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Introduction: Theories of the State

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No concept is more central to political discourse and political analysis than that of the state. Yet, whilst we all tend to think we know what we're talking about when we refer to the state, it is a notoriously difficult concept to define. Since the seventeenth century, when the term was first widely deployed, the concept of the state has been heavily contested (Skinner 1989; Viroli 1992). It remains so today. The state has meant, and continues to mean, a great variety of different things to a great variety of authors from a great variety of perspectives. Part of the aim of this volume is to look at family resemblances in those understandings of the state, in the hope that we might begin to piece together a more coherent picture of *what this state is* and, indeed, *how it is developing*. Yet that is no easy task, for whatever family resemblances we might

discern are unlikely to hide the very considerable variations between contending accounts both of what the state is and of the trajectory of its development. We should then, from the outset, expect diversity.

Yet whether depicted as an overbearing apparatus of patriarchal oppression or as the very condition of social and political freedom, as an 'ideal collective capitalist' or a fetter on the self-regulating capacity of the market, few commentators would disagree that the concept of the state is fundamental to social, political and economic analysis. The state, for better or worse: offers to vaccinate us against Covid-19; mobilises populations in defence of its realm; regulates, monitors and polices conduct within civil society; intervenes (whether we think we like it or not) within the economy; and regulates (and in some instances controls) the flow of information within the public sphere, to detail merely some of its more obvious activities. Few then would deny the ubiquity or pervasiveness of the influence of the state within modern societies.

Or so we might imagine. For in recent years the very relevance of the concept of the state has come under increasing dispute. In an era of globalization and of complex interdependence among nations it is often argued that the influence of the state (certainly in its incarnation as a nation-state) is waning, its very form and function under challenge. A second aim of the present volume is to review this influential if arguably rather blunt and premature proposition. Indeed, stated most simply, our ambition is to survey the range and diversity of theoretical and conceptual resources within the pantheon of state theory for the analysis of the developmental paths and

trajectories of the contemporary state. It is important, before so doing, however, that we put to one side a few contagious myths and popular fictions.

Though the state almost certainly accounts for a higher aggregate share of global GDP than ever before in its history, it attracts considerably less attention than 20 or even 40 years ago when that share was considerably smaller. It is frequently suggested that the share of GDP devoted to state-like activities in OECD countries has fallen somewhat since the early 1990s. But, as Figure 1 shows clearly: (a) that fall proved far less pronounced than many commentators suggested; (b) it predates the global financial crisis and the Covid pandemic; and (c) both have taken state expenditure as a share of GDP, even in the OECD, to previously unprecedented levels.

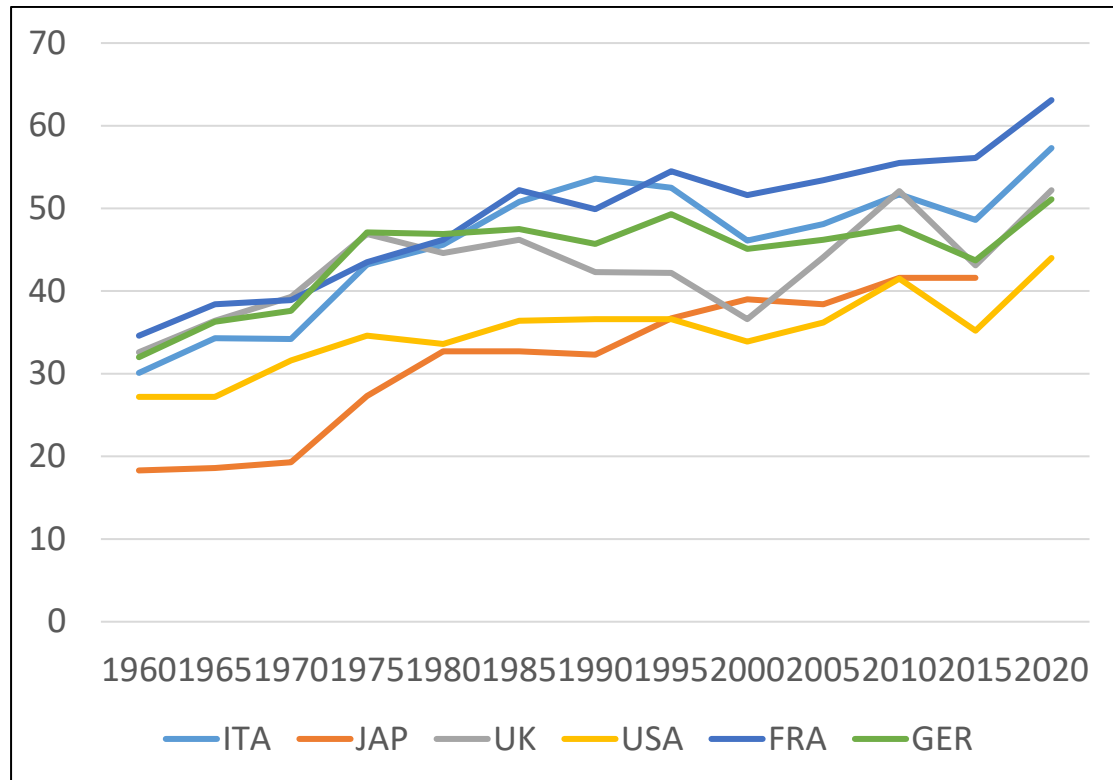


Figure 1: State expenditure as a share of GDP (1960-2020)

Source: Eurostat and OECD *Economic Outlook* (various years)

Rather more accurate, it would seem then, is that the rate of increase of state expenditure lessened during the 1990s and has accelerated since. But arguably even that tells only part of the story. For this is not just about state spending per se. As Figure 2 shows very clearly, government debt has been expanding at the same time. In crisis, it seems, we have turned back to the state, with substantial increases in the level of public debt in wake of the global financial crisis and during the Covid crisis.

