

On Thinking With and Against the State

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“The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.”¹

For a long time, that concise declaration by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* formed the basis for how many radicals and revolutionaries thought about the nature of political power and the state. Today, in the second decade of the twenty first century, Communist regimes are an increasingly distant memory and the world is more economically and culturally intertwined than it was in 1848. And yet recently we have seen developments such as the legitimization crisis of the European Union and the Brexit that followed, the massive displacement of persons fleeing violence in the Middle East, and, in the U.S. both growing outrage over economic and racial inequality, and what has so far been an unpredictable and volatile Presidential election. These events have challenged and strained currently existing liberal democratic regimes, perhaps to an extent not seen since the late-1960s. Rather than destined to become obsolete, as some thought during the heyday of discussions about “globalization” in the 1990s, today’s key political issues also force us to confront questions about the purpose and significance of organized political power—in other words, of the modern state.

On the American left (broadly defined), the state is occasionally invoked in discussions of political analysis and strategy, as for example in Michael Parenti’s suggestion that “to reform capitalism and or move beyond it, the left needs to place the state front and center in its strategic

considerations.”² In other critical contexts, terms such as the “carceral state” and the “deep state” have been used to describe the growing prominence of judicial, administrative, and penal institutions and their exercise of undemocratic powers.³ Yet despite this general agreement on our need to theoretically grapple with the state’s capacities and limitations, there is little consensus on how a new democratic movement in the U.S. would position itself in relation to it. Recently, the unexpected popularity of Senator Bernie Sanders’ presidential campaign posed one such concrete dilemma, sparking debates between supporters of the Democratic Party seeking to push it to a more progressive agenda and those more enticed by the possibilities of a break with the dual party system.⁴ These reinvigorated debates make it important for those in favor of progressive social change to once again consider how to approach the state: as a bulwark against neoliberalism, a repressive apparatus to be smashed, an institution to be systematically democratized—or perhaps something else entirely?

The lack of a consensus on what the modern state actually is has not been for a lack of effort. Debates about the capacities and functions of the state can be found on the left since the nineteenth century origins of European socialism. During the years of the First International, the relationship of the workers’ movement to the state became one of the points of controversy among anarchists, Lassallean state socialists, parliamentary reformers, and those who eventually became “Marxists.” Since the older Marx never managed to conduct his analysis of the bourgeois state hinted at in the *Grundrisse*, later on it was up to subsequent Marxist movements in such different national contexts as Germany, the United States, and Russia to outline the stance that working class parties should take vis-à-vis existing political institutions. Was the state to be seized by force or infiltrated through the ballot? Should bourgeois institutions be

dismantled or reoriented toward working class aims? Is the state a neutral instrument, equally capable of promoting the interests of any class that occupies the place of political power, or is it by nature a means of bourgeois class domination? By the first decade of the twentieth century, this internal struggle for an adequate definition of the capitalist state was directly tied to questions of concrete political practice. What one thought about the state had almost everything to do with where they situated themselves on the spectrum between revolution and reform.

In the postwar decades, especially during during the 1970s, the academization of Marxism in Europe and the United States led to a growing interest and proliferation of theories of the capitalist state, first in the field of sociology and not long after in political science. In those often-arcane debates, adjectives such as “instrumentalist,” “functionalist,” “derivationist,” “dependent,” and “relatively autonomous” were used to stake out competing positions in an elaborate theoretical enterprise.⁵ But since the exhaustion of these discussions by the mid-1980s, aside from a few lone voices there has not been a concerted attempt to further develop state theory from the left.

Rather than recovering any of those “isms” or attempting to bridge the significant differences between them, the remainder of this essay has a different focus. As an essentially contested political concept, what makes discussing the state difficult is its dual existence as 1) a set of particular, distinct institutions; and 2) as a discursive or ideological representation of their interactions. The mutual evolution of these two dimensions of organized political power is one of the defining qualities of modernity; the formation and emergence of modern administrative and organizational institutions would have been impossible without a corresponding political

language of “the State” by means of which this new authority could be represented.⁶ Therefore, the state is not simply a coercive or administrative power, but equally importantly, an ideological mediator that defines the scope and limits of political practices. And so, in order to get at the heart of the matter, we must also understand the way that discourses *about* the state have been formed and articulated, and the historical changes undergone by these discourses in the modern era.

The disciplinary history of political science in the United States provides an especially useful vantage point for understanding this relationship between the discourse of the state and the emergence of state institutions. Over the course of the existence of American political science as a specialized field of knowledge, the state has been both a necessary and elusive concept. The production of knowledge about the state reveals a series of broader social tensions in the history of the United States from the post-Civil War years through the New Deal, the Cold War era, and into the present. Therefore, the history of the ways it was constructed and articulated contains potential insights and lessons for thinking about the state today.

