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## *Bringing the State Back In*, but did it Ever Leave? And Which State?

**Abstract:** This paper assesses the continuing debate about the role of the State in governance. Although the State has been “brought back in” numerous times, there are continuing changes in the State and in its relationships with society that are important for understanding how contemporary governance functions. Further, there is no single model of the contemporary State but substantial variety, again with implications for governing.

**Keywords:** state, governance, social actors

The State is a fundamental concept in political theory, but it is one which appears to have been forgotten, or at least ignored, in much of contemporary political science. The emphasis on individual behavior, whether that behavior is assumed to be shaped by rational calculation or by social characteristics, has tended to make institutions and especially meta-institutions such as the State less significant in the discipline. That has been especially true for the United States but also has been evident in much of European political science with a stronger history of paying attention to the State. In European political science the emphasis on the role of social actors, through corporatist structures and networks (Schmitter, 1974; Sørensen, Torfing, 2003) tended to make the State less central to understanding governance.

The emphasis on social actors is only one part of the movement away from the State in political theory. The acceptance of methodological individualism as the fundamental logic of political science has tended to reduce the importance of structural forms of explanation in favor of agency. At the extreme the State becomes a rather hollow box in which individual actors pursue their own goals, whether shaped by sociological and psychological factors (behavioralism), or shaped by their pursuit of self-interest (rational choice). States become little more than a collection of “veto points” (Tsebelis, 2002).

The State was also seen to be losing its central position in governance to the international system, and especially the international market. Any number of scholars (see, for example, Strange, 1996) argued that the market had become too powerful for individual states to control, especially in central areas of governance such as economic policy. The ability of firms to move money across borders and the impact of international trade on national economies was argued to limit the capacity of State to act.

The tendency to ignore the State has not gone un-noticed by political scientists, and there have been several attempts to *Bring the State Back In*. The most familiar of these statements was that of Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol (1985). This initial discussion of the topic was motivated by the general shift toward society-centered models of politics, as well as concern with the nature of newly formed states with limited capacities to govern. In both instances there were important questions about the autonomy of the state and its ability to make the legitimate legal decisions required for an effective State.

## Did the State Ever Leave?

The notion of bringing the State back in is premised on the State having left. While that exit may be seen in failed states, or in very weak states, for the majority of States that notion is somewhat hyperbolic. And in political theory the State never really left, although it was certainly less visible in discussions of politics. That said, concepts such as the “political system” may have substituted for the older notion of the State but, leaving aside some of the legal trappings that go with the concept of the State, the same role was being played in comparative political theory.

Even while the State was argued to have left, other aspects of political theory were placing the State in a central position in theory, albeit perhaps without expressly identifying it as the central concept. As well as the general movement away from the domination of societal models in explaining political phenomena, there were some more specific directions involved in bringing the State back into mainstream political theory.<sup>1</sup> One of these emphases in bringing back the State has been the role of war in building States, and maintenance of the warfare state has produced large institutional structures even in countries such as the United States which are usually considered anti-statist.

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<sup>1</sup> For some strands of political theory, e.g. Marxism and neo-Marxism, the state never really left. And for public administration scholars focusing on the organizations within the public sector the State was also very real, even if they perhaps did not discuss their focus as state-centric.

While the warfare state has been one source of emphasis on state building, the welfare state has been another. And just as the warfare state has been a means legitimating the public sector in some countries, the welfare state has performed the same function in others. This is especially true given that in many democratic regimes legitimation is increasingly on the basis of the outputs of the public sector rather than on processes such as voting. Those input mechanisms are still in place but declines in levels of voting and in membership in political parties have shifted the emphasis to the performance of the governing system.

Political development has been yet another of the dimensions of bringing the State back in, and indeed making the State central to the concerns of political science. Among the several dimensions of political development there is one strand of research that focuses heavily on building effective states. Beginning at least with Huntington (1968) the need to create an effective State to channel the demands of the public has been important in the study of political development. Even long after the heyday of political development studies there has been an interest in how to make weak states, and failing states, stronger.

