

For a discussion of 'State'

Excerpt: pp.8-12 'The Mystery of the State'

- Feldman, Paul (2008) *Unmasking the State* Lupus Books

Excerpt: pp.62-71 'Tenets of a Non-Existent Science'

- Graeber, David (2004) *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press

Excerpt: pp.8-12 'The state and state power'

- Jessop, Bob (2009) in *Sage Handbook of Power* Sage

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The ‘mystery’ of the state

Most people understand what is meant by the term “government”. This is made up of men and women who are said to *govern* the country. Yet the prime minister and ministers are part of a wider, much more significant body – the **state**. Governments come and go but the state itself not only lives on but evolves and adapts to new circumstances expressed through the actions of government.

So if you want to know how Britain is really *ruled*, as opposed to *governed*, you have to dig deeper, down into the recesses of the state. For the state is how and where real power – backed up by force and coercion – is exercised over people’s lives. In Britain, the state is shrouded in mystery and mystique and appears as something natural, timeless and universal. So demystifying the state, bringing it out into the light of day, should help us answer some of the following questions in the course of this book:

- ▶ what is the relationship between the state and capitalism?
- ▶ how are the powers of the state exercised?
- ▶ are the powers of the state legitimately held? Can they be challenged?

- ▶ what is the relationship between democracy and the state?
- ▶ are the majority powerless or does the vote give ordinary people power?
- ▶ what rights, if any, do we have in relation to the state?
- ▶ is the modern state the last word on democracy?
- ▶ do we require new state forms to make a transition from a capitalist society to one based on co-operation and production for need?
- ▶ would change have to take a revolutionary form or can it be achieved through reform?

So what constitutes the state? The Chambers dictionary, for example, offers a variety of answers. One definition is that the state is a territory governed by a single political body. There is also reference to the “nation state” – which is described as an independent state with a population that broadly shares a common descent, language and culture. What concerns us here, however, is a further definition of the state as the **political entity of a nation** “including the government and all its apparatus, eg the civil service and the armed forces”. In Britain, this also embraces the monarchy, Parliament, the judiciary, laws and the legal system, police and prisons, spy agencies MI5 and MI6, local government, a range of semi-government bodies and agencies and the established Church of England. Taken together, they constitute the modern British state. In turn, many national agencies now have global and regional relationships with bodies like the World Trade Organisation and the European Union, to which they have ceded substantial powers once reserved to the British state.

State bodies operate in a complex, often contradictory relationship with each other. Each branch of the state has its own particular history

Well concealed

The state is, then, in every sense of the word a triumph of concealment. It conceals the real history and relations of subjection behind an a-historical mask of legitimating illusion; contrives to deny the existence of connections and conflicts which would if recognised be incompatible with the claimed autonomy and integration of the state.

Philip Abrams, *Notes on the difficulty of studying the state*. Journal of Historical Sociology 1988

and development. This adds to the abstract, elusive nature of the concept of the state, particularly in Britain which is distinguished by the absence of a single, written constitutional document. Nevertheless, the general rules and regulations that govern the connections with each branch of the state are contained in a series of rules, regulations, precedents, conventions and laws that often operate in the background. For example, the fact that the victorious party at an election provides the prime minister, who in turn appoints members of the government without further reference to Parliament, is not explicitly stated in any document – but it happens.

A theory of the state

A study of these constitutional rules, precedents and conventions will tell us how the state operates on a day-to-day basis. But they will not in themselves reveal how the state came into being or what its overall social purpose and role is. What is important in this regard is to see the state in its interconnections with the rest of society, as a social, historically developing phenomenon. A World to Win's starting point is that the state has an objective existence. It exists independently of our consciousness and views about it. We may not recognise the state but the state certainly recognises us. Secondly, the state exists only in relationship to other parts of society. It can only be understood, for example, in its connection to economic relations, both national and global. In other words, the state is part of a greater whole. Thirdly, the state, as all other phenomena, has internal and external contradictions. For example, its role under capitalism limits its capacities and powers in relation to the economy. The need for popular approval and legitimacy is undermined by the state's alienated existence. Fourthly, the state is studied in its development, both in terms of its historic origins and how it is changing in the present.

A pioneering study into the origins of the state in society was made by Frederick Engels, the close collaborator of Karl Marx. In his *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), Engels showed through an anthropological study of ancient, primitive societies – where no state existed – that the state was a product of society at a particular stage of historical development. This stage, he argued, marked the end of communal property and the beginning of private ownership.