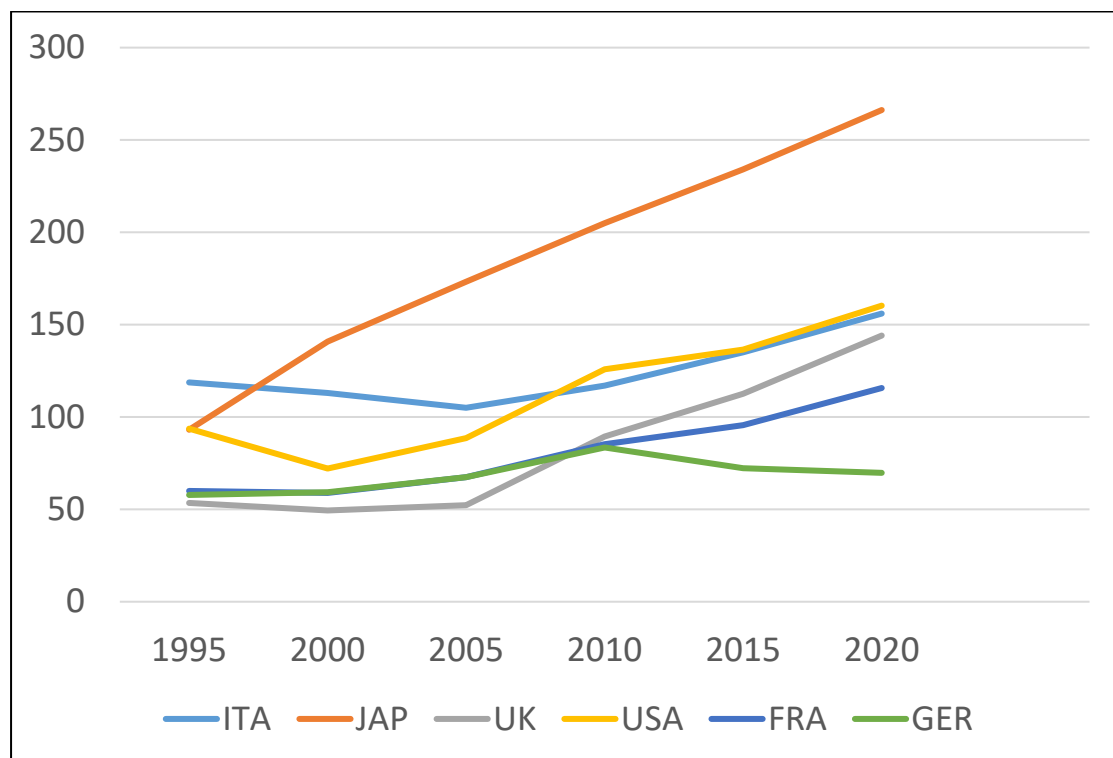


Figure 2: General government debt as a share of GDP (1995-2020)

Source: OECD *Economic Outlook* (various years)

We might well be more sceptical and less trusting of the state than even; but, if anything, the early 21st century has reinforced and consolidated the role of the state

as the public good provider of last resort. In the context of contagion on a potentially planetary scale, whether financial or viral, the only entity capable of bailing out the economy and of securing the continued supply of public goods it turns out is the very state we have come to distrust so much.

As this suggests, whilst intellectual interest in the state may have waxed and waned, the state is a constant – and, if anything, growing – presence at the heart of contemporary politics. This makes its seeming disappearance from the political analyst’s radar since the 1990s somewhat difficult to explain. The result is that the theory of the state, once a raging torrent, is now little more than a trickle, an intellectual backwater traversed only by hardened theorists. A ‘return to the state’, by no means the first (see, for instance, Evans et al. 1985), is now long overdue; and, as many of the chapters in this volume make clear, the beginnings of such a return might just about be discerned in a number of contemporary developments from a diverse range of theoretical perspectives. Indeed, as the following chapters attest, the intellectual resources to sustain and animate such a ‘bringing back in’ of the state are today rather greater than they were when the first edition was published nearly two decades ago.

It would be presumptuous to think that a volume such as this might contribute in all but the most meagre of ways to such a ‘return to the state’. What it can hope to offer, however, is something of a stock-taking exercise. If the continued centrality of the state to contemporary political life is to be acknowledged and reflected in the accounts of political dynamics offered by contemporary political analysts (as we think

it should), then it is crucial that we interrogate the range and diversity of theoretical resources at our disposal to interrogate the state, particularly at a moment when we our reliance upon it seems greater than ever. That is the more modest aim of this volume.

In this relatively brief introductory chapter we examine first the emergence and development of the distinctive concept of the modern state in European political thought. We then turn to the still considerable influence of the Weberian approach to, and definition of, the state in more contemporary state theory. We show how the Weberian understanding of the state continues to exert a powerful influence on the traditional triumvirate of state theories – pluralism, elite theory and Marxism. We turn next to the challenge posed to the ascendancy of this mainstream conception of the state presented by Foucauldian, discourse-analytical and, above all, feminist perspectives. We conclude by considering the prospects for the state, and for the theory of the state, in an era of globalization and neoliberal retrenchment have been called into question by the crises in and through which we now acknowledge ourselves to be living.

Defining the state

Introductions to the state tend, unremarkably, to begin by addressing the question of definition. All too frequently, however, they fall short of providing an answer. The importance of defining the state is all the greater given that, as Dunleavy and O’Leary note, the state is not a material object but conceptual abstraction (1987: 1; see also

Hay 2014). As such its utility as a concept cannot and should not be taken for granted since it does not have a self-evident material object of reference. Its utility must be demonstrated; and in order to demonstrate that utility we must first be clear about what we are referring to.

That may sound fine in principle, yet the question of definition raises particular problems for a theoretically pluralistic volume such as this. Indeed, it is sorely tempting in a volume which makes something of a virtue of the diversity of theoretical resources we have on offer to interrogate the role of the state today to suggest that this is a question for each distinct approach to the state – and to leave it at that. And as already indicated and at the risk of sounding trite, the state does indeed mean a variety of different things to a variety of different perspectives.

Yet we cannot quite leave it at that. For whilst the state may, and indeed does, mean different things to different authors, the commonality between seemingly diverse definitions should not be overlooked – and cannot be allowed to provide an excuse for a failure to consider the ontology of the state – what the state *is*. In order to help us achieve this, and to offer some historical context for the chapters which follows, we consider first the genealogy of the concept of the state before turning to by far the most influential definition of the modern state – that offered by Weber.

