

Learning from Friends, Learning from Enemies: Technology Transfers and Excesses of the State

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ABSTRACT

This presentation represents one facet of a larger study of liberal democracies and their reliance on disproportionate coercive power in three policy domains: conventional regulation, crime control, and national security. The immediate question concerns how states acquire the knowledge and inspiration leading them to engage in excessive policy responses. It soon becomes apparent that liberal democracies do not exist in a vacuum: They have learned a great deal from authoritarian states, and vice versa.

We begin with a discussion of various paths through which knowledge may flow between states, then present illustrative examples of how authoritarian and democratic states learn from each other. So it was that prior to the enactment of the Nuremberg Laws in 1934, the Nazis studied US laws of racial segregation and compulsory sterilization. Soon thereafter, US authorities learned a great deal about chemical and biological warfare from Japanese and German medical research conducted on prisoners during WWII. More recently, the French Army shared their expertise in ruthless counterinsurgency tactics with their Argentine counterparts, some of whom applied these skills during the “Dirty War” of 1976–83. Algerians, who learned about torture at the hands of the French, practiced it on their own citizens once they achieved independence. Former British colonies inherited laws on subjects as diverse as sodomy and official secrecy, retaining and using them for years after the Union Jack was lowered.

The interdiction of dangerous knowledge-flows appears even less practicable in the digital age than in years past. A common solution, extreme state secrecy, itself constitutes a potential abuse of power. It appears that relentless sunlight will remain the best disinfectant.