Engels explained that the emergence of the state

is the admission that this society has involved itself in insoluble self-contradiction and is cleft into irreconcilable antagonisms which it is powerless to exorcise. But in order that these antagonisms, classes with conflicting economic interests, shall not consume themselves and society in fruitless struggle, a power, apparently standing above society, has become necessary to moderate the conflict and keep it within the bounds of 'order'; and this power, arisen out of society, but placing itself above it and increasingly alienating itself from it, is the state.

Engels also argued that, as a rule, it is the “state of the most powerful, **economically dominant class**, which, through the medium of the state, becomes also the **politically dominant class**” [emphasis added]. So state power in any society has to be closely related to the dominant social classes in society. If it is not, then the state cannot function or establish legitimacy and authority and becomes vulnerable. Economic power in a class-based society requires political power for social stability and in order to reproduce, as well as develop, the best conditions for production. In this sense, the state represents a division of labour. Capitalists go on doing what they do best – producing commodities, exploiting labour and making profits. Politics is left to the state, to professional groups of administrators, politicians, civil servants, judges, prison officers, police and the armed forces. Capitalists are a diverse class with competing interests which is one crucial reason why they cannot rule directly. The state creates and then develops a framework within which the capitalist system of production is able to function.

In his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx explained the relationship between the “political superstructure” and the “economic structure” of society. He described how political relations arise on the base of economic foundations and ultimately reflect the interests of the dominant class in society and that:

In the social production of their life, human beings enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes **the economic structure of society, the real**

foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure [emphasis added] and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of human beings that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.

Over time, specialists in ruling like top civil servants, generals and judges have come to dominate affairs and have given the state a certain operational but relative autonomy. In this way, the state, rather than serving society, stands above and aloof from the population and is insulated from popular pressures. This adds to the impression that the existing state system is independent, neutral, normal and, above all, irreplaceable. This alienation is itself a reflection at a political level of the fact that people, both individually and socially, are deprived of the result of their own labour and the wealth produced by society as a whole.

While we are free to sell our labour power to an employer in return for a wage, once bought it becomes a good for use by the capitalist alone. The value added by labour belongs to – or is appropriated by – the employer and is the source of profit. Marx discovered that “this fact simply means that the object that labour produces, its product, stands opposed to it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer”. He described this process as “a loss of reality for the worker, objectification as loss of and bondage to the object, and appropriation

A division of labour

State power is exercised through the state apparatus, or more precisely, through a system of state apparatuses. The separate existence of the state is part of a specific division of labour within society. Its internal organisation thus reflects in a particular way the social division of labour and the prevailing social class relations, contributing to their reproduction in the ever-ongoing social process. In the historical course of the class struggle, the state apparatuses come to crystallise determinate social relations and thus assume a material existence, efficacy and inertia which are to a certain extent independent of current state policies and class relations.

Göran Therborn, *What does the state do when it rules?* Verso 1978

as estrangement, as alienation”. This alienated existence also confronts people in a hostile way through state institutions and bureaucracies. The overwhelming majority of the population have no direct control, access to or involvement in the running of the state. Occasionally we are consulted through a general or local election. We have the right to choose our rulers – but not the right to rule. The state’s key functions include:

- ▶ maintaining the degree of social and institutional stability necessary for production, commerce and trade
- ▶ developing a legal framework that guarantees private property rights and contract law
- ▶ establishing a universal monetary system
- ▶ managing external/foreign relations, organising defence and conducting war
- ▶ maintaining border controls and regulating immigration
- ▶ regulating the terms and conditions of capital-labour relations
- ▶ ensuring the supply of new generations of trained and educated workers for the labour market
- ▶ dealing with the consequences of economic crisis
- ▶ providing services that capitalists cannot carry out but require such as education, health, transport infrastructure etc
- ▶ enforcing deductions from people’s wages and profits to finance state expenditure.

The state also plays a key ideological role in conveying notions that, for example, capitalism is really all about “individual freedom” and “consumer choice”, that the state governs in the “national interest”,

An intrinsic unity

A state apparatus operates simultaneously as an expression of class *domination*... and as the *execution* of the supreme rule-making, rule-applying, rule-adjudicating, rule-enforcing and rule-defending tasks of society. These two aspects constitute an intrinsic unity: execution of these tasks is class domination and class political domination is the execution of these tasks.

Göran Therborn, *What does the state do when it rules?* Verso 1978

do is raise a red or black flag and issue defiant declarations. Sometimes the sensible thing is just to pretend nothing has changed, allow official state representatives to keep their dignity, even show up at their offices and fill out a form now and then, but otherwise, ignore them.

