCES**

- [1] Albrecht, K., McIntyre, L., 2005 *Spychips: How major corporations and government plan to track your every move with RFID*. Nelson Current, Nashville.
- [2] Dennis, D. 2006 *Policing the Convergence of Virtual and Material Worlds*. [www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=567](http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=567). Consulted October 5, 2007.
- [3] Small, A. W. 2001 (first published 1909), *The Cameralists. The Pioneers of German Social Polity*. Batoche Books, Kitchener.
- [4] Spannaus, N. 1996 *The Roots of the American System. From Cameralism to the American System of Economics*. *American Almanac*, pp 154-196.