# Bringing the State Back In

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# 1. Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research

*Theda Skocpol*

A sudden upsurge of interest in "the state" has occurred in comparative social science in the past decade. Whether as an object of investigation or as something invoked to explain outcomes of interest, the state as an actor or an institution has been highlighted in an extraordinary outpouring of studies by scholars of diverse theoretical proclivities from all of the major disciplines. The range of topics explored has been very wide. Students of Latin America, Africa, and Asia have examined the roles of states in instituting comprehensive political reforms, helping to shape national economic development, and bargaining with multinational corporations.[1] Scholars interested in the advanced industrial democracies of Europe, North America, and Japan have probed the involvements of states in developing social programs and in managing domestic and international economic problems.[2] Comparative-historical investigators have examined the formation of national states, the disintegration and rebuilding of states in social revolutions, and the impact of states on class formation, ethnic relations, women's rights, and modes of social protest.[3] Economic historians and political economists have theorized about states as institutors of property rights and as regulators and distorters of markets.[4] And cultural anthropologists have explored the special meanings and activities of "states" in non-Western settings.[5]

No explicitly shared research agenda or general theory has tied such diverse studies together. Yet I shall argue in this essay that many of them have implicitly converged on complementary arguments and strategies of analysis. The best way to make the point is through an exploration of the issues addressed in a range of comparative and historical studies – studies that have considered states as weighty actors and probed how states affect political and social processes through their policies and their patterned relationships with social groups. First, however, it makes sense to underline the paradigmatic reorientation implied by the phrase "bringing the state back in."[6]

## *From Society-Centered Theories to a Renewed Interest in States*

There can be no gainsaying that an intellectual sea change is under way, because not long ago the dominant theories and research agendas of the social sciences rarely spoke of states. This was true even – or perhaps one should say especially – when politics and public policy making were at issue. Despite important exceptions, society-centered ways of explaining politics and governmental activities were especially characteristic of the pluralist and structure–functionalist perspectives predominant in political science and sociology in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s.[7] In these perspectives, the state was considered to be an old-fashioned concept, associated with dry and dusty legal-formalist studies of nationally particular constitutional principles. Alternative concepts were thought to be more compatible with scientific, generalizing investigations.[8] "Government" was viewed primarily as an arena within which economic interest groups or normative social movements contended or allied with one another to shape the making of public policy decisions. Those decisions were understood to be *allocations* of benefits among demanding groups. Research centered on the societal "inputs" to government and on the distributive effects of governmental "outputs." Government itself was not taken very seriously as an independent actor, and in comparative research, variations in governmental organizations were deemed less significant than the general "functions" shared by the political systems of all societies.

As often happens in intellectual life, the pluralist and structure–functionalist paradigms fostered inquires that led toward new concerns with phenomena they had originally de-emphasized conceptually. When pluralists focused on the determinants of particular public policy decisions, they often found that governmental leaders took initiatives well beyond the demands of social groups or electorates; or they found that government agencies were the most prominent participants in the making of particular policy decisions. Within pluralist theoretical premises, there were but limited ways to accommodate such findings.[9] In the classic pluralist studies of New Haven politics, Mayor Richard Lee's strong individual initiatives for urban renewal were extensively documented but not grounded in any overall state-centered analysis of the potential for certain kinds of mayors to make new uses of federal funding.[10] In major works about "bureaucratic politics" such as Graham Allison's *Essence of Decision* and Morton Halperin's *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*, government agencies were treated individually, as if they were pure analogues of the competing societal interest groups of classical pluralism.[11] The structure and activities of the U.S. state as a whole receded from view and analysis in this approach.[12]

Like the pluralists, yet on a broader canvas, when structure–functionalist students of comparative political development set out to "apply" their grand theories to Western European history or to particular sets of non-Western polities, they often found poor fits between historical patterns and sequences and those posited by the original concepts and assumptions. "Political development" (itself found to be an overly evolutionist conception) ended up having more to do with concrete international and domestic struggles over state building than with any inherent general logic of socioeconomic "differentiation." Most telling in this regard were the historically oriented studies encouraged or sponsored by the Social Science Research Council's Committee on Comparative Politics toward the end of its life span of 1954–72.[13] In many ways, the ideas and findings about states to be reviewed here grew out of reactions set in motion by such confrontations of the committee's grand theories with case-study and comparative-historical evidence.

