

## STATE AND SOCIETY: MAPPING THE RELATIONSHIP

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*There is a dialectical relationship between the state and society, and the autonomy of the former is constantly negotiated in the changing contexts. In this essay, authors who make these suggestions have been reviewed, with the objective to understand why the state has got prominence in academic debates again. The essay shows that the Weberian conception of political association is the main theory for the authors under discussion here, and that although the statist theories advance arguments for taking the state seriously, society-centered approaches continue to raise important questions for them.*

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### I

Paul Pierson (1994) has studied the UK and US political systems and assessed the effectiveness of the Thatcher and Reagan administrations in meeting their goal of “dismantling” welfarism in the 1980s. The enormous postwar expansion of government programmes such as income maintenance, health care, and housing, made welfare state an “integral part” of all the advanced industrial democracies, he notes. But when neo-liberalism gained influence in the late twentieth century, the agenda of welfarism suffered. He argues, however, that the political “actors” such as Thatcher and Reagan, both elected representatives of liberal democratic states, could do far less damage than they “wanted.” Both leaders could cut as much they could, given the limitations imposed by the governance structures in both the state. What was responsible for the limited effectiveness of Thatcher and Reagan? The state behaviour studies, writes Pierson, should keep in mind the “goals and incentives of the central political actors” as well as

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“how the institutional rules” along with the “distribution of political resources” shape their decisions (Pierson 1994, 1, 13).

The state does not behave as the “political actors” want them to. Pierson suggests that this “autonomy” can be understood if we consider the historicity of the decisions taken in the past. The past decisions, such as allowing the state “to intervene” and create welfare provisions “constrain” the decision-making of “political actors.” That the state does not always act as the political actors wish, and that the state gets its “autonomy” from the very context in which it operates, is something that the three authors under review in this essay, Skocpol (1985), Mann (1997) and Mitchell (1991), also emphasize upon. The authors explore the conditions and reasons for the “autonomy.” State behaviour should be understood by considering the state as an “actor,” not by looking at political actors only (Skocpol 1985, 3). The entity called “the state” is a “weighty actor,” a “social actor,” as well as a complex of “society shaping institutional structures” which creates “effects in politics” (Skocpol 1985, 6, 27; Mitchell 1991).

My purpose is to show how Skocpol (1985), Mann (1997[1984]) and Mitchell (1991) map what we call “the state.” The “state autonomy” or “capacity” is not “fixed,” but rather constantly negotiated with society, and the two entities are dialectically related. The shifting contexts condition the state autonomy. While Skocpol argues that more research should be done using the “state autonomy” as a variable, Mann explains the power sources of state autonomy. Mitchell, on the other hand, explains why the “boundary problem” between the two entities should be taken seriously. State, thus, makes resurgence as an intervening variable, an actor, and as an object of investigation, or an *institution* that shapes outcomes of interest. In so far as they ground their arguments in examining the state-society “relations,” I will argue, they show a Weberian perception of the state, and the state-society relationship. I will show how these authors argue their case in a similar way and offer my critique subsequently.

## II

What provokes Skocpol (1985) to want to “bring” the state back in? Can the entity called state be commanded to “intervene” or “roll back”? Who decides? Why was the state discarded at all?

Understanding the context in which the arguments for reclaiming the state's autonomy developed would be helpful.

The "society-centered" approaches (Skocpol 1985, 4; Nordlinger 1981), like pluralism, structure-functionalism, and Marxism, were predominant in the mid-twentieth century, especially in the American academia. These approaches regarded the state as "an old-fashioned concept, associated with dry and dusty legal-formalist studies" of constitutional principles. Government received more focus as "an arena," where different economic and social groups competed to "shape" policymaking. The "decisions" showed "allocations of benefits" and distribution of resources among the plurality of competing social groups, who define their own "interests." In this situation, "political behaviour" gets moderated through "broad consensus on the rules of the game" (Nordlinger 1981). This "interest group" model of pluralism is dismissive about "public actors and institutions," viewing them as "cash registers" or "referees," making it difficult to speak of "state autonomy" (Krasner 1984, 227). In the Marxist theories, we see a formulation of "autonomy," that "the state" can act contrary to the wishes of the bourgeoisie for protecting the interests of capitalism. Overall, however, it cannot have preferences of its own. The administrators are rarely credited with much independence in the face of social demands and pressures. "When state and societal preferences diverge," comments Nordlinger, "this society-centered model denies, ignores, or downplays the possibility of the public officials acting on their preferences.... and strenuously denies the possibility of the state translating its preference into authoritative actions when opposed by societal actors who control the weightiest political resources" (Nordlinger 1981,3).