Before doing so, however, it is first important to say something about the development of the modern state itself – or, at least, the development of the political institutions now generally held to characterise the modern state (for a far more

extensive treatment see Gill 2003). For, unremarkably, our conception of the state has not developed in isolation from the development of the institutions we associate with the state. We cannot consider one without the other.

The development of the modern state

As John A. Hall and G. John Ikenberry note in their useful introduction to the term, “most of human history has not been graced by the presence of states” (1989: 16). This is undoubtedly the case. Moreover, whilst the term has been used retrospectively to refer to mechanisms and processes of political governance arising in Mesopotamia as early as 3000 BC, it is only since the seventeenth century that the human history has been graced by the concept of the state. According to most conventional accounts, the origins of the state lie in the transition from the nomadic subsistence of hunter-gatherers to more agrarian societies characterised, increasingly, by organised agriculture (Hall 1986; Mann 1988; Sahlins 1974). Indeed, it was the relative geographical immobility of agricultural production that led to the development of the institutions and infrastructure capable of governing and projecting power, albeit at first in a rather diffuse way, over a specific and delineated territory. As Hall and Ikenberry again note, “irrigation works – and date and olive trees – tie agricultural producers very firmly to the land, and thus make them better fodder for the state” (1989: 18). In this way the institutional capacity to project power over a territory which we now associate with the state owes its origins to the historical accident of the replacement, first in Mesopotamia, Meso-America, the Indus river valley, China and Peru and then more generally, of hunter gathering by agriculture *in situ*.

In these initial stages of its development, the state was largely despotic and coercive in the manner in which it exercised power over a population. And it is in this context that a second key factor becomes important – religion. Hunter gatherer communities tended to be tribal – with forms of association based on kinship ties. The agrarian states which replaced them were not. This made them both rather more reliant upon coercion and, in the absence of strong kinship relations amongst their members, rather more fragile politically when that coercion was challenged. In this context, as Patricia Crone (1989) demonstrates, it was the capacity of religion to lend legitimacy to the organised and increasingly centralised use of coercive power (through the appeal to divine authority) that made possible where otherwise it might not have been the consolidation of state power. This, in turn, facilitated the further development of the institutional capacity to govern and regulate a geographical territory and, with it, the capacity to mobilise militarily. The association between the state and military might was, then, established early on and arguably persists to the present day. Conquest rapidly became the primary mechanism through which the institutional form of the state became diffused, since the organisational capacity which the state developed conferred upon it a competitive advantage when it confronted pre-state-like societies.

If the origins of the state itself lie in Mesopotamia, then it is to Western Europe that we must turn if we are to establish the origins of the modern state. What is invariably taken to characterise the modern state is the simultaneous combination of, on the one hand, its claim to act as a public power responsible for the governance of a tightly

delineated geographical territory and, on the other, its separation from those in whose name it claims to govern. The modern state is, then, an institutional complex claiming sovereignty for itself as the supreme political authority within a defined territory for whose governance it claims and is held responsible.

The factors that made possible the development of such an institutional form in Western Europe were, again, both complex and bound up with the role of religious authority. And once again the process was a highly contingent one. It was the church, in particular, that challenged the authority of Imperial Rome. The result was a previously unprecedented degree of cultural homogeneity, as an initially unlikely synthesis of Christian doctrine, on the one hand, and the strong legal residue which carried over from the Roman Empire, on the other, facilitated both the development of consensual trading relations throughout the European economy and the diffusion of the institutional template of the modern state. The result was the birth of the so-called absolutist state in the sixteenth and seventeenth century in Bourbon France, Habsburg Spain and Tudor England. These were the precursors for the institutional complex we now recognise as the state. It in turn came to be characterised by a centralised bureaucracy and tax-raising capacity, a standing army, a system of diplomatic relations with other states and, for the most part, clearly delineated and commonly accepted territorial borders.

It is, once again, to Western Europe that the origins of the most recent phase of significant state re-structuring and expansion can be traced. This bout of institutional dynamism, largely confined to the most developed economies and occurring in many

cases in the immediate wake of the Second World War, is associated with the rise of the welfare state. It has seen the creation of the most extensive state regimes that the world has ever seen. As we saw in Figure 1 these welfare states account, in many cases, for in excess of 50 per cent of GDP; and they typically employ 10-20 per cent of the total workforce (Hay 2021). They represent, at least to date, the highest point in the development of the institutional capacity of the state. Whether they are increasingly anachronistic and a burden on economic growth and prosperity in an ever more closed integrated world economy is a source of very significant debate and a key theme of this volume. Suffice it for now to say that, despite the now customary hyperbola, there would seem to be little evidence to date of their ongoing or imminent demise. Sub-optimal as institutions of governance in an era of global interconnectedness though they well be, thus far they have proved remarkably resilient. Though it might not be difficult to imagine more effective means of governing ourselves, given the typically planetary character of challenges we now face, rumours of the demise of the state appear, to date at least, ill-founded.

The genealogy of the concept of the state

Having considered the institutional origins and development of the state, we are now better placed to consider and contextualise the development of the concept of the state. Etymologically, the notion of the state is derived from the Latin *status*, meaning literally social status, stature or standing, specifically of an individual within a community. By the fourteenth century the use of the term to refer to the standing or status (indeed to the 'stateliness') of rulers, distinguishing and setting them apart from

those subject to their rule, was commonplace. In the idea that the state resides in the body of the ruler, indeed that the state and the 'sovereign' are synonymous, this was a characteristically pre-modern formulation (Shennan 1974; Skinner 1990).

The development of a distinctively modern conception of the state would take a further three centuries – and its development would parallel the emergence of the institutional complex described above as the absolutist state. A first step was taken by the authors of the so-called 'mirror-for-princes' writings, most famously Machiavelli in his *Il Principe (The Prince)*. In this literature, the state (*lo stato*) now became synonymous not only with the prince himself, but with the character of the political regime, the geographical area over which sovereign authority was claimed and maintained, and the very institutions of government required to preserve such authority (1988).

