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Bourdieu's Theory of the State

A Critical Introduction

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the state is sidestepped'.¹⁶ Although he disagrees with this restricted form of functionalism, this does not mean Bourdieu eschews a view of the state as fulfilling some of the functions that Marxists ascribe to it, such as the production of consent. However, the question of whether the state has autonomy pursued by Miliband and Poulantzas, for example, is deemed a false one, this is rather an empirical question: 'instead of asking whether the state is dependent or independent, you examine the historical genesis of a policy, how this happened, how a regulation, decision or a measure was arrived at, etc. You then discover right away that the academic *Streit* [dispute] between dependence and independence has no meaning, that it is impossible to give a response that is valid for all circumstances'.¹⁷ As we shall see, Bourdieu intends to by-pass this dilemma, as well as the Weberian view of the absolute autonomy of the state, with his view of the state as a bureaucratic field, which like all fields is semi-autonomous with its own specific logic, state capital and normative dimension.

In addition, although Marxists allocate a prominent role to ideology for maintaining the social order, and reproducing the *status quo*, this, for Bourdieu, either presupposes a Cartesian focus on individuals' and their consciousness¹⁸ or depends on a base superstructure model where the ideological superstructure is determined by an economic base. Such a view needs to be rejected, or at least reversed so that the symbolic realm predominates.¹⁹

WEBER'S THEORY OF THE STATE

Weber's discussion of the state is in some ways more systematic and developed than Marx's, yet it nevertheless remains incomplete and inconsistent. Drawing heavily on the *Staatstheorie* of Jellinek, Treitschke, Gottle and

¹⁶ Bourdieu, *On the State*, p. 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹⁸ Bourdieu, Pierre and Eagleton, Terry. 'Doxa and the Common Life (In Conversation Pierre Bourdieu and Terry Eagleton)' *New Left Review*. 191. 1992, p. 113).

¹⁹ Bourdieu writes: 'forms of domination, which a certain philosophical tradition calls symbolic, are so fundamental that I find myself wondering whether a social order could function, even in its economic foundations, without these forms of domination. In other words the old model of infrastructure and superstructure . . . must be rejected, or, if you insist on keeping it, must at least be turned upside down' Bourdieu, *On the State*, p. 161.

Rathenau, the state emphatically occupies a more central place in his thought than that of Marx. Yet, like Marx, in his early writings at least, the material backdrop is the Prussian state, though in this instance interpreted through Weber's distinctive liberal-nationalist worldview.

Rather than talking about the state *per se*, Weber discusses many different forms of state – a 'robber state', a 'welfare state', a 'constitutional state', a 'culture state' and even a 'patrimonial state'.²⁰ There are also subsequent changes of emphasis and criteria delimiting the state in his writings – from emphasising its monopoly of physical force, rulership and legitimacy, to the state as a machine following a process of occidental rationalisation, to the state as a producer of value ideas, a legal order or rational bureaucratic enterprise.²¹ Weber therefore not only describes the state as a locus of physical force but also its political, institutional and organisational nature, encompassing legitimation, administrative staff and social order, in addition to seeing it as the 'most constitutive element in all cultural life'.²² Given this plethora of functions and activities,²³ it is difficult for Weber to provide a clear-cut definition of the state, since there are few activities that the state has not been involved in. Nevertheless, what remains consistent in his discussions of the state is that it is primarily a relationship of force and rule of material and ideal interests.²⁴ Power (*Macht*) – the ability to impose one's will despite opposition from others and to use one's organisational might to control the action of others – and

²⁰ Weber, Max. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. 2nd ed. Edited by Guenther Roth. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978. Volume II, p. 902, 106.

²¹ Anter, Andreas. *Max Weber's Theory of the State: Origins, Structure, Significance*. London: Palgrave, MacMillan, 2014.

²² Weber, Max 'The objectivity of knowledge in social science and social policy' in Sam Whimster (ed.) *The Essential Weber*. London: Routledge, p. 371.