When political science was first consolidated into a discipline in the 1880s, branching away from its sister fields sociology and political economy, the state was the central concept around which the study of politics was organized. The formation of political science as the study of the state was closely tied to the social conditions of that period. Industrialization, westward expansion, urbanization, and the rise of the labor movement put pressures on the diffuse nineteenth century American “state of courts and parties,” encouraging the expansion of public power that began to take shape during the Progressive Era.⁷ Coalescing in the midst of this social transformation

from out of the intersection of moral philosophy, history, and jurisprudence, the leading scholars and departments of political science were directly involved in what they saw as the process of refining government institutions to meet these challenges, and through that, the fulfilling of the historical development of the American nation.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, large numbers of American students of law and history had trained at German universities. Upon returning to the US, they brought with them the juridical theories of the state formulated across the Atlantic. Of these German-educated scholars, the perhaps the most influential by the turn of the century was John Burgess, who founded the first school of political science at Columbia University in 1880. Burgess was a conservative Hegelian and used the state concept as a metaphor for the metaphysical bonds of community and popular sovereignty that had developed historically among various peoples. Not only were such conceptions of popular sovereignty largely circumscribed to white men, thus excluding women and minorities from the vote, but there was also an unmistakable class component in this new science of politics, in which the constitutional foundations of the Madisonian republic needed to be protected against agitation from those heretofore excluded from the political process.

Burgess's vision of a historical and juridical state existing above the particular institutions of government appealed to a perpetual political community to hold off the challenges posed by social conflicts arising from the changing socioeconomic landscape. While the Social Democratic Party of Germany was seeing mass electoral gains over the course of the 1890s, across the Atlantic the Germanophile Burgess fretted about the "vicious nonsense" of socialism, which "advocated the capture of the government by the masses, through an indiscriminate

suffrage, and its use for the distribution of the wealth of the classes, or for conducting or controlling business enterprises.”⁸ A majority of Burgess’s fellow political scientists shared this sentiment, even if at the same time they encouraged the existence of a vigorous administrative state that could foster a strong national union. By the time the American Political Science Association was founded in 1903, political science in the United States had developed a link to the mission of Progressive reformism, for which a strong and active state was key. In this manner, the goals of political science and national policymaking dovetailed: the existence of the administrative state would provide a *raison d’etre* for a political science built around the study of the state, and the study of the state would, in turn, aid in the state’s development and perpetuation.

Yet as American political science began to take an institutional life of its own with the appearance of numerous academic departments in the first decades of the twentieth century, the concept of the state also became increasingly fragmented and controversial. Considering the existing views of the state as too metaphysical and imprecise, students of politics began to turn away from the historical-evolutionary and juridical perspectives that preoccupied the first generation. Instead, a greater emphasis developed on deconstructing the state into its component parts, through the study of specific governmental institutions such as Congress and the bureaucracy. The years surrounding World War One saw these Progressive attitudes align with the presidency of Woodrow Wilson—a former Princeton political scientist and author of an 1889 textbook called *The State*, which despite its title was less a metaphysical treatise on political community than a comparative examination of existing governmental systems.⁹ Concurrently, the ideological association of the state concept with its so-called “Teutonic” origins and its

apparent foreignness in comparison to the Anglo-American tradition of government affected its declining popularity in the interwar years.

Indicative of this shift was that the concepts of state and government, which were consistently treated as distinct in previous decades, gradually became treated as synonyms. In a nation that still held a strong historical and ideological attachment to local government, and whose federal state developed in a peculiar way compared to other industrialized countries, appeals to a vague state concept obscured the real substance of politics—the functioning of government in its various branches and at various administrative levels, as well as the growing fields of research into public opinion and the group psychology. After World War One, liberal pluralist theories of politics in both England and the U.S. adopted radical positions in defense of the associational rights of groups in civil society against the principles of absolute sovereignty asserted by the state.¹⁰ In a development reminiscent of Marx's metaphor of the *camera obscura* by which ideology inverted social reality, it was not long after the administrative scope of the national American state grew during the New Deal that academic political scientists began coming to a consensus that something called “the State” did not actually exist.