Tenets of a Non-existent Science

Let me outline a few of the areas of theory an anarchist anthropology might wish to explore:

1) A THEORY OF THE STATE

States have a peculiar dual character. They are at the same time forms of institutionalized raiding or extortion, and utopian projects. The first certainly reflects the way states are actually experienced, by any communities that retain some degree of autonomy; the second however is how they tend to appear in the written record.

In one sense states are the “imaginary totality” par excellence, and much of the confusion entailed in theories of the state historically lies in an inability or unwillingness to recognize this. For the most part, states were ideas, ways of imagining social order as something one could get a grip on, models of control. This is why the first known works of social theory, whether from Persia, or China, or ancient Greece, were always framed as theories of statecraft. This has had two disastrous effects. One is to give utopianism a bad name. (The word “utopia” first calls to mind the image of an ideal city, usually, with perfect geometry—the image seems to harken back originally to the royal military camp: a geometrical space which is entirely the emanation of a single, individual will, a fantasy of total control.) All this has had dire political consequences, to say the least. The second is that we tend to assume that states, and social order, even societies, largely correspond. In other words, we have a tendency to take the most grandiose,

even paranoid, claims of world-rulers seriously, assuming that whatever cosmological projects they claimed to be pursuing actually did correspond, at least roughly, to something on the ground.

Whereas it is likely that in many such cases, these claims ordinarily only applied fully within a few dozen yards of the monarch in any direction, and most subjects were much more likely to see ruling elites, on a day-to-day basis, as something much along the lines of predatory raiders.

An adequate theory of states would then have to begin by distinguishing in each case between the relevant ideal of rulership (which can be almost anything, a need to enforce military style discipline, the ability to provide perfect theatrical representation of gracious living which will inspire others, the need to provide the gods with endless human hearts to fend off the apocalypse...), and the mechanics of rule, without assuming that there is necessarily all that much correspondence between them. (There might be. But this has to be empirically established.) For example: much of the mythology of “the West” goes back to Herodotus’ description of an epochal clash between the Persian Empire, based on an ideal of obedience and absolute power, and the Greek cities of Athens and Sparta, based on ideals of civic autonomy, freedom and equality. It’s not that these ideas—especially their vivid representations in poets like Aeschylus or historians like Herodotus—are not important. One could not possibly understand Western history without them. But their very importance and vividness long blinded historians to what is becoming the increasingly clear reality: that whatever its ideals, the Achmaenid Empire was a pretty light

touch when it came to the day-to-day control of its subjects’ lives, particularly in comparison with the degree of control exercised by Athenians over their slaves or Spartans over the overwhelming majority of the Laconian population, who were helots.

Whatever the ideals, the reality, for most people involved, was much the other way around.

One of the most striking discoveries of evolutionary anthropology has been that it is perfectly possible to have kings and nobles and all the exterior trappings of monarchy without having a state in the mechanical sense at all. One should think this might be of some interest to all those political philosophers who spill so much ink arguing about theories of “sovereignty”—since it suggests that most sovereigns were not heads of state and that their favorite technical term actually is built on a near-impossible ideal, in which royal power actually does manage to translate its cosmological pretensions into genuine bureaucratic control of a given territorial population. (Something like this started happening in Western Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but almost as soon as it did, the sovereign’s personal power was replaced by a fictive person called “the people,” allowing the bureaucracy to take over almost entirely.) But so far as I’m aware, political philosophers have as yet had nothing to say on the subject. I suspect this is largely due to an extremely poor choice of terms. Evolutionary anthropologists refer to kingdoms which lack full-fledged coercive bureaucracies as “chiefdoms,” a term which evokes images more of Geronimo or Sitting Bull than Solomon, Louis the Pious, or the Yellow Emperor. And of course the evolutionist framework itself ensures that such

structures are seen as something which immediately precedes the emergence of the state, not an alternative form, or even something a state can turn into. To clarify all this would be a major historical project.

2) A THEORY OF POLITICAL ENTITIES THAT ARE NOT STATES

So that's one project: to reanalyze the state as a relation between a utopian imaginary, and a messy reality involving strategies of flight and evasion, predatory elites, and a mechanics of regulation and control.

All this highlights the pressing need for another project: one which will ask, If many political entities we are used to seeing as states, at least in any Weberian sense, are not, then what are they? And what does that imply about political possibilities?

