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The state

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Introduction

The state is a complex institution that has been studied from diverse entrypoints and standpoints. No single theory could ever exhaust its intricacies. This chapter defines its core features and presents five approaches that provide some theoretical and empirical purchase on its roles in local and regional development. It also advocates studying the state in terms of its central role in meta governance, i.e. in articulating government and governance at different scales and across different social fields. Analyses should also draw on several disciplinary perspectives, consider different kinds of state and political regime, and explore how they are embedded in wider sets of social relations. These suggestions imply that, despite recurrent tendencies to reify the state and treat it as standing outside and above society, the state and its projects cannot be adequately understood apart from their relations to wider sets of social relations.

The state

The state is so taken for granted in everyday life that social forces often discover many of its complexities only when they seek to change it. While such complexities have led some analysts to undertake particular case studies and ignore general questions about statehood, states, or state power, such issues are valid research topics. Five approaches are especially productive: the Weberian account in terms of the territorialization of political power; the Marxist approach to the state as a social relation; critical discourse analysis on the political imaginaries that frame the nature and purposes of government; the Foucauldian approach to technologies of government (or governmentality); and work on governance, multi-level governance, network governance, and meta governance.

Recognizing the complex nature of the state, Max Weber, the German social scientist, addressed it in terms of means rather than ends. He famously defined the modern state as a ‘human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory’ (Weber 1948: 78). Similar definitions from other scholars highlight its formal sovereignty vis-à-vis its own population and other states. Thus viewed, the state’s key features are state territory, a state apparatus, and a state population. This does not mean that modern states exercise power mainly through direct and immediate coercion – this would be a
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sign of crisis or state failure – but rather that coercion is their last resort in enforcing binding decisions. If state power is deemed legitimate, compliance normally follows without such recourse and is often mediated through micro-techniques that seem to have little if anything to do with the state (cf. Bratsis 2006; Miller and Rose 2008).

More generally, building on Weber and like-minded scholars, some theorists regard the essence of the state (both pre-modern and modern) as the territorialization of political authority. This involves the intersection of politically organized coercive and symbolic power, a clearly demarcated core territory, and a resident population on which political decisions are collectively binding. This draws attention to the variable ensemble of technologies and practices that produce, naturalize, and manage territorial space as a bounded container within which political power is wielded to achieve various, more or less consistent, and changing policy objectives. Almost all territorial states have territorial subdivisions with more or less wide-ranging political and administrative powers and some autonomy from the central state apparatus. This provides the framework for cooperation and competition among local and regional authorities as well as their relations to the national territorial state and, directly or indirectly, to trans- and supranational authorities and institutions. The growing importance of the supranational from the 1970s onwards (putting aside previous patterns of historical empire, suzerainty, dependency, colonization, and imperial conquest) casts doubt on the common assumption that states are typically national states or, even more inadequately, nation-states. This assumption is still reflected in attempts to make sense of the European Union, for example, as a rescaled ‘national’ state. In contrast, others ask whether the EU is reviving medieval political patterns (neomedievalism), is a new form of territorial state, or represents an emerging post-sovereign form of authority (with emphasis in this case falling on the open method of coordination that has been adopted in some policy areas). One might also ask whether the rapid expansion of transnational regimes indicates the emergence of global governance or even a world state.