The real withering away of the state did not take place in the Soviet Union of the 1920s, but in the imaginary of American political science during the 1950s. Postwar American social science was dominated by the new paradigm of behavioralism, seeking to advance knowledge about the social order by developing a common set of standards and lines of inquiry across the disciplines. Proponents of the behavioral revolution such as David Easton and Robert Dahl argued for a revival of political science by bracketing away normative considerations and focusing primarily

on the empirically observable aspects of political and social interactions.¹¹ Not only did this approach have little use for the notion of the state, but it also provided a justification of the status quo of Cold War America. One of the central premises of the behavioral revolution was that instead of asserting the presence of a ruling class, or what C. Wright Mills called “the power elite,” the liberal, pluralist, and federal character of the American polity could effectively incorporate the preferences of competing interest groups, producing sociopolitical stability and moderate policy outcomes.¹²

By the mid-1950s, leading figures like Easton were arguing that the state was at best, a misleading concept, declaring that “neither the state nor power is a concept that serves to bring together political research.”¹³ Instead, Easton proposed to speak of the “political system” and the “authoritative allocation of values,” respectively, as analogous concepts. Influenced by the functionalist sociology of Talcott Parsons, he argued that the notion of a political system better captured the reality of social interaction, not only in advanced industrial societies but also in those of the developing world. Identifying the operation of the political system with the successful and authoritative allocation of values among groups and individuals, he painted the picture of an essentially consensus-based and self-correcting status quo that tended toward a social homeostasis. Within this academic culture, the voices of political radicals like Mills were few and far in between. From the postwar years up until the late 1960s, mainstream political science remained concerned with institutions, but attempted to theorize the state out of existence.

It was not until the political crises and the breakdown of the New Deal liberal consensus, exacerbated by the escalation of the Vietnam War, that the behavioral revolution faltered under

the dual weight of its own ambitions and the increasingly apparent detachment from political reality. As antiwar protests, racial tensions, and urban blight began to garner the attention of policymakers and the public, it also appeared increasingly absurd to speak of the United States as a healthy and effectively functioning political system. Delivering the Presidential address to the American Political Science Association in 1969, Easton conceded that “we as political scientists have proved so disappointingly ineffectual in anticipating the world of the 1960s.”¹⁴ As one piece of evidence, he produced the example that in the entire decade between 1958 and 1968, the *American Political Science Review* (the official journal of the APSA) had published only three articles on urban crises, four on racial conflict, one on poverty, two on civil disobedience, and two on violence in the U.S.

Behavioralism and structural-functionalism were clearly incapable of addressing the essential political issues of its time, including the broader wave of structural readjustments in the economies and societies of advanced industrialized democracies during the 1970s. A new generation of critical voices in the tradition of Mills, including those in the newly formed Caucus for a New Political Science, began to register their objections to the methodological obscurantism and political complacency (or worse, collaboration) by which academic political science had helped further the interests of the capitalist state.

The movement that took place during the late 1970s and 1980s to “bring the state back in” led to a renewal of interest in the uses of history and classical social theory for political science.¹⁵ Drawing upon but also critiquing the neo-Marxist theories of the state developed concurrently by figures like Ralph Miliband, Nicos Poulantzas, Goran Therborn, and others, this scholarship

sought to emphasize the autonomous character of the modern state in relation to society.¹⁶ If both behavioralism and Marxism suffered from a methodological blind spot that reduced politics to underlying social processes (whether those originated at the level of class relations or individual motivation was irrelevant), this position emphasized instances where the interests of various agents of the state, such as policymakers, bureaucrats, and the military, predominated.

Although this movement too ultimately waned, by the 2000s a pluralistic consensus had been established among competing paradigms in political science. Rather than fully dominating the mainstream research agenda or being marginalized, the study of the state became merely one out of many increasingly diverse and fragmented topics. Today, the state remains an important component for political science research, yet its diverse usage suggests less a consensus on meaning than a pragmatic approach less concerned with theoretical precision than with investigating the particular question at hand. Many have continued to define the state according to Max Weber's ideal type of the state as "a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory," not least of all because of this definition's parsimony.¹⁷ Today these neo-Weberian postulates can be found alongside a variety of others, and it is possible to encounter widely different analyses of the state, depending on if one is looking at it through a neo-Marxist, discourse-analytic, interpretivist, institutionalist, constitutional, or rational choice lens.

Considering the history given above, it would be reasonable to conclude that how the state has been conceived of in the past is mostly irrelevant to understanding what it actually is and how it functions—two pressing political questions in our time. After all, who will deny the existence of

states today or think that the concept's complex history has any bearing on the operations of the entity itself? It is not as though a re-definition of what is meant by "the state" changes how states operate in the world today in such tasks as the management of national and international economies, the mediation of class conflict, and the setting and enforcement of legal systems.

This line of thinking is intuitively powerful. Yet it also misses something important about the significance of the state concept. The example of how the state became a focal point in American political science and subsequently declined in prominence only to reappear again in the span of a century illustrates how systematized knowledge can reproduce the specific pathologies and tensions of the larger society in which it is grounded. It also suggests that the language of the state itself is often expressed and perpetuated through specialized disciplines and institutions of knowledge production. This changing discourse provides a window into the way political institutions are not merely organized as centers of coercive and structural power, but also as the specific ideological representations of that power.