Especially among younger scholars, new ideas and findings have also arisen from an alternative theoretical lineage. From the mid-1960s onward, critically minded "neo-Marxists" launched a lively series of debates about "the capitalist state." By now, there are conceptually ramified and empirically wide-ranging literatures dealing especially with the roles of states in the transition from feudalism to capitalism, with the socioeconomic involvements of states in advanced industrial capitalist democracies, and with the nature and role of states in dependent countries within the world capitalist economy.[14] Neo-Marxists have, above all, debated alternative understandings of the socioeconomic functions performed by the capitalist state. Some see it as an instrument of class rule, others as an objective guarantor of production relations or economic accumulation, and still others as an arena for political class struggles.

Valuable concepts and questions have emerged from these neo-Marxist debates, and many of the comparative and historical studies to be discussed here have drawn on them in defining researchable problems and hypotheses. Yet at the theoretical level, virtually all neo-Marxist writers on the state have retained deeply embedded society-centered assumptions, not allowing themselves to doubt that, at base, states are inherently shaped by classes or class struggles and function to preserve and expand modes of production.[15] Many possible forms of autonomous state action are thus ruled out by definitional fiat. Furthermore, neo-Marxist theorists have too often sought to generalize – often in extremely abstract ways – about features or functions shared by *all* states within a mode of production, a phase of capitalist accumulation, or a position in the world capitalist system. This makes it difficult to assign causal weight to variations in state structures and activities across nations and short time periods, thereby undercutting the usefulness of some neo-Marxist schemes for comparative research.[16]

So far the discussion has referred primarily to paradigms in American social science in the period since World War II; yet the reluctance of pluralists and structure–functionalists to speak of states, and the unwillingness even of critically minded neo-Marxists to grant true autonomy to states, resonate with proclivities present from the start in the modern social sciences. These sciences emerged along with the industrial and democratic revolutions of Western Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Their founding theorists quite understandably perceived the locus of societal dynamics – and of the social good – not in outmoded, superseded monarchical and aristocratic states, but in civil society, variously understood as "the market," "the industrial division of labor," or "class relations." Founding theorists as politically opposed as Herbert Spencer and Karl Marx (who now, not entirely inappropriately, lie just across a lane from one another in Highgate Cemetery, London) agreed that industrial capitalism was triumphing over the militarism and territorial rivalries of states. For both of these theorists, nineteenth-century British socioeconomic developments presaged the future for all countries and for the world as a whole.

As world history moved – via bloody world wars, colonial conquests, state-building revolutions, and nationalist anticolonial movements – from the Pax Britannica of the nineteenth century to the Pax Americana of the post–World War II period, the Western social sciences managed to keep their eyes largely averted from the explanatory centrality of states as potent and autonomous organizational actors.[17] It was not that such phenomena as political authoritarianism and totalitarianism were ignored, just that the preferred theoretical explanations were couched in terms of economic backwardness or the unfortunate persistence of non-Western "traditional" values. As long as capitalist and liberal Britain, and then capitalist and liberal America, could plausibly be seen as the unchallengeable "lead societies," the Western social sciences could manage the feat of downplaying the explanatory centrality of states in their major theoretical paradigms – for these paradigms were riveted on understanding modernization, its causes and direction. And in Britain and America, the "most modern" countries, economic change seemed spontaneous and progressive, and the decisions of governmental legislative bodies appeared to be the basic stuff of politics.