A second development came with the republican political theory of the Renaissance (see Skinner 1978; Viroli 1992). This movement championed the cause of a self-governing republican regime that might inaugurate a 'state' or condition of civic liberty — in Dante's terms *lo stato franco*. Here, at last, we see the emergence of a conception of an autonomous civil and political authority regulating the public affairs of an independent community or 'commonwealth'. The state is here presented as claiming and enjoying a monopoly over the legitimate use of violence, and as deriving the authority for this claim not from the power or stature of its ruler(s), but from the people themselves. The state is here referred to for the first time as a distinct

apparatus of government which rulers have a duty to maintain and which will outlast their rule, as opposed to an extension of the latter's innate authority.

The final step came with the rise of the absolutist state in Europe in the seventeenth century. Here, in particular in the writings of Bodin and Hobbes, the state is eventually conceptualised as truly separate from the powers of the ruler and the ruled. Three aspects of this formulation set it apart as a distinctively modern conception of the state: (i) individuals within society are presented as subjects of the state, owing duties and their allegiance not to the person of a ruler but to the state itself; (ii) the authority of the state is singular and absolute; and (iii) the state is regarded as the highest form of authority in all matters of civil government (Skinner 1989: 90). Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1968), and the rise of the absolutist state which this work reflects, marks the end of the pre-modern conception of the state in which political power is understood in personal and charismatic terms. The state now comes to be seen as a distinct form of authority independent of those who give effect to its power.

The Weberian definition of the modern state

It is this modern conception of the state that still dominates contemporary state theory. Indeed, the definition of the state most often accorded the status of *the* definition the state – the Weberian one – displays considerable similarities with that of Hobbes. Weber, as is often noted, defined the state not in terms of its function but in terms of its *modus operandi*. More specifically, he saw the state in terms of its organization and deployment of the means of coercion and physical force. As he

explained, “a compulsory political organization with continuous operations will be called a ‘state’ insofar as its administrative staff successfully upholds the claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force in the enforcement of its order” (Weber 1978: 54).

Two aspects of this definition are particularly noteworthy, providing as they do the basis, and/or point of departure, for much contemporary reflection on the state. First, the state for Weber is a set of institutions with a dedicated personnel. This observation has been taken up and developed by a diverse group of neo-Weberians, neo-statists and institutionalists working in particular in the US (see Chapter Five). They argue that the differentiation of the state from civil society allows state managers to develop an array of distinct interests, preferences and capacities which cannot be explained by reference merely to societal factors.

In their efforts to ‘bring the state back in’ as both an actor and an independent force in social causation, the neo-statists have emphasised both the autonomy of the state from society and the power of ‘state-centred’ explanations of political outcomes. More specifically they have concentrated on: the ability of state managers to exercise power independently and autonomously of non-state forces; the ‘infrastructural power’ of the state to infiltrate, control, supervise, police and regulate modern societies; and the ways in which the specific institutional structures of particular states at particular moments in time may enhance or undermine such general capacities. Such an idea has also proved increasingly influential in neo-Marxist state theory (see, for instance, Block 1990 and, more generally, the discussion in Chapter Three), in neo-

pluralism (see Chapter One) and, albeit in a rather different form, in public choice theory (see Chapter Four).

Second, Weber regards the modern state as wielding a monopoly of authoritative rule-making within a bounded territory. This is in turn backed by a monopoly of the means of physical violence within this same territorial space. Institutionalists and neo-statists, whose indebtedness to Weber is perhaps clearest, have concentrated on the mechanisms by which the state preserves (or at least seeks to preserve) its monopoly of authoritative rule-making. They have focused in particular on the question of political legitimacy, on the often democratic and/or nationalist strategies and mechanisms through which it is constructed and sustained, on the processes leading to its withdrawal, on the consequences for the always fragile balance between coercion and consent in modern societies, and on the mechanisms through which legitimacy might be re-established (through changes of regime and, in some instances, revolution). Yet, these too have increasingly become concerns for neo-Marxists (particularly those keen to develop the insights of Gramsci) and neo-pluralists. Other neo-statists, the so-called war-centred state theorists, but also realists and neo-realists in international relations theory (most famously, Waltz 1959), have focused on the state's supposed monopoly of the means of violence and in particular on the military dimension of state power. Stimulated perhaps by the intuitive appeal of Charles Tilly's remark that 'wars make states and states make war' (1975), the former in particular have considered the war-making capacity of the state, the extent to which the internal organisation of the state apparatus reflects military imperatives, and the consequences of war-making and of mobilisation for war on the evolution and

transformation of the state itself — in short, on the relationship between war-making and state-shaping. Such themes have also been taken up by feminist scholars, most notably perhaps Cynthia Enloe (1990), in interrogating the complex relationship between the state, organised violence, militarism and masculinity (see Chapter Six).

As the above discussion would seem to indicate, a substantial and rather disparate literature can trace some lineage from the Weberian conception of the state. Yet despite this seeming diversity, neo-Weberian perspectives do tend to display certain shared characteristics — and indeed weaknesses. First, such theories have tended to concentrate rather one-sidedly on political factors internal to the state. As a consequence they have often relegated political forces outside and beyond the state, such as social movements and pressure groups, to a marginal role. Second, much neo-Weberian theory rests on the rather tenuous distinction between state and societal variables and an explanatory emphasis on the former at the expense the latter. In the context of the attempt to ‘bring the state back into’ American social science in the 1970s and 1980s this tilting of the stick towards the side of the state was entirely appropriate. Yet now that ‘state-centred’ approaches have become as if not more dominant than their ‘society-centred’ counterparts ever were, it is crucial that we acknowledge that the casualty of both perspectives has been the attempt to develop an understanding of the complex and ever changing relationship *between* the state and society, the public and the private. This is the challenge to which contemporary theories of the state must now respond (see Chapters One, Six and Nine, in particular).

The concept of the state

It is all very well to have a clear and consistently articulated conception of the state and all the better if that is framed in a clearly articulated definition of the state. Yet, given that the state is not an immediately transparent or self-evident material object, this is merely one step in defending a view of politics which places the state at centre stage.

