

Chapter 5

The State

‘The Purpose of the State is always the same: to limit the individual, to tame him, to subordinate him, to subjugate him.’

Max Stirner *The Ego and His Own* (1845)

What is the State?

- The term ‘state’ has been used to refer to a bewildering range of things: a collection of institutions, a territorial unit, a philosophical idea, an instrument of coercion, or oppression, and so on.
- This confusion stems, in part, from the fact that the state had been understood in three very different ways, from an idealist perspective, a functionalist perspective and an organisational perspective.
- The *idealist* approach to the state: Hegel conceives of the state as an ethical community underpinned by mutual sympathy– ‘universal altruism’.

- *Functionalist* approaches to the state focus on the role or purpose of state institutions. The central function of the state is invariably seen as the maintenance of social order, the state being defined as that set of institutions that uphold order and deliver social stability.
- The *organisational* view defines the state as the apparatus of government in its broadest sense: that is, as that set of institutions that are recognisably ‘public’ in that they are responsible for the collective organisation social existence and are funded at the public’s expense.

Five key features of the state

- The state is sovereign.
- State institutions are recognisably ‘public’, in contrast to the ‘private’ institutions of civil society.
- The state is an exercise in legitimation.
- The state is an instrument of domination.
- The state is a territorial association.

The principle difference between government and the state are as follows:

- The state is more extensive than government.
- The state is a continuing, even permanent, entity. Government is temporary.
- Government is the means through which the authority of the state is brought into operation.
- The state exercises impersonal authority.
- The state, in theory at least, represents the permanent interests of society: that is, the common good or general will.

Rival theories of the state

Four contrasting theories of the state can be identified as follows:

- The pluralist state
- The capitalist state
- The leviathan state
- The patriarchal state

The Pluralist state

- The pluralist theory of the state has a very clear liberal lineage. It stems from the belief that the state acts as an ‘umpire’ or ‘referee’ in society.
- As a theory of the state, pluralism holds that the state is neutral insofar as it is susceptible to the influence of various groups and interests and all social class. The state is not biased in favour of any particular interest or group, and it does not have an interest of its own that is separate from those of society.

The Capitalist state

- Marxists argue that the state cannot be understood separately from the economic structure of society. This view has usually been understood in terms of the classic formulation that the state is nothing but an instrument of class oppression: the state emerges out of, and in a sense reflects, the class system.
- **Bourgeoisie:** a Marxist term, denoting the ruling class of a capital society, the owners of productive wealth.

- The state as an agent or instrument of the ruling class, stressing the extent to which the state elite is disproportionately drawn from the ranks of the privileged and propertied.
- The bias of the state in favour of capitalism is therefore derived from the overlap of social backgrounds between civil servants and other public officials, and bankers, business leaders and captains of industry. Both groups tend to be representatives of the capitalist class.

The Leviathan state

- The image of the state as a ‘leviathan’ (a self-serving monster intent on expansion and aggrandizement) is one associated in modern politics with the New Right or radical form of individualism.
- State intervention in economic and social life; the state is an overbearing ‘nanny’, desperate to interfere or meddle in every aspect of human existence.
- The central feature of this view is that the state pursues interests that are separate from those of society (setting it apart from Marxism), and that those interests demand an unrelenting growth in the role or responsibilities of the state itself.

The Patriarchal state

- Modern thinking about the patriarchal state must, finally, take account of the implications of feminist approach.
- ‘patriarchy’ literally means ‘rule by the father’, the domination of the husband-father within the family, and the subordination of his wife and his children.
- It is used in more general sense of ‘rule by men’ drawing attention to the totality of oppression and exploitation to which women are subject.

The role of the state

There is profound disagreement about the exact role the state should play, and therefore about the proper balance between the state and civil society. Among different state forms that have developed are the following:

- The minimal state
- The developmental state
- The social-democratic state
- The collectivised state
- The totalitarian state

Minimal states

- The minimal state is the ideal of classical liberals, whose aim is to ensure that individuals enjoy the widest possible realm of freedom.

Three core functions of the ‘minimal’ or ‘night-watchman’:

1. The state exists to maintain domestic order.
2. It ensures that contracts or voluntary agreements made between private citizens are enforced.
3. It provides protection against external attack.

Developmental states

- A developmental state is one that intervenes in economic development. This does not amount to an attempt to replace the market with a ‘socialist’ system of planning and control, but rather to an attempt to construct a partnership between the state and major economic interests, often underpinned by conservative and nationalist priorities.
- The classic example of a developmental state is Japan.

Social-democratic states

- The social-democratic state is an active participant, helping in particular to rectify the imbalances and injustices of a market economy. It therefore tends to focus less upon the generation of wealth and more upon what is seen as the equitable or just distribution of wealth. In practice, this boils down to an attempt to eradicate poverty and reduce social inequality. The twin features of a social-democratic state are therefore Keynesian and social welfare.

- The aim of Keynesian economic policies is to ‘manage’ or ‘regulate’ capitalism with a view to promoting growth and maintaining full employment.
- The adoption of welfare policies had led to the emergence of so-called welfare states, whose responsibilities have extended to the promotion of social well-being amongst their citizens.

Collectivised states

- While developmental and social-democratic states intervene in economic life with a view to guiding or supporting a largely private economy, collectivised states bring the entirety of economic life under state control.
- The best examples of such states were in orthodox communist countries such as the USSR and throughout eastern Europe. These sought to abolish private enterprise altogether, and set up centrally planned economies administered by a network of economic ministries and planning committees.
- The justification for state collectivisation stems from a fundamental socialist preference for common ownership over private property.

Totalitarian states

- The most extreme and extensive form of interventionism is found in totalitarian states. The essence of totalitarianism is the construction of an all embracing state, the influence of which penetrates every aspect of human existence.
- The state brings not only the economy but education, culture, religion, family life and so on under direct state control. The best examples of totalitarian states are Hitler's Germany and Stalin's USSR, although modern regimes such as Saddam Hussein's Iraq arguably have similar characteristics.

A 'hollow' state?

- Although the state has traditionally been regarded as the central feature of political life, its role and significance are threatened by developments that became increasingly pronounced in the late twentieth century.
- 'hollowing out' effects: an insidious process through which functions that once belonged to the state have gradually been transferred to other institutions and bodies.
- Three distinct but interrelated developments: globalisation, 'rolling back' and restructuring, and the growth of sub-state government.

Globalisation

- Globalisation is, broadly, the process through which events and decisions in one part of the world have come to affect people in quite another part of the world.
- One manifestation of this is the emergence of a global economy, in which it has become increasingly difficult, and perhaps impossible, for any country to regulate the international flow of capital. The implications of this development for states are dramatic.

Restructuring the state

- This led to a ‘rolling back’ of the state through policies such as deregulation, **privatisation** and the introduction of market reforms in the public services.
- **Privatisation**: the transfer of state assets from the public to the private sector, reflecting a contraction of the state’s responsibilities.

Sub-state governance

- The final challenge to the state comes from the pressure for decentralisation, the tendency to transfer responsibilities from national or central bodies to a local or community level.
- E.g. the creation of a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly in 1999 brought the UK into line with other European states, i.e. Spain, France and Italy, in having a significant tier of devolved government.