As the period after World War II unfolded, various changes rendered society-centered views of social change and politics less credible. In the wake of the "Keynesian revolution" of the 1930s to the 1950s national macroeconomic management became the norm and public social expenditures burgeoned across all of the advanced industrial capitalist democracies, even in the United States. The dismantlement of colonial empires gave birth to dozens of "new nations," which before long revealed that they would not simply recapitulate Western liberal democratic patterns in their political organization or policy choices. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, by the mid-1970s, both Britain and the United States were unmistakably becoming hard-pressed in a world of more intense and uncertain international economic competition. It is probably not surprising that, at this juncture, it became fashionable to speak of states as actors and as society-shaping institutional structures.

Social scientists are now willing to offer state-centered explanations, not just of totalitarian countries and late industrializers, but of Britain and the United States themselves. Fittingly, some recent arguments stress ways in which state structures have distinctively shaped economic development and international economic policies in Britain and America and also ponder how the British and U.S. states might fetter or facilitate current efforts at national industrial regeneration.[18] In short, now that debates about large public sectors have taken political center stage in all of the capitalist democracies and now that Britain and the United States seem much more like particular state–societies in an uncertain, competitive, and interdependent world of many such entities, a paradigmatic shift seems to be underway in the macroscopic social sciences, a shift that involves a fundamental rethinking of the role of states in relation to economies and societies.

### *The Revival of a Continental European Perspective?*

In the nineteenth century, social theorists oriented to the realities of social change and politics on the European continent refused (even after industrialization was fully under way) to accept the de-emphasis of the state characteristic of those who centered their thinking on Britain. Even though they might positively value liberal ideals, Continental students of social life, especially Germans, insisted on the institutional reality of the state and its continuing impact on and within civil society. Now that comparative social scientists are again emphasizing the importance of states, it is perhaps not surprising that many researchers are relying anew – with various modifications and extensions, to be sure – on the basic understanding of "the state" passed down to contemporary scholarship through the widely known writings of such major German scholars as Max Weber and Otto Hintze.

Max Weber argued that states are compulsory associations claiming control over territories and the people within them.[19] Administrative, legal, extractive, and coercive organizations are the core of any state. These organizations are variably structured in different countries, and they may be embedded in some sort of constitutional–representative system of parliamentary decision making and electoral contests for key executive and legislative posts. Nevertheless, as Alfred Stepan nicely puts it in a formulation that captures the biting edge of the Weberian perspective:

> The state must be considered as more than the "government." It is the continuous administrative, legal, bureaucratic and coercive systems that attempt not only to structure relationships *between* civil society and public authority in a polity but also to structure many crucial relationships within civil society as well.[20]

In this perspective, 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. But this Weberian view of the state does require us to see it as much more than a mere arena in which social groups make demands and engage in political struggles or compromises.

What is more, as the work of Otto Hintze demonstrated, thinking of states as organizations controlling territories leads us away from basic features common to all polities and toward consideration of the various ways in which state structures and actions are conditioned by historically changing transnational contexts.[21] These contexts impinge on individual states through geopolitical relations of interstate domination and competition, through the international communication of ideals and models of public policy, and through world economic patterns of trade, division of productive activities, investment flows, and international finance. States necessarily stand at the intersections between domestic sociopolitical orders and the transnational relations within which they must maneuver for survival and advantage in relation to other states. The modern state as we know it, and as Weber and Hintze conceptualized it, has always been, since its birth in European history, part of a system of competing and mutually involved states.

Although a refocusing of social scientific interests significantly informed by the Weber–Hintze understanding of states may be upon us, the real work of theoretical reorientation is only beginning to be done. This work is understandably fraught with difficulties, because attempts are being made to think about and investigate state impacts against a background of deeply rooted theoretical proclivities that are stubbornly society-centered. Recent attempts by neo-Marxists and (what might be called) neopluralists to theorize in very general terms about "state autonomy" have not offered concepts or explanatory hypotheses rich enough to encompass the arguments and findings from various comparative-historical studies.[22]

Rather than dwell on the shortcomings of such general theories, however, the remainder of this essay will be devoted to an exploration of what some selected historical and comparative studies have to tell us about states in societal and transnational contexts. Two somewhat different, but equally important tendencies in current scholarship will claim our attention. First, we shall examine arguments about *state autonomy* and about the *capacities of states* as actors trying to realize policy goals. Then we shall explore arguments about the *impacts of states on the content and workings of politics*. The overall aim of this exercise is not to offer any new general theory of the state or of states and social structures. For the present, at least, no such thing may be desirable, and it would not in any event be feasible in the space of one essay. Rather, my hope is to present and illustrate a conceptual frame of reference, along with some middle-range issues and hypotheses that might inform future research on states and social structures across diverse topical problems and geocultural areas of the world.