To develop a concept (and, by extension, a theory) of the state is to look at politics in a particular way. It is a choice which can and should be defended. This is an important point with clear implications. Political analysis can – and often does – proceed in the absence of a concept of the state (see, for instance, Easton 1967; Allen 1990). If we are, then, to justify a ‘return to the state’, we must first provide an answer to the question ‘what conceptual work does this concept (or theoretical abstraction) do’? Stated more starkly still, ‘what analytical purchase does the concept of the state offer the political analyst’? What, in short, does it bring to the analytic feast that we might otherwise be missing? And what is the value of that additional insight?

However good, and however obvious, a series of questions this might seem, state theory has not been quick to provide ready answers. Even Dunleavy and O’Leary, who as we have seen perhaps get closest to tabling this as the relevant question, fail really to provide an answer, contenting themselves with noting that the state is an analytical abstraction and then pointing to certain family resemblances in the definitions of the state offered by theorists of the state (1987: 1-6). In so doing they identify the kinds of theoretical abstraction that state theorists are appealing to in invoking the state as

a category, differentiating in so doing between organisation and functional definitions. Yet what they don't do is to assess and defend the analytical purchase on political reality offered by such abstractions. To be fair, some of this is implicit in what they say. But, for present purposes it is important that we are perhaps a little more explicit. Two elements, in particular, of the analytical utility offered by the concept of the state might usefully be identified. Both are concerned with the ability to contextualise political behaviour: the first relates to the structural and/or institutional contextualisation of political actors, the second to the historical contextualisation of political behaviour and dynamics. We consider each in turn.

The state as institutional contextualisation

As later chapters will testify, theories of the state vary significantly in terms of the assumptions about the state on which they are predicated and from which they build. Yet, almost without exception the state is seen, by those who deploy it as a concept, in structural and/or institutional terms. Thus, whether the state is seen organisationally or functionally – as a set of functions necessitating (in so far as they are performed) a certain institutional ensemble, or as an institutional ensemble itself – it provides a context within which political actors are seen to be embedded, with respect to which they must be situated analytically and which helps us to make sense of their behaviour. The state, in such a conception, provides (a significant part of) the institutional landscape which political actors must negotiate and the key to making sense of the things they do.

This landscape, in Bob Jessop's terms, is 'strategically selective' – in that it is more conducive to certain strategies, and by extension, the realisation of the interests and/or preferences of certain actors, than others (1990: 9-10; see also Hay 2002: 127-31). It provides the unevenly contoured backdrop to political conflict, contestation and change – a strategic terrain with respect to which actors must orient themselves if they are to realise their intentions.

As this perhaps serves to suggest, the appeal to the concept of the state tends to draw the political analyst's attention to – and, in the process it might be hoped, to sharpen the analyst's purchase on – the opportunities and (more often than not) the *constraints* that political actors face in realising their intentions, their preferences and their interests. A political analysis informed by a theory of the state is less likely to see political actors in voluntarist terms – as free-willed subjects in almost complete control of their destiny, able to shape political realities in the image of their preferences and volitions. For, in contrast to voluntarism and more agent-centred accounts, theorists of the state tend to see the ability of actors to realise their intentions as conditional upon often complex strategic choices made in densely structured institutional contexts which impose their own strategic selectivity (the pattern of opportunities and constraints they present).

Such considerations are important and have the potential to provide a valuable and much-needed corrective to the tendency of an at times behaviouralist-dominated political science mainstream to see actors' preferences alone as the key to explaining political outcomes. State theory reminds us that the access to political power

associated with a landslide electoral triumph does not necessarily bring with it the institutional and/or strategic capacity to translate such a mandate into lasting social, political and economic change. If political will and the access to positions of power and influence were all that were required (as, for instance, in some pluralist and elitist conceptions), wholesale political change would be endemic. That this is not the case suggests the value of institutionally contextualising abstractions like the state. And these, in turn, encourage a rather more sanguine and realistic assessment of ‘political opportunity structures’ (Tarrow 1998).

Yet such valuable insights do not come without their own dangers. State theory, as many of the chapters in this volume demonstrate, has at times been characterised by a tendency to structuralism. Indeed, this would seem to be the pathology to which it is most prone. In at least some of their many variants, Marxism, institutionalism, green theory, feminism and even public choice theory, have all legitimately been accused of structuralism. For each has, at times and in certain forms, appealed to essential and non-negotiable characteristics of the state (its capitalism, its patriarchy, its complicity in the destruction of the natural environment, and so forth) reproduced independently of the will, volition or agency of political actors. Such essentialism is both fatalistic and apolitical; it does nothing to enhance the analyst’s purchase on political reality. Indeed, in a sense it denies that there is a *political* reality to be interrogated (on politics as the antithesis of fate, see Gamble 2000; Hay 2007). Yet whilst structuralism has proved an almost perennial target for critics of state theory, contemporary theories of the state would seem more acutely aware of its dangers today than at any point in the past. Indeed, the recent development of state theory

can at least in part be read as a retreat from structuralism and an attempt to 'bring state *actors* back in'.

The state as historical contextualisation

If the appeal to the concept or abstraction of the state serves to sensitise political analysts to the need to *contextualise political agency and agents institutionally*, then no less significant is its role in sensitising political analysts to the need to *contextualise the present historically*. Indeed, the two are intimately connected.

The characteristic concern of the political scientist with government and the holders of high office tends to be associated with an analytical focus on the present. Within this conventional framework, the determinants of political outcomes are invariably seen to lie in factors specific to a particular context at a particular point in time – typically, the motivations and intentions of the actors immediately involved and their access to positions of power and influence. This somewhat ahistorical approach is immediately problematised by appeal to the concept of the state. For whilst governments come and go, the state, as an institutional ensemble, persists – even whilst it evolves over time. That evolution is shaped by the intended and unintended consequences of governing strategies and policies. Yet this is a reciprocal relationship. For, at any given point in time, the strategic context in which governments find themselves is in turn a reflection of the strategic capacities and competences of the institutions of the state and the constraints and opportunities these impose. To understand the capacity for governmental autonomy is, then, to assess the extent of

the institutional, structural and strategic *legacy* inherited from the past (on which, see Farrall, Gray and Hay 2020). It is, in short, to understand the dynamic relationship between state and governmental power over time.