The government's "output" is seen as a "response" toward societal pressures or the societal "inputs" in this understanding of the political system, suggesting that the "government" is not an "independent actor." The government organizations could vary, but what was considered important was its "general functions," common to the "political systems of all societies." In the 1950s, Easton, Almond, and other scholars eliminated the term "state" from their political vocabulary, for they found the word "vague," with a very narrow focus. A "precise meaning of the concept" was "impossible" (Easton 1953). Instead, using the term "political

system" could remove the ambiguity and "pass beyond the experience...of any one culture" (Easton 1953, 319; cf Mitchell 1991). The "idea of a system" made it possible that the political aspect of the society could be analytically separated and analyzed as "a self-contained entity" (Easton 1957, 384; cf Mitchell 1991,80).

Other models of pluralism show concern with how "political actors" behave and consider that their "own interests" motivate their behaviour. Robert Dahl's *Who Governs* suggest this. In this understanding, "the state" is not a legal entity, but rather "a collection of individuals occupying particular roles." The "institutional imperatives and constraints, including political beliefs," are not considered important.

Statist approaches, on the other hand, such the authors being discussed here, regard "institutions and political beliefs" as significant, which constrain the choices of the "political actors." The argument is that the "political actors" can only do as much as is allowed by the "institutional resources and arrangements" of the "political system". The statist would argue this as the reason why Thatcher and Reagan were not as successful in cutting the welfare measures as they wanted to. The emphasis is on regarding the state as "an actor in its own right," as "exogenous variable or intervening variable." The suggestion is that "the state" does not merely reflect "societal characteristic or preferences." And, therefore, the causal analysis should consider societal forces as dependent variable, not the state. So far, the studies have been conducted in a "reductionist" mode. The political and sociological studies, therefore, should "bring the state back in."

### III

Skocpol rejects the "voluntarist" perspective on "the state." She argues that how social revolutions occur or what their "outcome" are cannot be explained by the ideological visions of revolutionary or state leaders (Skocpol 1979). Instead, an "organizational" approach, in which revolutionary collapse and the building of new states are explained by the structural vulnerabilities and potentials of states themselves, is more helpful. She defines "state autonomy" as the capacity to "formulate and pursue goals" independent of "the demands or interests of social groups, classes, or society" (Skocpol 1985, 9). Against the approaches which focus on society

more, major German scholars such as Weber and Hintze argued for the “reality of the state” and how it impacts the “civil society” (Skocpol 1985, 7). For Weber, the states are “compulsory associations” exercising “control over territories and the people within them” and “organizes domination” (Weber 1946, 82). The state may be understood as “the continuous administrative, legal, bureaucratic and coercive systems” which shape the relationship between “civil society” and “public authority” (Stephen 1978, xii; cf Skocpol 1985,7). The state certainly does not become “everything.” Other organizations and agents also pattern social relationships and politics, and the analyst must explore the state’s structure and activities in “relation” to them. The importance of the Weberian understanding is to show that the state is not only an “arena” where various “social groups” compete (Skocpol 1985, 8). In Weber’s formulation, notes Skocpol, the state is not inert or extraneous to the civil society it governs, rather it is active in shaping the “relationships” that are crucial. I will show that this understanding underlies the assumptions of all the three authors I have chosen to review. This comes across in the way they attempt to map the power, capacity, and location of the state.

If state can be seen as “autonomous,” what are the factors which determine its autonomy and capacity? Skocpol views the state in “relationship” with its social contexts. The state is an “organization,” according to her, which may “pursue goals, realizing them more or less effectively given the available resources in relation to social settings” (Skocpol 1985, 28). She also suggests that the state may also be viewed more “macroscopically” as “configurations of organization and action” that “influence the meanings and methods of politics for all groups and classes in society” (Skocpol 1985, 28). She ends her essay with a hope that “a new theoretical understanding of states in relation to social structures” will emerge (Skocpol 1985, 28). At this point, Mann’s and Mitchell’s contributions become significant. In a way, they address the issues raised by Skocpol. I will first discuss Mann (1997), as he directly addresses the question of how state gets it autonomous “power.”

State power, according to Michael Mann, could be disentangled in two different meanings: (a) despotic power and (b) infrastructural power. The “despotic” power refers to the “actions”

taken "without routine, institutionalized negotiation with civil society group"; and the "capacity of the state actually to penetrate civil society, and to implement logistically political decisions throughout the realm" is the state's "infrastructural" power (Mann 1997, 61-62). Mann explains that states have enjoyed low infrastructural power, for the most part in history. With industrialization, capitalist expansion and rise of the nation-states, the Western states have gained the capacity to penetrate the whole of territory over which the state governs, including also the lives of its citizens.