²³ M. Weber, *Economy and Society*, p. 54. In his lecture on 'Politics as a vocation' he adds: 'There is hardly a task which has not been undertaken by some political association at some time or other, but equally there is no task of which it could be said that it is always, far less *exclusively*, the preserve of those associations which are defined as political (in today's language: states) or which were the historical predecessors of the modern state'. Weber, Max. 1919 'Politics as a vocation' in *Max Weber: Political Writings*. Edited by Peter Lassman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 310.

²⁴ Anter, *Max Weber's Theory of the State*, p. 46.

Herrschaft combine so that states are intrinsically connected with domination. For Weber, these historically shifting forms of domination tend to persist, structurally crystallising around the economic, cultural and political dimensions of the social world. Hierarchical forms of social stratification are expressed in the interdependent conflicts of class, status and party. The manner in which states have acquired obedience thereby constitutes a central concern in his writings.

The multiplicity and changing nature of the ends of the state implies that the state can only be defined as a concept in terms of its means, eschewing a systematic outline of its aims and ends other than those broadly political and cultural, and tied to the maintenance of social order. These means primarily entail violence employed within a territory:

In the last analysis the modern state can only be defined sociologically in terms of a specific means (*Mittel*) which is peculiar to the state, as it is to all other political associations, namely physical violence (*Gewaltsamkeit*). "Every state is founded on force (*Gewalt*)", as Trotsky once said at Brest-Litovsk . . . we have to say that a state is that human community which (successfully) lays claim to the monopoly of legitimate physical violence within a certain territory.²⁵

This is an *ideal type* definition that involves distilling what states share in common. Although violence and force is not the only means employed by the state, it is the means *specific* to the state and it alone possessed the *right* or claimed the *legitimacy* to use physical violence. As he notes in another definition given in *Economy and Society*: 'the claim of the modern state to monopolize the use of force is as essential to it as its character of compulsory jurisdiction and of continuous operation'.²⁶ Such a monopoly remained absent during the Middle Ages. Monopolisation of force entailed the development of sovereignty, as two sides of the same coin.²⁷ In parallel with the development of capitalist enterprise via the expropriation of independent producers, the modern state is 'set in motion

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 310–311.

²⁶ Weber, *Economy and Society*, p. 56.

²⁷ As Anter argues, Weber: 'interprets and assesses the emergence of the modern state as a process of centralization, monopolization and statalisation, of ordering functions that had hitherto been exercised by decentralized instances' Anter, *Weber's Theory of the State*, p. 16.

everywhere by a decision of the prince to dispossess the independent “private” bearers of administrative power who exist alongside him’.²⁸ It is by dispossessing those who formerly owned the means of administration and means for war – ‘the estates’ – that the modern state comes into existence: ‘thus in today’s “state” (and this is fundamental to the concept), the separation of the material means of administration from the administrative staff, the officials and the employees of the administration, has been rigorously enforced’.²⁹ Later, the prince is replaced by party leaders so that there occurs an expropriation of the political expropriator in which party leaders, through usurpation or election, gain command of the political administration and derive their legitimacy ‘from the will of the ruled’.

In order to carry out organised rule, the state requires an administrative apparatus and administrative staff, and the material means of administration. Hence, in addition to force and rule, the modern state is able to claim a monopoly of legitimate violence with the aid of a regularised administrative staff, as well as a paid army, over a delimited territorial area.

This allows Weber to give a compound definition of the state:

the modern state is an institutional association of rule (*Herrschaftsverband*) which has successfully established the monopoly of physical violence as a means of rule within a territory, for which purpose it unites in the hands of its leaders the material means of operation, having expropriated all those functionaries of “estates” who previously had command over these things in their own right, and has put itself, in the person of its highest embodiment, in their place.³⁰

Within a process of political expropriation led by monarchs, there emerged in the West, professional full-time functionaries who, as either prebendaries (bureaucrats provided a living) or salaried officials, singularly and exclusively served the prince within the context of their political struggles within dynastic political formations. This provided them both a material living, but more importantly, also gave them ‘an ideal content for their

²⁸ Weber, *Politics as a vocation*, p. 315.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

own lives',³¹ an inner meaning and purpose and devotion so that they lived not so much *from* politics but, *for* politics.