## The Autonomy and Capacity of States

States conceived as organizations claiming control over territories and people may formulate and pursue goals that are not simply reflective of the demands or interests of social groups, classes, or society. This is what is usually meant by "state autonomy." Unless such independent goal formulation occurs, there is little need to talk about states as important actors. Pursuing matters further, one may then explore the "capacities" of states to implement official goals, especially over the actual or potential opposition of powerful social groups or in the face of recalcitrant socioeconomic circumstances. What are the determinants of state autonomy and state capacities? Let us sample the arguments of a range of recent studies that address these questions.

### *States as Actors*

Several lines of reasoning have been used, singly or in combination, to account, for why and how states formulate and pursue their own goals. The linkage of states into transnational structures and into international flows of communication may encourage leading state officials to pursue transformative strategies even in the face of indifference or resistance from politically weighty social forces. Similarly, the basic need of states to maintain control and order may spur state-initiated reforms (as well as simple repression). As for who, exactly, is more likely to act in such circumstances, it seems that organizationally coherent collectivities of state officials, especially collectivities of career officials relatively insulated from ties to currently dominant socioeconomic interests, are likely to launch distinctive new state strategies in times of crisis. Likewise, collectivities of officials may elaborate already established public policies in distinctive ways, acting relatively continuously over long stretches of time.

The extranational orientations of states, the challenges they may face in maintaining domestic order, and the organizational resources that collectivities of state officials may be able to draw on and deploy – all of these features of the state as viewed from a Weberian–Hintzean perspective can help to explain autonomous state action. In an especially clear-cut way, combinations of these factors figure in Alfred Stepan's and Ellen Kay Trimberger's explanations of what may be considered extreme instances of autonomous state action – historical situations in which strategic elites use military force to take control of an entire national state and then employ bureaucratic means to enforce reformist or revolutionary changes from above.

Stepan's book *The State and Society: Peru in Comparative Perspective* investigates attempts by state elites in Latin America to install "inclusionary" or "exclusionary" corporatist regimes.[23] A key element in Stepan's explanation of such episodes is the formation of a strategically located cadre of officials enjoying great organizational strength inside and through existing state organizations and also enjoying a unified sense of ideological purpose about the possibility and desirability of using state intervention to ensure political order and promote national economic development. For Brazil's "exclusionary" corporatist coup in 1964 and for Peru's "inclusionary" corporatist coup in 1968, Stepan stresses the prior socialization of what he calls "new military professionals." These were career military officers who, together, passed through training schools that taught techniques and ideas of national economic planning and counterinsurgency, along with more traditional military skills. Subsequently, such new military professionals installed corporatist regimes in response to perceived crises of political order and of national economic development. The military professionals used state power to stave off or deflect threats to national order from nondominant classes and groups. They also used state power to implement socioeconomic reforms or plans for further national industrialization, something they saw as a basic requisite for improved international standing in the modern world.