We can supplement the Weberian definition by noting the role of discursive and material practices in constituting the territorial boundaries of states and in redefining the division between the state qua institutional ensemble and other institutional orders and the everyday life in a given society. Noting how the state is related to other institutional orders in society, such as economy, family, religion, sport, art, or ‘civil society’ does not exclude (indeed, it assumes) specifically state-generated and state-mediated processes. The form and dynamic of political struggle is typically relatively autonomous from other sites and forms of struggle and may well create major disjunctions between politics and the organization of other fields of life. Well-known examples include the disjunction between the organization of the real and/or financial economies and the boundaries of different tiers and branches of government, creating potential problems of economic performance and political governance. The so-called relative autonomy of the political is what motivates many interests and forces to conduct struggles addressed to the state and/or to seek to transform the state, its capacities, and the forms of its intervention. From the viewpoint of local and regional (as well as supranational) government and governance, such struggles could turn on the extent and forms of areal differentiation, centre–periphery relations, the scalar division of political responsibilities and rights to raise revenue, and the chance to jump scale to secure political advantage over rivals and adversaries. There are significant cross-national differences in these regards that shape the capacities of local, urban, metropolitan, and regional authorities to enhance economic growth, competitiveness, and effective subnational government. Political practices at these levels are never confined to a given area or scale, of
course, any more than is the case for the conditions for economic performance (cf. Arts et al. 2009; Cox 1998; Jessop 2002).

Organized coercion is just one state capacity among many forms of ‘hard power’ and co-exists with forms of ‘soft power’ rooted in socio-cultural relations. Thus another influential theorist, Antonio Gramsci, defined the state as ‘political society + civil society’; and analysed state power in modern democratic societies as based on ‘hegemony armoured by coercion’. He defined hegemony as the successful mobilization and reproduction of the ‘active consent’ of dominated groups by the ruling class through its political, intellectual, and moral leadership. In turn, for Gramsci, force refers to coercion that aims to bring the mass of the people into conformity and compliance with the requirements of a specific mode of growth. This approach reminds us that the state only exercises power by projecting and realizing state capacities beyond the narrow boundaries of state; and that domination and hegemony can be exercised on either side of any official public–private divide (for example, state support for paramilitary groups like the Italian fascisti or, conversely, state education in relation to intellectual and moral hegemony). It also suggests a continuum of bases of state power ranging from active hegemony through passive revolution (change without popular mobilization) and force-fraud-corruption to an open war on sections of the population. Gramsci was also sensitive to the spatial aspects of state power: he analysed the problems of building national unity due to local and regional economic, political, social, and linguistic differences as well as to uneven development, focusing especially on the ‘Southern Question’, i.e. the challenges created by the ‘backwardness’ of Southern Italy (Gramsci 1971, 1978; cf. Agnew 1995; Jessop 2007).

One way to move beyond the Weberian and Gramscian focus on coercion and hegemony, even allowing for socio-spatial differentiation, is to explore the state in terms of ‘governance + government’ or ‘governance in the shadow of hierarchy’. An influential approach to local and regional development in this regard is that promoted by scholars inspired by Foucault (e.g. Isin 2000). They emphasize the micro-foundations of state power in specific techniques of governmentality, i.e. the distinctive rationalities and disciplinary practices involved in shaping individual conduct and the overall properties of a given population (Miller and Rose 2008). These techniques often cross-cut the public–private divide and involve diverse institutions, professions, and practices. This poses the question of how multiple micro-powers can be combined to produce the semblance of macro-order by bringing individuals into conformity with the requirements of specific modalities of macro-power relations and/or be deployed to manage the effects of fragmentation and exclusion through targeted economic and social policies.

A fourth source of insight into state power comes from ‘critical discourse analysts’ who explore how discourse(s) shape the state and orient action towards it (e.g. Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Scott 1998). The development of broad economic and political visions as well as specific policy paradigms is relevant here. Given the multiplicity of competing visions (at most there is a dominant or hegemonic discourse) that orient the actions of political forces, this reinforces the view of the state as a polyvalent, polycontextual phenomenon. This becomes especially clear when we consider the many scales and sites on which the state is said to operate and highlights once again problems of institutional integration and the distribution of state functions and powers.