Despotic power has fluctuated, too, with recurrent ages of authoritarian rule followed by weakening of central authority towards forms of a "patrimonial state" or "territorial federal" polities. The states tend to increase their infrastructural powers. The difference between "the state" and "other social powers" is its "territorial centralization," so "the state is, indeed, a place" (Mann 1997, 69). The territorial centralization provides the state with "a potentially independent basis of power," which also explains its "autonomous power." That is, if we combine the factors like "necessity, multiplicity, and territorial-centrality of the state," we can in principle also explain its autonomy. This is how the elite maintains "an independence" from civil society. Its power cannot be reduced to the power of any other major social group "either directly or 'ultimately' or 'in the last instance'" (Mann 1997, 71). Theda Skocpol has attacked the "society-centered" approaches as treating the state "merely as an arena" where groups compete for their interests. Michael Mann, by contrast, asserts that "the state" is certainly "an arena," and he uses this understanding to explain the state's "autonomous power." We can, therefore, treat states as "actors."

The relation "between the state and civil society" is not "fixed," it is rather "dialectical," and there cannot be "a simple antithesis" between these two institutions. The two are continuously, temporarily entwined. The power of dominant classes is boosted because of the "fragmentation of successful, despotic states" more than as a product of civil society forces alone.

History should be understood as a dialectical process of infrastructural power circulating from society to the state, and

backwards, tending toward “concentration” in “the state,” especially in the last two centuries. It is territorial centralization that makes the state establish itself autonomously from alternative social instances. Consequently, this has increased the territoriality of social life, by confining into borders the relationships between social actors. As we note, Mann’s account, too, as it recognizes the centrality of the territory for the state’s autonomous power, is essentially Weberian. I will explain Weber’s theory of the state now and then proceed to examine Mitchell’s account.

#### IV

Weber offers a definition, which is distinct from taking the state’s functions as its constitutive features. Weber uses the term “political association” to refer to “the state,” which is “a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory” (Weber 1946, 78). Territoriality is a characteristic of “the state” while physical force is “the specific *means* peculiar to it.”

Like the historical institutions preceding it, the political association called the state, is “a relation of men dominating men.” This is a relation which is supported by the specific means it has: means of legitimate violence. Critical to the state’s existence is the maintenance of this relationship. The dominated “must obey the authority” claimed by the powers to be. State maintains this through “organized domination” that calls for a “continuous” administration (Weber 1946, 80).

The state, therefore, exists; it not only exists but it also maintains itself as the “sole source” of the “right” to use violence. Politics means striving to “share power” or striving to “influence” the distribution of power, either “among the states” or “among the groups within a state” (Weber 1946, 78).

If the state exists, and we believe it does, where is its location? Is it located in society? Or is it placed above society? Timothy Mitchell recognizes that explaining the “meaning” of the state “remains difficult” (Mitchell 1991, 84). Conceptual definitions compete with each other. A definition of the state always rests upon its relationship with the society, how distinct is it from society, or whether is it distinct from society at all. But it is “difficult to draw” the line between the two. Calling it “an amorphous complex

of agencies with ill-defined boundaries", as Philippe Schmitter does (Schmitter 1985, 33; cf Mitchell 1991, 84), helps *only* insofar as it describes "the nature of the state", not what a state is.

Unlike the "society-centered" approaches, "the statist approach" treats "the state as a distinct entity," which is "opposed to and set apart from a larger entity called society." The assessment is made about how much "independence one object enjoys from the other" (Mitchell 1991, 89). The state boundary is not the "real exterior," rather "it is a line drawn internally, within the network of institutional mechanisms" for maintaining "a certain social and political order," Mitchell argues (Mitchell 1991, 90). Also, "the power to regulate and control" is not "a capacity stored within a state," and the state boundary does not suggest the "limit of the processes of regulation," rather that it is "itself a product of those processes" (Mitchell 1991, 90).

Where does the state boundary begin, and the sphere of society end? For Mitchell, the "boundary" between the two is "not real." The state "appears" to be external to society, because of "structural effect" which is created by the way "disciplinary power" operates through the technique generated by a "meticulous organization of space, movement, sequence, and position." The internal operation of power projects the structural effects outwardly, lending "distinctiveness" to the state, and "the effect is the counterpart of the production of modern individuality" (Mitchell 1991, 92-93). Therefore, the state's "external reality" is a "construct."