Ellen Kay Trimberger's *Revolution from Above* focuses on a set of historical cases – Japan's Meiji restoration, Turkey's Ataturk revolution, Egypt's Nasser revolution, and Peru's 1968 coup – in which "dynamically autonomous" bureaucrats, including military officials, seized and reorganized state power. Then they used the state to destroy an existing dominant class, a landed upper class or aristocracy, and to reorient national economic development.[24] Like Stepan, Trimberger stresses the formation through prior career interests and socialization of a coherent official elite with a statist and nationalist ideological orientation. She also agrees with Stepan's emphasis on the elite's concern to contain any possible upheavals from below. Yet, perhaps because she is in fact explaining a more thoroughly transformative version of autonomous state action to reshape society, Trimberger places more stress than Stepan on the role of foreign threats to national autonomy as a precipitant of "revolution from above." And she highlights a structural variable that Stepan ignored: the relationship of the state elite to dominant economic classes. As Trimberger puts it, "A bureaucratic state apparatus, or a segment of it, can be said to be relatively autonomous when those who hold high civil and/or military posts satisfy two conditions: (1) they are not recruited from the dominant landed, commercial, or industrial classes; and (2) they do not form close personal and economic ties with those classes after their elevation to high office."[25] Trimberger also examines the state elite's relationship to dominant economic classes in order to predict the extensiveness of socioeconomic changes a state may attempt in response to "a crisis situation – when the existing social, political, and economic order is threatened by external forces and by upheaval from below."[26] State-initiated authoritarian *reforms* may occur when bureaucratic elites retain ties to existing dominant classes, as, for example, in Prussia in 1806–1814, Russia in the 1860s, and Brazil after 1964. But the more sweeping structural changes that Trimberger labels "revolution from above," including the actual dispossession of a dominant class, occur in crisis situations only when bureaucratic state elites are free of ties or alliances with dominant classes.[27] As should be apparent, Trimberger has given the neo-Marxist notion of the relative autonomy of the state new analytical power as a tool for predicting the possible sociopolitical consequences of *various* societal and historical configurations of state and class power.[28]

### *State Autonomy in Constitutional Polities*

Stepan and Trimberger deal in somewhat different, though overlapping, terms with extraordinary instances of state autonomy – instances in which nonconstitutionally ruling officials attempt to use the state as a whole to direct and restructure society and politics. Meanwhile, other scholars have teased out more circumscribed instances of state autonomy in the histories of public policy making in liberal democratic, constitutional polities, such as Britain, Sweden, and the United States.[29] In different forms, the same basic analytical factors – the international orientations of states, their domestic order-keeping functions, and the organizational possibilities for official collectivities to formulate and pursue their own policies – also enter into these analyses.

Hugh Heclo's *Modern Social Politics in Britain and Sweden* provides an intricate comparative-historical account of the long-term development of unemployment insurance and policies of old-age assistance in these two nations.[30] Without being explicitly presented as such, Heclo's book is about autonomous state contributions to social policy making. But the autonomous state actions Heclo highlights are not all acts of coercion or domination; they are, instead, the intellectual activities of civil administrators engaged in diagnosing societal problems and framing policy alternatives to deal with them. As Heclo puts it:

> Governments not only "power" (or whatever the verb form of that approach might be); they also puzzle. Policy-making is a form of collective puzzlement on society's behalf; it entails both deciding and knowing. The process of making pension, unemployment, and superannuation policies has extended beyond deciding what "wants" to accommodate, to include problems of knowing who might want something, what is wanted, what should be wanted, and how to turn even the most sweet-tempered general agreement into concrete collective action. This process is political, not because all policy is a by-product of power and conflict but because some men have undertaken to act in the name of others.[31]

According to Heclo's comparative history, civil service administrators in both Britain and Sweden have consistently made more important contributions to social policy development than political parties or interest groups. Socioeconomic conditions, especially crises, have stimulated only sporadic demands from parties and interest groups, argues Heclo. It has been civil servants, drawing on "administrative resources of information, analysis, and expertise" who have framed the terms of new policy elaborations as "corrective[s] less to social conditions as such and more to the perceived failings of previous policy" in terms of "the government bureaucracy's own conception of what it has been doing."[32] Heclo's evidence also reveals that the autonomous bureaucratic shaping of social policy has been greater in Sweden than in Britain, for Sweden's premodern centralized bureaucratic state was, from the start of industrialization and before the full liberalization and democratization of national politics, in a position to take the initiative in diagnosing social problems and proposing universalistic solutions for administering to them.