A hypothetical example may serve to reinforce the point. If the institutions of the state at a given point in time look very different from those, say, two decades earlier, after a systematic process of reform (led perhaps by a radical and ideologically driven administration), then this is likely to exert a significant influence on the autonomy of any new incoming administration, regardless of the size of its majority. Yet, as this example perhaps already serves to indicate, there is a certain danger of structuralism here too. The newly incumbent administration certainly has to grapple with the institutional, political and cultural legacy of the reforms enacted over the previous two decades. Yet, in our desire to contextualise historically we may come to overemphasise the burden the past places on the present. In so doing we may inadvertently absolve the newly incumbent administration of responsibility for the consequences of its own conduct in office – attributing, say, the lack of radicalism of the new administration to the legacy of its predecessor when it might more plausibly be attributed to its own lack of an animating political conviction.

State theory, especially in its neo-institutionalist form (see Chapter Five), is perhaps rather too predisposed to see continuity, inertia and, at best, incremental evolution over time. It sometimes tends to downplay political agency as a consequence. States, like governments, change and, under certain conditions, despite their path dependent nature, they may change surprisingly rapidly. It is important, then, that the historical

contextualisation of the present that the abstraction of the state encourages does not lead us to an historically undifferentiated account of the endless reproduction of the *status quo ante*. As this suggests, whilst the appeal to the concept of the state can certainly heighten our sensitivity to historical dynamics, it need not necessarily do so.

An overly structuralist and overly historicised account may in fact dull rather than sharpen our analytical purchase on questions of change over time. Yet, as already noted, contemporary theories of the state are perhaps rather more acutely aware of this danger than their predecessors. Recent developments in the theory of the state are characterised, as much as by anything else, by their emphasis upon the uneven pace of the state's development over time – and of the significant role played by political agency as an accelerant or decelerant.

Recent developments in state theory

In recent years the ascendancy of the neo-Weberian perspective that came to dominate the revival of interest in the state since the 1970s has been challenged. Two theoretical currents are here particularly noteworthy: the development of a distinctly feminist theory of the state, and the rejection of the very notion of the state by post-structuralists (in particular Foucauldians and discourse-analysts).

Feminism, or so it is often argued, lacks a theory of the state. Yet where once Judith Allen's comment that "where feminists have been interested in the state their ideas on its nature and form have often been imported from outside" (1990: 21) was

certainly warranted, things are now somewhat more complicated. Some argue that feminism has no (independent) theory of the state and needs one urgently; others, that feminism has no theory of the state and has no need for one; while yet others suggest that feminism not only needs but has at last begun to develop precisely such a theory (see, for instance, Chappell 2003; Cooper 2019; Haney 2000; Kantola 2006).

The evidence of recent scholarship would seem to support this latter view: that in recent years feminists have indeed begun to establish the basis for very adequate and distinctively feminist theories of the state (see Chapter Six). Indeed many of the most exciting and original developments in contemporary state theory have come from feminist scholars. Such insights include a number of key observations: (i) if the state can in some instances be seen to act as if an 'ideal collective capitalist' it may also be seen as a 'patriarch general', a key site in the reproduction of relations of patriarchal domination within society; (ii) with the growing feminisation of poverty, ever increasing numbers of women are becoming dependent upon the state for their very survival, giving the state a historically unparalleled prominence in the lives of women; (iii) paradoxically, at the same time the state is ever more dependent upon the unpaid domestic labour of women in an era of welfare retrenchment; (iv) as this demonstrates, the reproduction of capitalist social relations is integrally bound up with the reproduction of patriarchal relations — an adequate theory of either must deal with their mutual articulation.

If in recent years feminists have increasingly turned to a theory of the state then the rise of Foucauldian and discourse-analytical perspectives marks something of a

counter move – a move *from* the state (see Chapter Eight). Such approaches present a fundamental challenge to conventional theorists of the state, suggesting as they do that the notion of the state is itself something of a mystifying illusion. Following the work of Michel Foucault they argue that the concept and discourse of the state is but one part of a broader process governing and shaping our very conduct and bringing it in line with various ‘governing strategies’. From this perspective state effects exist precisely because people act as if the state existed, orienting themselves to the image constructed of it. Thus insofar as the state exists, it exists in the ideas we hold about it. This has led many theorists to reject the notion of the state altogether (see, for instance, Abrams 1988). Yet the idea that discourses of the state are partly constitutive of its power, authority and essence is hardly as devastating for the theory of the state as some might contend. It does however demonstrate that if theorists of the state are not to reproduce its mythology, they must give rather more attention to the processes through which the state is conceived of on the one hand, and the relationship between such conceptions and the institutions, processes and practices of the state on the other.

Beyond the state?

A final challenge to the theory of the state has come from a rather unexpected source – the challenge to the state itself. In recent years the value of state theory has come under attack from those who reject neither its sophistication nor the significance of the insights it has generated. What they do reject, however, is its contemporary relevance. The state, they argue, in an era of globalization and internationalization,

financial integration and capital mobility is rapidly becoming obsolete. It is becoming (if it has not already become) an anachronism. To paraphrase Daniel Bell (1987), it is too small to deal with the big problems which are now increasingly projected on an international or global stage and too clumsy to deal with the small problems which are increasingly displaced to the local level. It is difficult to deny the appeal of such an argument. Yet it is important to treat some of the often heroic claims made about the contemporary crisis of the nation-state with a degree of caution and some scepticism. First, globalisation is not a particularly novel phenomenon. Indeed it can be traced at least as far back as the imperial age. The mode of globalisation has certainly changed with time, but the mere presence of globalising forces need not herald the demise of the state form.