In a context where princes were first and foremost knights who fought rather than specialists in rule, and where the refinement of legal processes necessitated the work of trained lawyers, specialist functionaries became increasingly demanded. In these areas, specialised officialdom became the norm in the more advanced states in the West by the 16th century. The recruitment of professional officials by princes took place in a context of power struggles with estates in which the prince drew upon politically usable but unstable strata not belonging to the estates, including: a celibate literate clergy, who 'stood outside the machinations of normal political and economic interests',³² men of letters with a humanist education; courtly nobility; and jurists with a university training. As Weber notes in relation to the latter: 'There is no clearer evidence of the powerful long-term effects of Roman law, as transformed by the late Roman bureaucratic state, than the fact that trained jurists were the main bearers everywhere of the revolutionary transformation of the conduct and the organization (*Betrieb*) of politics, in the sense of developing it in the direction of the rational state'.³³ The professions to which members of the French assembly belonged contained few bourgeois entrepreneurs or proletarians but masses of jurists. The modern state advocate and modern democracy therefore 'belong together'. In terms of their 'true calling', officials, unlike political leaders do not engage in politics or fight, but impartially administer. This process has led to the growth of a modern officialdom: a body of technically qualified, specialised, intellectual workers who had undergone long years of training and preparation for their role and who embodied a sense of honour prioritizing integrity.

States are for Weber, relationships of rule (*Herrschaft*) with one group of human beings ruling over another, dominant and dominated. For Weber, domination 'as the probability that certain specific commands (or all commands) will be obeyed by a given group of persons' also entails that 'every genuine form of domination implies a minimum of voluntary

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, p. 327.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 328.

compliance, that is, an *interest* (based on ulterior motives or genuine acceptance) in obedience'.³⁴ In such a context: 'For the state to remain in existence, those who are ruled must *submit* to the authority claimed by whoever rules at any given time'.³⁵ Three grounds underpin this submission to authority through legitimation: 'traditional rule' exercised by the patriarch or prince of old, drawing on the authority of the past or of custom; 'charismatic rule' based on the 'the gift of grace', which refers to devotion, belief and trust in the exceptional leadership qualities and charisma of an individual – a prophet, a chosen war-lord or a great demagogue; and 'legal rule' through belief in the validity of statutes and juridical 'competence' deriving from rational rules. This is the rule exercised by the bureaucracy as the 'modern servant of the state'.³⁶ Individuals submit to the state not only because of fears of revenge from magical or real powers – but also of hopes – rewards in this life or the next, which dispose individuals to obey rulers.

Two additional features of Weber's theory of the state which are often overlooked need to be mentioned. First, Weber had defined the secular power of the state's monopoly of force in relation to the 'hierocratic' spiritual domination and monopoly of the church, 'which enforces its order through psychic coercion by distributing or denying religious benefits ("hierocratic coercion"). The monopolization of spiritual salvation and the role of religion are highly significant in terms of complementing the monopolization of physical force'.³⁷ Second, the three 'internal' forms of legitimacy and their corresponding organisational forms of domination are supplemented with a discussion of geopolitics, imperialism and nationalism. For Weber, a state's position of power prestige – based on nationalism and imperialism – in the geopolitical context is important for securing legitimacy within the state. As Collins notes: 'The legitimacy of state rulers and the state's tendency toward imperialist expansion are reciprocally related. A theory of imperialism is an integral part of a theory

³⁴ Weber, *Economy and Society*, p. 212.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

³⁶ These constitute three ideal types of rule rarely found as pure forms in reality but, rather in their admixture.