Heclo says much less than he might about the influences shaping the timing and content of distinctive state initiatives. He does, however, present evidence of the sensitivity of civil administrators to the requisites of maintaining order in the face of dislocations caused by industrial unemployment. He also points to the constant awareness by administrators of foreign precedents and models of social policy. Above all, Heclo demonstrates that collectivities of administrative officials can have pervasive direct and indirect effects on the content and development of major government policies. His work suggests how to locate and analyze autonomous state contributions to policy making, even within constitutional polities nominally directed by legislatures and electoral parties.

Along these lines, it is worth looking briefly at two works that argue for autonomous state contributions to public policy making even in the United States, a polity in which virtually all scholars agree that there is less structural basis for such autonomy than in any other modern liberal capitalist regime. The United States did *not* inherit a centralized bureaucratic state from preindustrial and predemocratic times. Moreover, the dispersion of authority through the federal system, the division of sovereignty among branches of the national government, and the close symbiosis between segments of the federal administration and Congressional committees all help to ensure that state power in the twentieth-century United States is fragmented, dispersed, and everywhere permeated by organized societal interests. The national government, moreover, lacks such possible underpinnings of strong state power as a prestigious and status-conscious career civil service with predictable access to key executive posts; authoritative planning agencies; direct executive control over a national central bank; and public ownership of strategic parts of the economy. Given such characteristics of the U.S. government, the concept of state autonomy has not often been used by scholars to explain American policy developments.

Nevertheless, Stephen Krasner in his *Defending the National Interest* does use the concept to explain twentieth-century continuities in the formulation of U.S. foreign policy about issues of international investments in the production and marketing of raw materials.[33] A clever heuristic tactic lies behind Krasner's selection of this "issue area" for systematic historical investigation: It is an issue area located at the intersection of properly geopolitical state interests and the economic interests of (often) powerful private corporations. Thus, Krasner can ask whether the short-term push and pull of business interests shapes the definition of the U.S. "national interest" with respect to raw materials production abroad or whether an autonomous state interest is consistently at work. He finds the latter pattern and attributes it to actors in a special location within the otherwise weak, fragmented, and societally permeated U.S. government:

> For U.S. foreign policy the central state actors are the President and the Secretary of State and the most important institutions are the White House and the State Department. What distinguishes these roles and agencies is their high degree of insulation from specific societal pressures and a set of formal and informal obligations that charge them with furthering the nation's general interests.[34]

Unfortunately, Krasner does not expand on the concept of "insulated" parts of the state. In particular, he does not tell us whether various organizational features of state agencies make for greater or lesser insulation. Instead, Krasner primarily emphasizes the degree to which different parts of the federal executive are subject to Congressional influences.[35] And he cannot fully dispel the suspicion that the Presidency and the State Department may simply be subject to class-based rather than interest-based business influences.[36] Nevertheless, he does show that public policies on raw materials have been most likely to diverge from powerful corporate demands precisely when distinctively geopolitical issues of foreign military intervention and broad ideological conceptions of U.S. world hegemony have been involved. Thus, Krasner's study suggests that distinctive state-like contributions to U.S. policy making occur exactly in those instances and arenas where a Weberian–Hintzean perspective would insist that they should occur, no matter how unpropitious the overall governmental potential for autonomous state action. As J. P. Nettl once put it, "Whatever the state may or may not be internally, . . . there have . . . been few challenges to its sovereignty *and* its autonomy in 'foreign affairs.' "[37]

My own work with Kenneth Finegold on the origins of New Deal agricultural policies also suggests that autonomous state contributions to domestic policy making can occur within a "weak state." Such autonomous state contributions happen in specific policy areas at given historical moments, even if they are not generally discernible across all policy areas and even if they unintentionally help to create political forces that subsequently severely circumscribe further autonomous state action.[38] Finegold and I argue that, by the period after World War I, the U.S. Department of Agriculture was "an island of state strength in an ocean of weakness."[39] We attribute the formulation of New Deal agricultural interventions – policies that responded to a long-standing "agrarian crisis" but *not* simply in ways directly demanded by powerful farm interest groups – to the unique resources of administrative capacity, prior public planning, and practical