In a way it's kind of amazing that such a theoretical literature doesn't already exist. It's yet another sign, I guess, of how hard it is for us to think outside the statist framework. An excellent case in point: one of the most consistent demands of "anti-globalization" activists has been for the elimination of border restrictions. If we're to globalize, we say, let's get serious about it. Eliminate national borders. Let people come and go as they please, and live wherever they like. The demand is often phrased in terms of some notion of global citizenship. But this inspires immediate objections: doesn't a call for "global citizenship" mean calling for some kind of global state? Would we really want that? So then the question becomes how do we theorize a citizenship outside the state. This is often treated as a profound, perhaps insurmountable, dilemma; but

if one considers the matter historically, it's hard to understand why it should be. Modern Western notions of citizenship and political freedoms are usually seen to derive from two traditions, one originating in ancient Athens, the other primarily stemming from medieval England (where it tends to be traced back to the assertion of aristocratic privilege against the Crown in the Magna Carta, Petition of Right, etc., and then the gradual extension of these same rights to the rest of the population). In fact there is no consensus among historians that either classical Athens or medieval England were states at all—and moreover, precisely for the reason that citizens' rights in the first, and aristocratic privilege in the second, were so well established. It is hard to think of Athens as a state, with a monopoly of force by the state apparatus, if one considers that the minimal government apparatus which did exist consisted entirely of slaves, owned collectively by the citizenry. Athens' police force consisted of Scythian archers imported from what's now Russia or Ukraine, and something of their legal standing might be gleaned from the fact that, by Athenian law, a slave's testimony was not admissible as evidence in court unless it was obtained under torture.

So what do we call such entities? "Chiefdoms"? One might conceivably be able to describe King John as a "chief" in the technical, evolutionary sense, but applying the term to Pericles does seem absurd. Neither can we continue to call ancient Athens a "city-state" if it wasn't a state at all. It seems we just don't have the intellectual tools to talk about such things. The same goes for the typology of types of state, or state-like entities in

more recent times: an historian named Spruyt has suggested that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the territorial nation-state was hardly the only game in town; there were other possibilities (Italian city-states, which actually were states; the Hanseatic league of confederated mercantile centers, which involved an entirely different conception of sovereignty) which didn't happen to win out—at least, right away—but were no less intrinsically viable. I have myself suggested that one reason the territorial nation-state ended up winning out was because, in this early stage of globalization, Western elites were trying to model themselves on China, the only state in existence at the time which actually seemed to conform to their ideal of a uniform population, who in Confucian terms were the source of sovereignty, creators of a vernacular literature, subject to a uniform code of laws, administered by bureaucrats chosen by merit, trained in that vernacular literature... With the current crisis of the nation-state and rapid increase in international institutions which are not exactly states, but in many ways just as obnoxious, juxtaposed against attempts to create international institutions which do many of the same things as states but would be considerably less obnoxious, the lack of such a body of theory is becoming a genuine crisis.

3) YET ANOTHER THEORY OF CAPITALISM

One is loathe to suggest this but the endless drive to naturalize capitalism by reducing it to a matter of commercial calculation, which then allows one to claim it is as old as Summer, just screams out for

it. At the very least we need a proper theory of the history of wage labor, and relations like it. Since after all, it is in performing wage labor, not in buying and selling, that most humans now waste away most of their waking hours and it is that which makes them miserable. (Hence the IWW didn't say they were “anti-capitalist,” much though they were; they got right to the point and said they were “against the wage system.”) The earliest wage labor contracts we have on record appear to be really about the rental of slaves. What about a model of capitalism that sets out from that? Where anthropologists like Jonathan Friedman argue that ancient slavery was really just an older version of capitalism, we could just as easily—actually, a lot more easily—argue that modern capitalism is really just a newer version of slavery. Instead of people selling us or renting us out we rent out ourselves. But it's basically the same sort of arrangement.

4) POWER/IGNORANCE, or POWER/STUPIDITY

Academics love Michel Foucault's argument that identifies knowledge and power, and insists that brute force is no longer a major factor in social control. They love it because it flatters them: the perfect formula for people who like to think of themselves as political radicals even though all they do is write essays likely to be read by a few dozen other people in an institutional environment. Of course, if any of these academics were to walk into their university library to consult some volume of Foucault without having remembered to bring a valid ID, and decided to enter the stacks anyway, they would soon discover that brute force is really