The third dimension of bringing the State back involves the relationship between the public sector and the market, and especially the globalized market. Although some theorists argued that the State had lost its powers to the internationalized market, that claim appears to have been overstated and states have demonstrated substantial capacity to regulate markets and to use their powers to manage, even in the face of financial crisis. The crisis beginning in 2008 was in large part a function of inadequate use of regulatory powers, but with some notable exceptions that lesson has been learned and the State has been brought back into a more powerful position (Kickert, Randma-Liiv, Savi, 2015).

## Which State?

Although the State may never really have left, its role has been reasserted by scholars and also by practitioners. But in most instances these efforts beg of the question of what version of the State is being brought back, or reasserted? The State has a variety of different interpretations, and may mean somewhat different things depending upon which version is being considered as having returned. Even the discussion above of the warfare and the welfare states demonstrates some of the important differences, and there are still more options. And these differences are important not just as analytic categories but also as means of describing what the State is likely to do, and how it legitimates itself.

States are real but they are also constructs (see: Jessop, 1990). This section of the paper will discuss five alternative models of the State and examine their impli-

cations for how states and governments function, and how they relate to citizens. This discussion is based in part on that of Christensen (2003) concerning Norway, but rather than focusing on that one case this discussion will be more comparative, and especially will attempt to discuss the role of the State in less developed political systems. And it also includes ideas from the work of Jacobsson and others about the Swedish State (Jacobsson, Pierre, Sundström, 2015). While these ideas about the State are largely based on the Scandinavian countries, they are also relevant for other advanced democracies, and even less developed political systems.

While these five models are presented as distinct alternatives, they may in reality be intertwined and closely related with one another. Any one governing apparatus may have features of several, or perhaps even all five. Still, these categories are useful for understanding the nature of the governance that is being conducted at any one time.

Also, in this essay I will not be dealing with the State in authoritarian systems, but rather focusing on bringing the State back into essentially democratic regimes. The State in less democratic regimes may have some, or indeed all, of the features mentioned below but will also have few of the constraints associated with contemporary democracies. Fukuyama (2013) argued that political science has spent too much time studying the constraints placed on governments, but the focus for assessing the performance of the State should include constraints as well as powers.

## The Weberian State

The most familiar notion of the State is the centralized Welfare State, sometimes associated with Weber and his conception of rational-legal authority. This model of the State is indeed about the exercise of authority, and may be associated with the “Night-watchman” state in which the State is responsible primarily for the “defining functions” of the public sector (Rose, 1976) such as defense, justice and finance. This version of the State governs primarily through authority and legal rules, and those rules tend to view its members as citizens with rights and entitled to equal treatment under law.

Although I am treating this version of the State as a distinct alternative, it may be the foundation for all other versions of the State, at least in democratic regimes. Underneath all the service orientation of contemporary welfare states there is a legal foundation for State action and some sense of the legitimate authority of the regime. But the crucial point for these differences among versions of the State is how they are legitimated. For the Weberian State legitimation comes primarily through rational-legal means, and the acceptance by citizens of the authority of the State.

The democratic State may be an important variant of this Weberian model in which the authority of the State is derived from the participation of individuals. Although the basic form of governing may be through authority, legitimacy comes from the inputs of citizens when they vote, and when they engage in other forms of political action. That legitimacy then comes into question when traditional modes of participation appear to lose meaning for citizens, as is true in most contemporary democracies.<sup>2</sup>

Do we have to bring this form of the State back in? As already noted, this State probably never really left, and there are strong elements of this version of the State undergirding all the other models to be discussed below. But it might be possible to reassert the primacy of this version of the State. Politicians on the political right have encountered difficulties in attempts to reduce the scope and powers of the State, and returning to such a simple State format may be unreasonable in the face of numerous policy demands, but at a minimum reliance on authority and law to produce action, rather than the other instruments available to government, may reflect some reassertion of this State form.

## The Institutional State

A second version of the State is one based on normative commitments of the population. In this version the State becomes like an institution which is shaped by its norms, myths, symbols and routines (March, Olsen, 1989). Or in Selznick's (1992) terms the institution which is infused with values greater than those necessary for the mechanical achievement of its tasks. In short, in this version of the State legitimation comes through the population believing in the institutions which govern them. The parades on national holidays and displays of the national flag are all manifestations of this version of the State.