It is certainly true that financial integration, heightened capital mobility, the emergence of regional trading blocs and the proliferation of supra-national regulatory bodies, to say nothing of planetary contagions of a variety of kinds, significantly alter the context (economic, political, social and cultural) within which states operate, and may indeed be reflected in the changing form and function of the state. Yet this is in no sense to pronounce the death of the state. In all likelihood people will continue to live, as they do now, in territorially-bounded communities governed primarily by state institutions on which they continue to confer legitimacy, and which they continue to regard responsible in the first instance for the social and economic context in which they find themselves. As this suggests, globalisation may well pose a challenge to the nation-state, but it is challenge that has far reinforced at least as much as it has undermined the state-based organisation of politics.

The state may struggle to deal with problems which are planetary in their reach, scope and scale; but that those are the kinds of challenges it increasingly faces has not as yet been associated with any significant scaling back or retrenchment of its activities. Indeed, the tension between the proliferation of planetary problems on the one hand and the non-proliferation of planetary solution arguably now defines the contemporary agenda for state theorists. On all the available evidence, then, rumours of the death of the state and of the demise of state theory would seem, for good or ill, greatly exaggerated.

Structure of the book

The volume begins with re-appraisals of classical triumvirate of Pluralism, Elitism and Marxism. All three chapters note that these approaches are not uniform bodies of thought and each pieces together key strands of thought to highlight key ideas, concepts and thinkers. In his chapter on Pluralism, Martin Smith begins by noting the paradox at the heart of pluralist thought; that concentration of power in a body such as the state is seen to be problematic and undesirable, yet the state is also seen to be the arena of democratic politics, where the different interests in society are represented. Pluralism struggles to reconcile this paradox, yet coheres around a view of politics and the state, which rejects centralised theories and focus on the importance of groups to political outcomes. Yet Smith argues that pluralism consistently struggles to adequately conceptualise the unequal power of such interests and groups, particularly with regard to economic and business elites, despite

the attempts of neo-pluralism to better account for such criticisms. Nonetheless, as Smith details, the influence of pluralism and its attention to complexity, diversity and multiplicity remains a vibrant and influential way of thinking about the state.

Providing an overview of the development of Elitism, Mark Evans points to the ways in which various scholars have pointed to the concentration of power within and without the state. He examines the key propositions for elite theory originally stated; that rulers form a cohesive group, selected on the basis of their access to economic, political or ideological resources, are based within a territory, and are closed off from those who are ruled. More recent contributions to elite theory extend the focus to transnational or global elites, where power and influence is diffused, sometimes in subtle and nuanced ways, raising issues for democratic governance. In addition, Evans argues that the recent populist turn represents perhaps less the rise of 'the people' against elites, but rather an example of elite circulation, of competition between older and newer elites over authentic representation of 'the people'. The chapter ends by considering the potential impact of AI and technology on current and future elites.

Hay's account of Marxist state theory begins by exploring two questions – what is Marxist state theory and why does Marxism need a theory of the state? In terms of the latter, Hay argues that the state plays a crucial role in the regulation and reproduction of capital and that therefore, the state is of central interest to Marxism. In terms of the first question, there are a wide array of accounts and responses. Key issues which Marxist state theory has sought to grapple with include whether and how the state contributes to the construction of consent for capitalist reproduction and

whether the state is inherently capitalist or capitalist by virtue of existing within a capitalist system. More recent work seeks to move beyond such dualisms. Hay points to Jessop's strategic relational approach, emphasising strategic selectivity where past struggles shape, but do not determine, future outcomes, as an approach which has much to offer analyses and understandings of the contemporary state.

Moving on from the classic theories of the state, chapter five considers the ways in which Public Choice Theory has conceived of, and critiqued, the state. Taylor and Bosworth begin by specifying the foundational assumptions of Public Choice Theory, derived from economics, as a commitment to methodological individualism, and the view that individuals seek to maximise their self-interest. From this, a view of the state emerges which is sceptical of its ability to efficiently and effectively correct for market failures, whether due to the unequal nature of interest group politics or through inefficient public bureaucracies. Taylor and Bosworth note that Public Choice Theory does not assume that markets don't fail, but rather that states and governments fail too. Thus, Public Choice Theory has been heavily associated with neoliberal government reforms which seek to limit the state and its interventions.

In contrast to this perspective, New Institutionalism, a reaction to the assumptions of Public Choice theory and behaviouralist revolution of the 1960s, sought to rehabilitate the state. New Institutionalism, as Vivien Schmidt argues, rather than reducing political action to its individual parts, sought to analyse the collective element of political action. There are a range of New Institutionalisms to which the chapter attends; rational choice institutionalism, historical institutionalism, sociological

institutionalism and discursive institutionalism, which vary in quite how they approach this insight, but all share a concern with how institutions, broadly understood, modify individual action; be that through incentive structures, historical legacies, or cultural and/or discursive norms. The overall effect of this diversity is, Schmidt argues, that the new institutionalist approaches constitute ways of studying and thinking about the state rather than a substantive theory of the state.

In the chapter on Feminism, Johanna Kantola argues that feminism has long been marked by an uneasiness about the state. States have both increased equality in some ways for some women, whilst at the same time, entrenching other types of inequality. The chapter explores liberal feminist views of the state as neutral and benign, before moving on to consider critiques of this position, that the state is patriarchal. Addressing the frequent western-centric nature of much work on the state, Kantola points to the feminist work around the postcolonial state and the ways in which diverse state practices and contexts impact upon women. Poststructuralist feminists have rejected totalising narratives on the state and seek instead to point to its differentiated nature. Through analysis of a range of issues such as neoliberalism and populism, Kantola points to the ways in which feminist theorising about the state seeks to explore the ways in which power relations within and across the state are complex and co-constitutive.

In a similar vein to Kantola and Feminism, Annica Kronsell and Roger Hildingsson point to an ambivalence around the state within Green political thought, with the state seen as both responsible for the (re)production of structures which contribute to

environmental degradation, whilst at the same time, seeing state action and intervention as important for addressing the environmental crisis. After reviewing the features of the green state both as a normative ideal and by comparing the performance of different states in environmental governance, the chapter assesses the arguments that the development of the welfare state offers potential avenues for greening of the state. Kronsell and Hildingsson conclude the chapter by considering three challenges for the green state; reconciling economic and environmental imperatives, processes of change and transition, and whether new political and democratic forms are needed to address environmental challenges.