These arguments, insights, and questions have been synthesized within the strategic-relational approach to the state developed by Jessop (1990, 2002, 2007). Inspired by Marx, Gramsci, and Poulantzas, Jessop analyses the state as a social relation. This elliptical phrase implies that, whether regarded as a thing (or, better, an institutional ensemble) or as a rational subject (or, better, the repository of
specific political capacities and resources), the state is far from a passive instrument or neutral actor. It is an ensemble of power centres and capacities that offer unequal chances to different forces within and outside the state. A given type of state, a given state form, a given form of regime will be more accessible to some forces than others according to the strategies they adopt to gain or influence state power; and it will be more tractable for some economic or political strategies than others because of its preferred modes of intervention and resources. In turn, the effectiveness of state capacities depends on links to forces and powers that exist and operate beyond the state’s formal boundaries. Moreover, since it is not a subject, the state does not and, indeed, cannot, exercise power. Instead its powers (plural) are activated in specific conjunctures by changing sets of politicians and state officials located in specific parts of the state. This differential impact on political forces’ capacity to pursue their interests depends in part on their goals, strategies and tactics. Political forces will usually consider the prevailing and, perhaps, future balance of forces within and beyond a given state. How far and in what ways state powers (and any associated liabilities or weak points) are actualized depends on the action, reaction, and interaction of specific social forces located in and beyond this complex ensemble. If an overall strategic line is discernible, it is due to strategic coordination enabled by the grid of the state system and the parallel power networks that cross-cut and integrate its formal structures. Such unity is improbable because the state is shot through with contradictions and struggles and its political agents must always take account of (potential) mobilization by a wide range of forces beyond the state, engaged in struggles to transform it, determine its policies, or simply resist it from afar. The strategic-relational approach covers all aspects of social domination, including class, gender, ethnicity, ‘race’, generation, religion, political affiliation, or regional location.

Applying this approach

There are many ways to study states on different scales with this approach. Three major foci are: (1) the distinctive material, social, and spatio-temporal features of the state and its relations to the wider political system and lifeworld; (2) the state’s role in reproducing the economic and extra-economic conditions for capital accumulation; and (3) the relations between the state as a complex organ of government and broader patterns of governance in the wider society.

First, one could analyse six interrelated dimensions of the state’s institutional materiality, discursive features, and spatio-temporal matrices. These are modes of political representation and their articulation; the vertical, horizontal, and transversal articulation of the state as an institutional ensemble and its demarcation from, and relation to, other states; mechanisms and modes of state intervention and their overall articulation; the political projects and demands advanced by different social forces within and beyond the state system; the state projects that seek to impose relative unity on state activities through a distinctive statecraft and to regulate the state’s boundaries as a precondition for such efforts; and the hegemonic projects that seek to reconcile the particular and the universal by linking the state’s purposes into a broader – but always selective – political, intellectual and moral vision of the public interest. One should not explore these dimensions solely at the national level because they also depend on broader areal and scalar grids of political practice.

Second, regarding capital accumulation and/or economic development, one can explore the roles of the state at various scales from the neighbourhood up to the world market or world society in facilitating profitable economic activities by private capital; in securing the overall economic and social reproduction of the labour force as workers and citizens (or subjects); the dominant, nodal, and other scales on which the most
important economic and social policies are made and implemented; and the modes of governance adopted by states to compensate for market failures. We can compare states in all four respects. Thus the Keynesian welfare national state that characterized economic and social policy formation and implementation of Atlantic Fordism can be contrasted with the tendentially emerging Schumpeterian welfare post-national regime in the after-Fordist period. The third term in this contrast refers explicitly to the shift from the dominance of the national scale in economic and social policy-making to a more complex scalar division in this regard. This is reflected in the increased importance of local and regional government and governance arrangements as well as the expansion of trans- and supranational regimes (for further discussion, see Jessop 2002).

Third, governance refers to mechanisms and strategies of coordination in the face of complex reciprocal interdependence among operationally autonomous actors, organizations, and functional systems. Four main forms exist: markets, hierarchies, networks, and solidarity; states have a major role in modulating them and ordering them in time-space (see below).