While the institutional state has numerous virtues, it may also have important challenges, and to some extent its strengths are its weaknesses. The commitment that individuals may feel toward their State may not be evenly distributed across time or across segments of the population. For example, in the United States the commitment of the population to the State waned during the Vietnam War and has also for many during the Trump administration. In Europe, support for the State has generally been higher but has waxed and waned depending upon leadership and policy choices that have been made.

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<sup>2</sup> Voting continues to decline, even in countries such as those in Scandinavia that have had very high levels of participation. Membership in traditional political parties has been declining even more rapidly (Van Biezen, Mair, Poguntke, 2012).

Variations in commitment on the part of the public when defined by ethnicity, language or other social factors may present a more significant problem for governance. If the State is perceived to be dominated by one such group at the expense of the other(s) then maintaining legitimacy among those who think they are excluded will be very challenging. Ethnic conflicts such as those in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia have been fueled by perceived inequities within the State apparatus.

The legitimation function of the institutional state is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand having a strong value commitment of citizens to the State can make governance extremely efficient and effective. On the other hand, if the State relies on the moral commitment of its members for its legitimacy, and some segments of the population are disaffected and have a different normative structure, then the State may be confronted with opposition and even violence.

## The Corporatist State

I began this essay by noting that some scholars have argued that the emphasis on social actors and corporatism in much of European political science had tended to drive the State out of the picture. But this perspective may seriously undervalue the role of the State in corporatist systems, as well as in other forms of interactive governance. While these governance arrangements do provide legitimate access for social actors into the decision-making processes of government, this should not be taken to mean that the State somehow becomes less important in the process. Indeed, one could argue that the State becomes even more powerful, albeit in a somewhat less apparent manner than would be true in the Weberian state.

While the powers of the State may appear to be reduced by having to bargain with non-State actors in corporatist or network systems, in the long run those powers are increased through the bargaining. In the first place, and especially for network models of governing, the State can set the agenda for bargaining, and may be able to establish the parameters of action. While the social actors do have a capacity for influencing policy they are doing so in arenas that are shaped by the State. And in this bargaining the social actors need the State more than the State needs the social actors. That is, the State always has its legal authority. Or, as Scharpf (2009) argued the delegation to networks is always conducted in “the shadow of hierarchy”, and the State can withdraw its delegations.

By delegating and involving the social actors in making decisions the State also gains compliance and greater ease in implementation. Having participated

in making the decisions the social actors are in part responsible for the decisions and will find it more difficult to oppose them later. For example, one of the virtues of tripartite economic bargaining in corporatist arrangements was that after an agreement was reached the labor unions were expected not to strike. They had their chance at the bargaining table and therefore were expected to accept the decision until the next round of negotiations.

Although the corporatist State has been discussed primarily in reference to advanced democracies, it may also be a useful structure for the developmental State. As Migdal (2001) has pointed out these systems are faced with governing in a situation of: “strong societies and weak states”. To the extent that the political actors in the State are capable of coopting the social actors than some of the advantages of corporatist arrangements discussed above can be obtained and the governance capacity of the State increased.

Consociational politics and elite pacts offer another version of State systems that coopt social actors in order to enhance their governance capacity. In the former, by guaranteeing access and involvement in decision to all groups in divided societies the state performs the same cooptive action as in the corporate model, although it attempts to coopt social rather than economic groups.<sup>3</sup> In all these approaches to the State there are close linkages with society that shape policy and also embed the State in society.

The corporatist state may not be the autonomous State discussed by some State theorists (Mitchell, 1991), and some comparative politics scholars. But neither is it a powerless structure. It at once cedes power to social actors while strengthening itself because of the cooptation of those social actors. Further, the State can legitimate itself through its connections with society. Rather than relying on authority and law to manage the social actors they are brought into some form of partnership with the State that can benefit both.

The interactions between State and society mentioned above are central to contemporary governance (Torfing *et al.*, 2011). Rather than departing, this version of the State has if anything strengthened. This may mean that the institutions usually associated with the State are not autonomous in their decisions, but that is not as revolutionary as is perhaps assumed by some scholars who have had the alarmed discovery of the links that exist between the State and its environment. So, this version of the State did not really leave but has in many ways been strengthened.