Since the modern state has been the inescapable ideological presupposition of politics, the revolutionary left long saw the eventual abolition of the state as the necessary condition for the emancipation of society. Per Engels, the overcoming of capitalist social relations would render the state largely unnecessary as a political apparatus, relegating it to the status of a museum antique.¹⁸ Engels' thesis on the withering away of the state reflects the degree to which the state concept has been the political limit of the radical imagination since the nineteenth century. Whether it was to be captured or smashed, tamed or disassembled, since its historical origins in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the state has shaped and conditioned the meaning and

content of politics in modernity, as the polis did during the classical period and the empire for the medieval.

As Phillip Abrams perceptively observed in his essay “Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State,” what linked the diverse views on the state within the Marxist tradition was an implicit agreement that something akin to the state actually existed.¹⁹ A philosophy of praxis such as Marxism had needed the state as an abstract object in order to explain the existence of class societies, but just as importantly, as a concrete object towards which political practice could be directed. And so, the ideological construction of the state as an entity thus becomes the precondition of a successful political struggle: the state must be established in theory so that it may then be transformed in practice. Yet in the process of this construction, the target recedes beyond the limits of political practice at any given point in time. Failed attempts by socialist and communist parties and movements to transform the state, either incrementally or at once, attest to this paradox, in which, rather than shrinking, the gap between the language and the practice of politics grows larger.

Given the multi-faceted character of the state, attempts to either smash or to theorize it out of existence will both be quixotic; while piecemeal reforms are complicated by the relational character of state institutions and their being located at the intersection of subnational and international levels. In the present and near future, a revived Left that orients itself towards state institutions and makes demands on them for a multitude of racial, gender, ecological, political, and economic equalities would face an uphill road. It must direct its politics to the space between the proximity of specific policies to be challenged and institutions to be democratized, and the

distance of that elusive entity called “the state.” It must negotiate between these two poles of a productive tension in a radically incremental (or incrementally radical) manner. Perhaps only then could it be possible to avoid both the short sightedness of neoliberalism with a social democratic face, and the monumental and self-defeating task of “capturing” the state that would be doomed to failure—or perhaps worse, to success.

¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in Robert C. Tucker, ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader* (W.W. Norton, 1978), p. 475

² Michael Parenti “Why the State Matters,” Oct. 30, 2015 (<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/10/developmentalism-neoliberalism-climate-change-hamilton/>)

³ For examples, see the exchange on the carceral state between Marie Gottschalk, Naomi Murakawa, and Amy E. Lerman and Vesla M. Weaver in *Perspectives on Politics* 13:3 (Sep. 2015): 798-814; and Mike Lofgren, “Anatomy of the Deep State” February 21, 2014: <http://billmoyers.com/2014/02/21/anatomy-of-the-deep-state/>

⁴ For example, see the two contrasting posts from February 2016 on *Public Seminar*: Jeffrey C. Isaac’s “The Sanders Campaign and ‘Political Revolution,’” February 16, 2016 (<http://www.publicseminar.org/2016/02/the-sanders-campaign-and-political-revolution/#.V83wUZMrLNA>) and Not An Alternative’s “Occupy the Party: The Sanders Campaign as a Site of Struggle”, February 18, 2016 (<http://www.publicseminar.org/2016/02/occupy-the-party-the-sanders-campaign-as-a-site-of-struggle/#.V83vnpMrLNA>)

⁵ Insightful analyses of these various approaches can be found in Martin Carnoy, *The State and Political Theory* (Princeton University Press, 1984) and Clyde W. Barrow, *Critical Theories of the State* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).

⁶ This characterization especially draws upon Bob Jessop, *State Theory: Putting States in Their Place* (Penn State University Press, 1990), p. 338-369; and Jens Bartelson, *The Critique of the State* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁷ Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920* (Cambridge University Press, 1982)

⁸ John Burgess, “The Ideal of the American Commonwealth,” *Political Science Quarterly* 10:3 (Sep. 1895): 404-425

⁹ Woodrow Wilson, *The State: Elements of Historical and Practical Politics* (D.C. Heath, 1889)

¹⁰ Marc Stears, *Progressives, Pluralists and the Problems of the State: Ideologies of Reform in the United States and Britain, 1909-1926* (Oxford University Press, 2002)

¹¹ See David Easton, *The Political System* (Knopf, 1953); Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (University of Chicago Press, 1956)

¹² C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (Oxford University Press, 2000)

¹³ David Easton, *The Political System* (Knopf, 1953)

¹⁴ Easton, “The New Revolution in Political Science,” *American Political Science Review* 63:4 (Dec. 1969), p. 1051-1061

¹⁵ Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge University Press, 1985)

¹⁶ Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society* (Basic Books, 1969); Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (New Left Books, 1973); Goran Therborn, *What Does the Ruling Class Do When It Rules?* (Verso, 1978)

¹⁷ Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 78

¹⁸ Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (Penguin, 1986), p. 212

¹⁹ Phillip Abrams, "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1:1 (Mar. 1988): 58-89