Exploring these themes highlights the role of strategic concepts in analysing state apparatuses and state power. Given social contradictions and political struggles as well as internal conflicts and rivalries among its diverse tiers and branches, the state’s capacity to act as a unified political force – insofar as it does – is related to political strategies. State managers (politicians and career officials) are key players here but cannot (or should not) ignore the wider balance of forces. Relevant strategic concepts for analysing states in capitalist societies include state-sponsored accumulation strategies oriented to economic development, state projects oriented to state-building and securing its institutional unity, and hegemonic visions of the nature and purposes of the state for the wider society. These should be related initially to specific economic, political, and social imaginaries and then to the deeper structure and logics of a given social formation and its insertion into the world market, inter-state system, and world society. Such strategies, projects, and visions are most likely to succeed where they address the major structural constraints associated with the dominant institutional orders and the prevailing balance of forces as well as the conjunctural opportunities that could be opened by new alliances, strategies, spatio-temporal horizons of action, and so on. A dialectics of path-dependency and path-shaping operates in these regards. This account can be applied to specific political periods, stages, or conjunctures by examining four topics.

First, what, if any, is the dominant Vergezellschaftungsprinzip (or principle of societalization) and how is it related to state formation and transformation? Among the competing principles are marketization, internal or external security, environmental stewardship, citizenship, the rule of law, nationalism, ethnicity, and theocracy. Any of these (or others) could (and have) become dominant, at least temporarily. Thus a state could operate mainly as a capitalist state, military power, theocratic regime, representative democratic regime answerable to civil society, apartheid state, ethico-political state, and so on (cf. Mann 1986). It follows that capital accumulation is not always the best entrypoint for studying the complexities of the social world even though one might later ask whether states that seem to prioritize, say, national security and nation-building actually pursue policies that favour capital (e.g. East Asian developmental states). Different crystallizations of state power will obviously affect capacities for local and regional as well as national development (e.g. South Africa during and after apartheid, Eastern and Central Europe before, during, and after Soviet domination). Other effects follow from modes of insertion into the world market (e.g. rentier oil states like the United Arab Emirates, small open economies based on a rich ecology of
industrial and post-industrial regional clusters and strong local and regional authorities like Switzerland, or low-tech, low-wage exporting economies like Cambodia. Both types of effect illustrate the importance of the embedding (or not) of government and governance in wider sets of social relations.

Second, what are the distinctive patterns of ‘structurally inscribed strategic selectivities’ of a given state considered as a complex institutional ensemble? Casual observation as well as theoretical and empirical study shows that, despite the formal equivalence among the member states of the United Nations, not all states are equally capable of exercising power internally and/or internationally. This depends on their specific state capacities and powers (in the plural) and their differential vulnerabilities to the activation of counter-powers by other social forces within and beyond the state. States have different problems at home and abroad; different histories; and different capacities to address these problems and reorganize themselves in response. Moreover, in international as well as domestic matters, some are more powerful than others. Even the more powerful states still face external pressures from other states, power centres, and the logic of the world market as well as from the internal impact of their own policies and resulting resistance. Recent US history, financially, economically, militarily, and geo-politically, illustrates this truism and, in the present context, attempts by the federal Administration to displace some costs of decline onto local authorities and states are reflected in fiscal crisis and overburdened government and governance arrangements. A counter-example is the capacity for innovation shown by local and state governments in response to climate change.

