

Menagerie of Happy Men: The Ancient Incas and the Bureaucratic State

BY RICHARD M. EBELING



Examples of bureaucratic control over social life seem to be as old as recorded history, and they always have features that are universal in their perverse effects regardless of time or place. The French economist and historian Louis Baudin described some of these consequences in his classic work, *A Socialist Empire: The Incas of Peru* (1927).

The Inca Empire emerged out of a small tribe in the Peruvian mountains in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The fourteenth and especially the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries saw their expansion into a great imperial power with control over a territory that ran along the west coast of South America and included much of present-day Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, Chile, and parts of Argentina and Colombia. The Incas were brought down in the 1530s by the Spanish conquest under the leadership of Francisco Pizarro.

The Incas ruled through a cruel and pervasive system of command and control over everyday life. Baudin explained:

Every socialist system must rest upon a powerful bureaucratic administration. In the Inca Empire, as soon as a province was conquered, its population would be organized on a hierarchical basis, and the [imperial] officials would immediately set to work. . . . They were in general in charge of the preparation of the statistical tables, the requisitioning of the supplies and provisions needed by their group [over whom they ruled] (seeds, staple foods, wool, etc.), the distribution of the production of the products obtained, the solicitation of assistance and relief in case of need, the supervision of the conduct of their inferiors, and the rendering of complete reports and accounts to their superiors. These operations were facilitated by the fact that those under their supervision were obliged to admit them to their homes at any moment, and allow them to inspect everything

in their homes, down to the cooking utensils, and even to eat with the doors open. . . .

The Inca bureaucracy cast its net over all those that it ruled and soon transformed them into docile and obedient subjects through a “slow and gradual absorption of the individual into the state . . . until it brought about the loss of personality. Man was made for the state, and not the state for the man,” Baudin said. The Incas tried to banish “the two great causes of popular disaffection, *poverty* and *idleness*. . . . But by the same token, they dried up the two springs of progress, *initiative* and *provident concern for the future*.” The Inca government did all the thinking and planning for their subjects, with the result that there was a “stagnation of commerce . . . lack of vitality and the absence of originality in the arts, dogmatism in science, and the rareness of even the simplest inventions.”

This inertia was fostered through the institutions of the welfare state. “As for the provident concern for the future,” Baudin asked, “how could that have been developed among a people whose public granaries were crammed with provisions and whose public officials were authorized to distribute them in case of need? There was never a need to think beyond the necessities of the moment.”

In addition, the Inca welfare state undermined the motive for charity and any personal sense of responsibility for family or community:

But what is even more serious is that the substitution of the state for the individual in the economic domain destroyed the spirit of charity. The native Peruvian, expecting the state to do everything, no longer had to concern himself with his fellow man and had to come to his aid only if required by law.

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The members of a community were compelled to work on the land for the benefit of those who were incapacitated; but when this task had been performed, they were free from all further obligation. They had to help their neighbors if ordered to do so by their chiefs, but they were obliged to do nothing on their own initiative. That is why, by the time of the Spanish conquest, the most elementary humanitarian feelings were in danger of disappearing entirely.

Life was also reduced to a joyless existence of uniformity, security, and order that was imposed and guaranteed by the Inca bureaucracy. Baudin tried to answer the question: Was the average person happy under the rule of the Incan kings?


He labored contently for a master whom he held to be divine. He had only to obey, without going to the trouble of thinking. If his horizon was limited, he was unaware of it, since he knew no other; and if he could not raise himself socially, he in no way suffered on that account, for he did not conceive that such a rise was possible. His life followed its peaceful course, its monotony broken by periodic holiday festivals and by such events as marriages, military service, and compulsory labor service, all in strict accordance with regulations. The Indian had his joys and sorrows at fixed dates. Only illness and death persisted in escaping government regulation. It was a negative kind of happiness, with a few adversities and a few great joys. The empire produced what D'Argenson called the "menagerie of happy men". . . . In the Inca state only the members of the ruling class and more especially the chief, could live a full life; outside of him and his family, men were no longer men, but cogs in the economic machine or figures in the official statistics.

In our own time the plague of bureaucracy has been no different. Those who man the bureaucratic agencies supervise and oversee many, if not most, of our economic affairs from the processes of production to the stage at which we actually use the goods that are man-

ufactured. They pry into and then proceed to regulate our personal and family affairs. They take responsibility for our welfare and our happiness, and try to guard us against all the trials and tribulations of everyday life. They watch over our schooling, care for us when we are ill, find work for us if we are unemployed, and pay us when we are without a job. They are concerned with our mental health, and police what we ingest. They take an interest in the things we read and the amusements and leisure activities we indulge in.

Our Freedom Weakened

One freedom after another has been incrementally abridged, weakened, and then taken away with the bureaucracy now responsible for what had previously been in the domain of the individual. But in this, too, the process has been no different from what occurred under the Incas. Louis Baudin pointed out that "The poison [of growing bureaucratic paternalism] was not given to the Indians in massive doses that would have provoked a reaction, but was administered drop by drop, until it brought about the loss of personality. . . . And whoever has formed the habit of passive obedience ends by being no longer able to act for himself and comes to love the yoke that is laid upon him. Nothing is easier than to obey a master who is perhaps exacting, but who rules over all the details of life, assures one's daily bread, and makes it possible to banish all concern from the mind."

In fact, the human spirit is not as easily and permanently broken as the Incas believed they had succeeded in doing in their empire centuries ago. There is something also inside the individual that cherishes self-expression and retains the wish to be free. This inner force, if awakened, assures that liberty will never be completely extinguished. *In my October 2005 column, "When the Supreme Court Stopped Economic Fascism in America," I remarked in passing that "Much of the urban youth of America were rounded up and sent off to national forests for regimentation and mock military-style drilling as part of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)." A reader has reminded me that young men participated voluntarily and were not compelled to join, as my phrasing suggested.* 

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