The final chapter in the theories section of the book turns to poststructuralism. James Martin and Alan Finlayson begin by characterising poststructuralism as an interest in rationalities and how certain rationalities become dominant, and how these might be contested. They argue that many important institutions, systems of meaning and identities are open, flexible and unstable, achieving a sense of permanence through discursive frameworks. The chapter points to the ways in which poststructuralism seeks to destabilise and decentre the state and its associated practices, to see the state as both a complex ensemble of contingent rationalities rather than a fixed, singular actor or entity; both site and outcome of a struggle to articulate particular meanings. The state is therefore an outcome of politics rather than something with which to explain politics. The work of Foucault on governmentality and his analysis of how power is dispersed throughout society highlights the complexity and plurality of state practices.

The second section of the book moves from state theory to critical engagement with key concepts and ideas raised or implied by debates about the state. An orthodox view of the state conceptualised would see it as a body which exercises sovereignty over a given territory to secure 'the people' and protect private property. In the chapters which comprise the second section, each of these terms is subject to further interrogation, to develop our understanding of the state. The choice of chapters also speaks to some of the major ways in which politics and international relations has changed and developed in the years since the first edition of the book. The global financial crisis raised a series of questions around the (in)ability of the nation state to regulate international financial systems and the power of business vis a vis the state. Issues like terrorism have also led to a renewed emphasis on security politics and Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, as well as the gains of nationalist/populist political parties across Europe have given renewed attention to sovereignty, nationalism and populism. These developments each prompt questions and debate about the state, which the subsequent chapters seek to explore.

Brown's analysis of the relationship between the state and sovereignty begins by noting the concentration of power and authority which emerged in the person of the sovereign in mid 17th century Europe. Reviewing different regimes and understandings of sovereignty, from that established under the Westphalian treaties, through debates around sovereignty and (non) intervention in the UN system, a key aim of the chapter is to emphasise that sovereignty, understood as dominium, the ability to dispose entirely as one wishes, has never been widely accepted. From cooperation around economic management issues, to human rights regimes, the international system has

been one which envisages and allows for constraints and limits on sovereignty. Yet in many contemporary western states, populist campaigns have fixed onto the idea of sovereignty as means of articulating opposition to international governance regimes. Whilst these understandings of sovereignty may be analytically thin and partial, Brown argues the idea of sovereignty remains a symbolically potent force.

Pinar Bilgin, in chapter eight, explores the state-security relationship. As Bilgin notes, the study of security has been almost completely bound up with a focus on the state. Within a Hobbesian framework, it is only the state which can provide security; security is unthinkable absent the state. This focus on the state has tended to work with a notion of the state as fixed and prior to security, as well as the thing, or referent, to be secured. The latter of these, including the idea that states provide security 'inside' and seek to defend their citizens from 'outside' remains a persistent limitation. Bilgin points to the myriad ways in which states are implicated in practices of insecurity, including for those 'inside', often in the name of states providing (national) security. The chapter concludes by considering the ways in which conceptions of the state have informed, sometimes implicitly, thinking about global, and postcolonial, security and calls for greater attention to the historical complexity of these relations.

The relationship between the state and territory comes into focus in Rhys Jones's chapter. It is, Jones notes, almost impossible to think of the state without a territorial dimension – states claims sovereignty (see above) over a particular territory. The measurement and control of such territory, as well as the embodied experiences of people are crucial. Space becomes territory through processes of measurement and

calculation, such that we might think of territory in terms of political technology, Jones argues. Yet these are contested and incomplete such that state territories are not 'flat' but fractured, uneven and incomplete. The chapter goes on to consider ideas about networks and flows, which suggest a lesser, declining significance of territory and whether they necessitate the rethinking of state territory as porous, unstable and, often, aspirational. These dynamics, Jones illustrates, are created and challenged by people and material infrastructures, leading to an conception of state territories (and therefore states themselves) as fractured and incomplete works in progress.

David Marsh analyses the relationship between the state and capital. Beginning with an overview of two of the key theories on this relationship, Marxism and pluralism, Marsh notes a convergence of views; that business is an important, but not undifferentiated or uncontested, actor within the state. Marsh goes on to argue that the global financial crisis has given renewed impetus and focus to accounts of the role and position of capital within the state. Drawing on structure/agency and the faces of power debates, the chapter considers a range of authors and arguments with differing positions on the relationship between the state and capital – from positions which argue that business has a dominant relation to the state through to arguments that business power fluctuates and subject to countervailing pressures. In doing so, Marsh gives an account of the strategies and techniques which capital deploys to further its interests.

In their chapter considering the relationship between the state and nationalism, Nicola McEwen and Daniel Cetrà suggest an equivalence is frequently assumed

between the nation and the state; that the state is the appropriate repository for the nation, giving the former the legitimacy and affective attachment of the later. This view is underpinned by dominant approaches to nationalism which argue that nations are phenomena intimately related to the emergence of states. The chapter notes that there are different forms of nationalism, which draw the boundary of the people – the ultimate source of political authority and sovereignty for modern states – in different ways, involving civic identity, ethnicity, language and gender. Yet McEwan and Cetrà argue, a simple equivalence between nation and state is not always present. The state can be both agent of nationalism, fostering national identity, but also the object of nationalism, where subnational groups and entities seek greater recognition for their national identity. Nationalism, the chapter argues, establishes a central source of legitimacy – the people. But who are the people? Different forms of nationalism draw the boundaries of belonging in different ways including civic identity, ethnicity, language and gender.

Mikko Kuisma's chapter on Populism brings together a number of different themes which have featured throughout the book. He notes that, whilst populism is subject to a significant degree of definitional ambiguity, some of its core features are a concern with inequality in the state and concerns around the dominance of elites and business. Populism also, Kuisma argues, seeks to place popular sovereignty, understood as national sovereignty, at the heart of politics, against the power of elites and global capitalism. The chapter argues that rather than being seen as a challenge to the state per se, populism, in either its left or right wing forms, represents a series of fundamental questions about the relationship between people and the state.

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