Third, how can one describe and explain the historical and substantive organization and configuration of political forces in specific conjunctures and their strategies and tactics, including their capacity to respond to the strategic selectivities inscribed in the state apparatus as a whole? This raises interesting issues about the extent, pattern, and ‘policing’ of the formal, institutional separation between the state apparatus(es) and other institutional orders; and about the degree of interpersonal or organizational overlap among them. It also raises questions about the changing scales of the state and politics. While the national scale tended to dominate in post-war states in such varied regimes as Atlantic Fordism, import-substitution industrialization, export-led growth, or state socialism, globalization allegedly tends to weaken national states as well as national economies and societies (cf. Collinge (1996) on the ‘relativization of scale’). This has enabled the resurgence of local and regional states beneath the national state and prompted the growth of trans- and supranational forms of power. The relative strengths and weaknesses of these scales of political organization and their implications for local and regional development can be studied in terms of the above-mentioned six dimensions, especially inter-scalar articulation and scale jumping. The weakening of national states need not entail that other scales of political organization gain power. This would depend on the adequacy of particular forms of representation, intervention, and internal and external articulation of state apparatuses and the tasks that are set by accumulation strategies, state projects, and hegemonic visions. This raises important questions about the relation between government and governance.

A fourth step leads to the interaction of the relevant political forces on the asymmetrical terrain of the state system and/or at a distance therefrom as they pursue immediate goals, seek to alter the balance of forces and/or the overall configuration of state powers and selectivities.

Bringing governance into the picture

The current fascination with the nature and dynamic of governance at all levels from the
local to the global is linked to disillusion with the market and state as coordination mechanisms. Governance is an ambiguous term that can refer to various modes of coordinating social relations marked by complex reciprocal interdependence. Four modes are widely discussed: ex-post coordination based on agents’ formally rational pursuit of self-interest (anarchic market exchange); ex-ante imperative coordination of the pursuit of collective goals set from above by relevant authorities (hierarchical command); continuing self-organization based on networks, negotiation, and deliberation to redefine objectives in the light of changing circumstances (heterarchic coordination); and reliance on unconditional commitment to communities of different kinds and scope (coordination via trust and solidarity). Self-organization based on networks is generally regarded as having expanded at the cost of markets and hierarchies. This is supposedly related to its suitability for guiding complex systems that are resistant to top-down internal and/or external command but cannot be left reliably to the market’s invisible hand. Many examples exist at local and regional level insofar as problems of economic performance, political legitimacy, and social cohesion (or exclusion) are seen to have specific local and regional features and, by virtue of these complexities, to require ‘joined up’ (multi-stakeholder) thinking and policies. Less research has been undertaken on solidarity even though it is well suited to governing local problems and is significant in new forms of community participation at local and regional level. This may be because it is harder to roll out and entrench on a national or supranational basis across the full range of policy fields.

States are not confined to hierarchical command but directly employ all four forms of governance in different ways. While states differ in how they combine these mechanisms, their relative weight seems to have shifted in the last 30 years from top-down command towards networked governance in response to market and state failure, especially where cooperation must cross territorial borders (e.g. in the European Union or in international regimes). Based on negotiation and networks, governance in this sense operates on different scales of organization ranging from localized networks of power and decision-making through national and regional public–private partnerships to the expansion of international and supranational regimes. While the expansion of governance is often assumed to imply a diminution in state capacities, it could enhance the state’s power to secure its interests and, indeed, provide it with a new (or expanded) role in meta-governance, i.e. the rebalancing of different forms of governance. This is certainly how its role is conceived in local and regional development, with its turn to governance and governmentality in the shadow of national (or, for the EU, supranational) government supervision and oversight. Indeed, as economic competitiveness becomes a major and comprehensive goal, states (on whatever scale) get more involved in redefining relations between the economic and extra-economic, steering the (re-)commodification of social relations, and coping with the repercussions of the growing dominance of economic logic in the wider society. However, while the micro-social conditions for economic competitiveness may sometimes be better handled now at subnational or cross-border levels, large national states may be better equipped to deal with territorial integration, social cohesion, and social exclusion because of their greater fisco-financial powers and redistributive capacities.