³⁷ See Turner, Bryan. *Religion and Modern Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2011.

of domestic legitimacy and domestic political domination and vice versa'.³⁸ The groups who fight within the state for this power and legitimacy are differentiated according to class, status and party.

Many modern writers including Mann,³⁹ Poggi,⁴⁰ Skocpol⁴¹ and Tilly⁴² have drawn sparingly upon Weber's theory of the state as an organisational form. Here administrative, legal, extractive and coercive forms constitute core features of the state that operate in transnational contexts. Skocpol defines the state as 'a set of administrative, policing and military organisations headed and more or less well coordinated by an executive authority'.⁴³ This is 'an autonomous structure – a structure with a logic and interests of its own'. Mann refers to his own approach as 'Institutional statism'.⁴⁴ Despite the diversity of their viewpoints and theoretical differences, these writers have been dubbed 'organizational materialists'.⁴⁵ A fundamental thesis deriving from their work is that when pursuing political objectives, state managers are self-interested maximisers whose main interests is to enhance their own institutional power, prestige and wealth. Thus, 'organizational realists view states not only as decision-making organizations but also as autonomous

³⁸ Collins, Randall. *Weberian Sociological Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 146–147.

³⁹ Michael, Mann. *The Sources of Social Power: Volume 1, A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760: V. 1*. 1st ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986; Mann, Michael. *The Sources of Social Power: Volume 2, the Rise of Classes and Nation-States, 1760–1914*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

⁴⁰ Poggi, Gianfranco. *The State, its Nature, Development and Prospects*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.

⁴¹ Skocpol, Theda. *States and Social Revolutions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979; Evans, Peter, Dieter Rueschemeyer, Theda Skocpol. *Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

⁴² Tilly, Charles. *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975; Tilly, Charles. *Coercion, Capital and European States, 990–1990*. Blackwell: Oxford, 1990.

⁴³ Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, p. 27.

⁴⁴ Mann, *Social Sources Vol II*, p. 53.

⁴⁵ Barrow, Clyde. W. *Critical Theories of the State: Marxist, Post Marxist and Postmodernist*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993.

organizational actors that must be considered real historical subjects in relation to social classes'.⁴⁶

According to Bourdieu, Weber retains a 'physicalist' theory of the state. By contrast to 'physicalist' approaches that correlate domination largely to material or military forces, including the army or police force, Bourdieu – paradoxically drawing on Weber's other writings on domination and legitimation – argues that no power can be exercised only as naked power,⁴⁷ Physicalist theories lack an explanation of how the social order is constituted in the first place, why the dominated submit so easily to their domination and overlook the fact that systems of domination based solely on force are fragile and easy to overthrow. Instead, symbolic forms need to be recognised for the central role that they play in state domination. This provides the basis for Bourdieu's definition of the state as a 'monopoly of legitimate physical and symbolic violence',⁴⁸ which he believes constitutes an essential corrective to Weber's restricted understanding. This definition is not proposed merely as a supplement to Weber's: rather, Bourdieu believes that his definition of the state underlies or furnishes the condition of possibility for Weber's focus on physical force. In addition to this truncated definition of the state Weber also fails to address in any satisfactory manner who possesses the monopoly of the monopoly of physical (and symbolic) violence and what interests it serves.⁴⁹

DURKHEIM ON THE STATE

Writing in the aftermath and within the legacy of the French Revolution and the immediate political context of German victory in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871 as well as in an intellectual context where French positivist philosophy of Saint-Simon and Comte is dominant, Durkheim, in his theory of the state, attempts to confront a number of political, social and ideological problems facing France. This includes the social and class conflicts between a republican tradition – for which he is an

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁴⁷ 'Domination, even when based on naked force, that of arms or money, always has a symbolic dimension'. Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, p. 172.

⁴⁸ Bourdieu, *Rethinking the State*, p. 3.

⁴⁹ Bourdieu, *On the State*, p. 125.