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<sup>3</sup> In corporate pluralism, more characteristic of the Scandinavian countries, both forms of involvement of social actors in the process of governance are practiced together. As well as including the major, and not so major, economic actors in discussions over economic policy, this model also involves the full range of organized groups in the society.

## The Supermarket State

The fourth model of the State to be discussed in this essay can be termed the “supermarket state”. This implies a position vis-à-vis society that is substantially less majestic than the Weberian model discussed above. In this view of the State it is primarily a source of benefits for the members of society. In this model the State utilizes its resources to create a panoply of benefits for citizens, and as is true for the supermarket those citizens have some opportunity to make choices about the benefits they consume, but perhaps less choice in the prices (taxes) they pay for those benefits.

The development of the Welfare State in European countries, Latin America and to a lesser extent in the United States and Asia is the obvious manifestation of the supermarket State. Even in the liberal welfare states the public sector is now providing a wide range of benefits for their citizens. These benefits, and the more general capacity of the State to provide benefits and economic growth, are arguably now the principal source of legitimation for the State. Output legitimation (Scharpf, 2009) has replaced input legitimation (voting, etc.) as the means through which governments can justify their existence to their citizens and create the authority needed to govern effectively.

The problem for the welfare state as a source of legitimation is that it has been successful by continuing to provide new and improved benefits for the population, but with demographic changes and slower economic growth it may no longer be able to expand or even to maintain its existing programs. One of the oldest questions in politics is “What have you done for me lately?”, and the managers of welfare states may not be able to provide a very satisfactory answer to that question. The fiscal crisis beginning in 2008 and the continuing demographic change may force changes to the Supermarket State, but it is still a central device for legitimation.

To bring this version of the State back in will involve perhaps not so much a transformation of the State as a transformation of the public and its relationship with the State. While output legitimation has become central to governing, can the public accept a State that is if not indifferent to their social and economic needs, at least more parsimonious in how it addresses those needs. Or can the public accept a State that continues to consume an increasing proportion of the income in society to pay for the goods in the supermarket?

## The Embedded State

The final version of the State to be considered here is the “embedded State” (see: Jacobsson, Pierre, Sundström, 2015). The notion of the embedded state is to some extent a description of perceived loss of capacity of States in the inter-



national environment, as well as to social actors. As noted in the introduction to this paper the “exit” of the State has been assumed to be occurring in response to the powers of society and the powers of the international market. In this view the State is embedded in those aspects of its environment and hence has lost a significant part of its capacity to govern.

While there is little doubt that the contemporary State is indeed embedded in these external structures, but that does not necessarily mean that the State is not important. Scholars such as Bell and Hindmoor (2009; see also: Sørensen, 2004) have argued that States still play the central role in intervening between the international market and individual citizens and firms. Likewise, the State is the means through which the social actors gain the capacity to make policy, whether through influence or through the delegation of public functions. But as Scharpf (2009) argued, that delegation is always conducted in the shadow of hierarchy.

This version of the State combines aspects of the other versions as a means of producing legitimation of the State. On the one hand the embedded State does provide input legitimation, to some extent as does the corporatist State, through the involvement of social actors in decision-making in the public sector. It also has some of the virtues of the Weberian State in that it is the actor in the international environment, and attempts to promote the interests of citizens in that external system. And finally the embedded State also legitimates itself through remaining effective in producing goods and services for citizens.

## The State of the State

This question about the status, and nature, of the State is as important for the real world of governance as it is for political theory. Understanding the role of formal institutions in the public sector provides the principal entry to understanding governance. Although some of the governance literature assumes that government or the State can be ignored in the process of governing, with networks of social actors being more capable and even more democratic (Rhodes, 1996). That view, however, does ignore the central role that the State plays, even when social actors are active and cooperate with their partners in the public sector (Pierre, Peters, 2016).

While the State may never really have left political theory or governance it was certainly ignored by some political theorists. And it was also ignored by some individuals and groups interested in creating governance through less formal means. Especially for the governance aspects of this discussion the question

should not be whether the State is present or not, but rather it should be how is it present and how is it influencing society, as well as being influenced by society. The patterns of interaction, rather than a stark dichotomy, are what explains the continuing role of the State in public governance.

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