Important differences remain between government and governance regarding modes of economic and social intervention. First, while the sovereign state is essentially a political unit that governs but is not itself governed, self-organization provides the essence of governance. Second, while the sovereign state mainly governs activities on its own territorial domain and defends its territorial integrity against other states and intrusive
forces, governance seeks to manage functional interdependencies, whatever their (often variable) territorial scope. These differences explain the growing interest in multi-level governance insofar as it can operate across scales and coordinate state and non-state actors around particular functional problems with a variable territorial geometry. Some theorists emphasize the vertical dimension of coordination (multi-level governance); others focus on the horizontal dimension (network governance). In both cases the state is accorded a continuing role in the organization of reflexive self-organization among multiple stakeholders across several scales of state territorial organization and, indeed, in essentially extra-territorial contexts. But this role is that of primus inter pares in a complex, heterogeneous, and multi-level network rather than as the sovereign authority in a single hierarchical command structure. Thus formal sovereignty is better seen as a series of symbolic and material state capacities than as an overarching, dominant resource. Other stakeholders contribute other symbolic or material resources (e.g. private money, legitimacy, information, expertise, organizational capacities, or power of numbers) to be combined with states’ sovereign and other capacities to advance collectively agreed aims and objectives. Thus states’ involvement in multi-level governance becomes less hierarchical, less centralized, and less directive and, compared to the clear hierarchy of territorial powers theoretically associated with sovereign states, it typically involves tangled hierarchies and complex interdependence.

If markets and states fail, so does governance. One response to this is the increased attempts by states (especially but not exclusively at the national territorial level) to manage the mix and operation of the four main modes of governance in the light of emerging problems, the mutual interactions of their different forms and effects, and the overall balance of forces. This is expected to improve the performance of each mode of governance and, through judicious re-mixing and recalibration of markets, hierarchy, networks, and solidarity, to achieve the best possible outcomes from the viewpoint of those engaged in metagovernance. In this sense it also means the organization of the conditions of governance in terms of their structurally inscribed strategic selectivity, i.e. in terms of their asymmetrical privileging of some outcomes over others.

Governments play a major and growing role in all aspects of metagovernance: they get involved in redesigning markets, in constitutional change and the juridical re-regulation of organizational forms and objectives, in organizing the conditions for self-organization, and, most importantly, in collaboration. They provide the ground rules for governance and the regulatory order in and through which governance partners can pursue their aims; ensure the compatibility or coherence of different governance mechanisms and regimes; act as the primary organizer of the dialogue among policy communities; deploy a relative monopoly of organizational intelligence and information in order to shape cognitive expectations; serve as a ‘court of appeal’ for disputes arising within and over governance; seek to rebalance power differentials by strengthening weaker forces or systems in the interests of system integration and/or social cohesion; try to modify the self-understanding of identities, strategic capacities, and interests of individual and collective actors in different strategic contexts and hence alter their implications for preferred strategies and tactics; facilitate collective learning about functional linkages and material interdependencies among different sites and spheres of action; and assume political responsibility in the event of governance failure. In this last respect, another motive for metagovernance is to guide the effects of governance arrangements on political stability and social cohesion (or overall coordination) of different governance regimes and mechanisms (Jessop (2002) on national states;
Zeitlin and Trubek (2003) on Europe; Torfing and Sørensen (2007) on democratic network governance; Slaughter (2004) on the world order. Meta-governance also serves to modify the strategic selectivity of the state and shift the balance of forces in favour of one set of forces or another. Jumping scale is one aspect of this. This emerging role means that networking, negotiation, noise reduction, and negative as well as positive coordination occur ‘in the shadow of hierarchy’ (Scharpf 1994: 40). Unfortunately, since every practice is prone to failure, metagovernance is also likely to fail. This implies that there is no Archimedean point from which governance or metagovernance can be guaranteed success.

Concluding remarks

This chapter has explored different dimensions of statehood, the state apparatus, and state power as well as broader issues of governance and metagovernance. It has used occasional references to the local and regional aspects of these complex phenomena but it has proved impossible to explore these aspects in detail because of the priority of setting out the broader theoretical framework. If readers have found the latter interesting, they must now face the challenge of applying it in these fields.

References


Further reading

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Applying the approach

Bringing governance in