Defining the State

Given the preceding remarks, I now define the state as a 'rational abstraction' to be re-specified in different ways and for different purposes as strategic-relational analysis proceeds. In short, in order to initiate the analysis rather than pre-empt further exploration, the *core of the state apparatus* can be defined as a distinct ensemble of institutions and organizations whose socially accepted function is to define and enforce collectively binding decisions on a given population in the name of their 'common interest' or 'general will' (Jessop 1990: 341). This broad definition identifies the state in terms of its generic features as a specific form of macro-political organization with a specific type of political orientation; it also indicates that there are important links between the state and the political sphere and, indeed, the wider society. Thus, not all forms of macro-political organization can be classed as state-like nor can the state simply be equated with government, law, bureaucracy, a coercive apparatus, or another political institution. Indeed this definition puts the contradictions and dilemmas entailed in political discourse at the heart of work on the state, because claims about the general will or common interest are a key feature of the state system and distinguish it from straightforward political domination or violent oppression (contrast Tilly 1973). The approach can also serve as a basis for describing specific states and political regimes and exploring the conditions in which states emerge, evolve, enter into crisis, and are transformed. This initial cluster definition is also compatible with diverse analytical approaches to the state and with recognition of what [Mann \(1986\)](#) terms the polymorphous crystallization of state power associated with alternative principles of societalization.¹

This said, six qualifications are required to make this multi-dimensional definition useful in orienting a strategic-relational research agenda:

1. Above, around, and below the core of the state are found institutions and organizations whose relation to the core ensemble is uncertain. Indeed the effective integration of the state as an institutional ensemble pursuing relatively coherent policies is deeply problematic. This is where governmental rationalities, administrative programmes, and political practices oriented to

achieving such integration become significant. Moreover, while statal operations are most concentrated and condensed in the core of the state, they depend on a wide range of micro-political practices dispersed throughout society. States never achieve full closure or complete separation from society and the precise boundaries between the state and/or political system and other institutional orders and systems are generally in doubt and change over time. In many circumstances this ambiguity may even be productive in pursuit of state policies. Similar problems emerge in relation to inter-state relations in the emerging world political system.

2. The nature of these institutions and organizations, their articulation to form the overall architecture of the state qua institutional ensemble, and its differential links with the wider society will depend on the nature of the social formation and its past history. The capitalist type of state differs from that characteristic of feudalism, for example;² and political regimes also differ across capitalist social formations.
3. Although the socially acknowledged character of its political functions is a defining feature of the normal state, the forms in which this legitimacy is institutionalized and expressed will also vary. Indeed the whole point of describing such political functions as 'socially acknowledged' is to stress that their precise content is constituted in and through politically relevant discourses. The contested discourses about the nature and purposes of government for the wider society and their relationship to alternative hegemonic projects and their translation into political practices become significant in this context.
4. Although coercion is a state's ultimate sanction, states have other methods to secure compliance. Violence is rarely the state's first resort (especially in consolidated capitalist societies) and would often be counterproductive. A full account of the state must consider all the means of intervention at its disposal, their capacities and limitations, and their relative weight in different contexts. This is especially important for evolving forms of statehood in an increasingly interdependent world society.
5. The society whose common interest and general will are administered by the state should no more be interpreted as an empirical given than the state

itself. The boundaries and identity of the society are often constituted in and through the same processes by which states are built, reproduced, and transformed. Indeed it is one of the more obvious conclusions of the state-centred approach that state- and nation-building are strongly influenced by the emergent dynamic of the emergent international system formed through the interaction of sovereign states. An effect of globalization and its associated relativization of scale is the increasing difficulty of defining the boundaries of any given society – to the extent that some theorists claim that only one society now exists, namely, world society ([Luhmann 1982, 1997](#); Richter 1996; [Stichweh 2000](#)). Interestingly, the tendential emergence of world society reinforces the importance of national states in many areas of social life ([Meyer et al., 1997](#)).

6. Whatever the political rhetoric of the 'common interest' or 'general will' might suggest, these are always 'illusory' insofar as attempts to define them occur on a strategically selective terrain and involves the differential articulation and aggregation of interests, opinions, and values. Indeed, the common interest or general will is always asymmetrical, marginalizing or defining some interests at the same time as it privileges other. There is never a general interest that embraces all possible particular interests ([Jessop 1990](#)). Indeed, a key statal task is to aid the organization of spatio-temporal fixes that facilitate the deferral and displacement of contradictions, crisis-tendencies, and conflicts to the benefit of those fully included in the 'general interest' at the expense of those more or less excluded from it. In turn, this suggests clear limits to the possibility of a world state governing world society because this would exclude a constitutive outside for the pursuit of a 'general interest' or require a fundamental shift in social relations to prevent social exclusion.