The state agency is an abstract effect, which comes from "the apparent boundary between state and society," by which the state comes across "as an actor that intervenes in society." The "statist approaches" show that they "take this reversal for reality," argues Mitchell (Mitchell 1991, 91). According to him, for a proper understanding, we require to move away from the assumption that in order to be "a distinct entity," the entity should be separate from the society. State is nothing but "a structural effect" caused by the production and reproduction of the complex web of power relationships in society. And the "distinction" is being created and recreated by the "processes of regulation." That is, the relation is not fixed, or frozen; the boundary between the two is a "shifting" boundary (Mitchell 1991). That this domain of "relations" creates "the effect of the state as a distinct identity", is a novel perspective



that Mitchell offers. Weber's theory of politics emphasizes that the state must measure up to the world "as it really is in its everyday routine" (Weber 1946, 128). But in Weber's conception, we do not see power as something "dispersed" in society, it is rather located in the state. Power is "the power to dominate." Nevertheless, I would consider Mitchell's account as interpreting Weber's understanding of the "relation" between "the state and civil society."

While Mitchell's theory succeeds in explaining why the state boundary "appears" to be distinct, it denies the state any agency as an actor. State does not "pre-exist" for him. How can it if it is merely an "effect"? To me it appears to be an over-stretched conclusion. Suppose a motorist violates a traffic light, does the state emerge at once? What Mitchell fails to understand is that everyday structures of regulation which creates the "effects" are basically the "instances" of the idea called the state. A traffic law which prescribes some punishment for its violation presupposes the existence of the state. The law or the rules do not "create" the state; the state makes the laws. In effect, the disjuncture, or the ruptures that Mitchell notes are the specific instances of how the state manifests its existence. The state should not be seen as the perfumatory structural effects, it is rather the continuous existence of a perpetual idea. That the cop may choose to fine the deviant motorist is reflective of the "pre-existence" of the state.

## V

The discreditation of the "society-centered" approaches, Skocpol recounts, began as politics unfolded after the World War II. National macroeconomic management became the norm and public social expenditures burgeoned across all the advanced industrial capitalist democracies in the wake of Keynesian recommendations. Birth of the "new nations" after the end of colonialism revealed that they would follow a path of development of their own choosing. In the mid-1970s, the Britain and the US were "unmistakably" becoming hard-pressed in the environment of intense international economic competition (Skocpol 1985, 6). In her view, these are the circumstances which generate the debate on the "autonomy" of the state.

Ironically, when the systems theory and pluralism were the

dominant modes of explanations in the 1950s and 1960s that privileged "society-centered" research, the state was very much dominant in developing countries like India. Centralized planning is the proof for state's autonomous role and functioning in shaping the society in the matters of education, health, economic development. Despite the increasing state intervention through welfare measures, why would the 1950s or 1960s research agenda "abandon" the state? The research was mostly centered on the state in India because the institution of the state was seen with hope. If the state had been indeed "abandoned," it was limited to only the affluent societies. In spite of this, Skocpol does not hesitate to make universalizing claims.

At the time when Skocpol and associates were emphatically arguing for the "bringing the state back in" in the 1980s, they failed to notice that Reagan and Thatcher were arguing for a "roll back." The debate reinforces what Mitchell has accused the statist theorists of doing. The debate treated "state" as a variable, apart from and opposed to the society. This essay shows that the three authors treat the state-society relations as the focal point of their analysis. However, the question "what is the state?" remains unanswered. The studies make persuasive arguments in favour of taking the state as an analytic independent variable, but they do not convince us why we should give up on the questions raised by the "society-centered" approaches. Do the authors reviewed here take our understanding to a new level?

The state, in my opinion, is a multi-headed phenomenon. It cannot be characterized as an object. We do not "see" the state; yet we experience it every day. The state exists; it exists as a perennial idea, and it can be experienced through the offices of decision-making. What makes it distinct is its ability to coerce people to behave the way they should; it does not only "mirror" how they actually behave. The state is not an abstract entity, it exists in an environment. And the state *may* be autonomous but *is not always* autonomous.

A better approach to understand the state-society issue is to look at it through "relational" perspective, not as a boundary problem. State's existence depends on the territorial control of the society it governs. It cannot be treated apart from its society. Historically, we have seen societies that have existed without the

states, but we *cannot* have states existing in isolation from society. Societies may or may not be “*statist societies*”; states always are *societal states*. We cannot abbreviate the state’s experience in forms of general principles and transplant it elsewhere. Colonialism tried to achieve this, but it could not create identical states.

The problem is that the entity called state is understood as a monolithic entity, not as the idea by which the society governs itself. It is pitying that Skocpol whose influential paper looks like a “preamble” to subsequent research did not look into this aspect.

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