

BRINGING THE STATE BACK IN . . . AGAIN

ABSTRACT: Previous scholarship on states' autonomy from the interests of society has focused primarily on nondemocratic societies, raising the question of whether "state theory" is relevant to modern states. Public-opinion research documenting the ignorance of mass politics suggests that modern states may be as autonomous as, or more autonomous than, premodern states. Premodern states' autonomy was secured by their ability to suppress societal dissent by force of arms. Modern states may have less recourse to overt coercion because the very thing that legitimates them in the eyes of society—democracy—virtually ensures that society will not control the state, since the putative agent of control, the electorate, cannot possibly be well informed about the multitudinous tasks undertaken by modern governments. Instead of focusing solely on armies, taxes, and bureaucracies, state theorists can now direct their attention to how the vagaries of public opinion and the legitimating effects of popular elections may fuel state autonomy.

Despite the efforts of several prominent scholars, the state remains neglected in the study of politics and society. This is the case even though the division of the world into sovereign states is still the most salient aspect of the modern political landscape. Modern states display widely different degrees of democratic legitimacy and political power; some have well-trained and -equipped military and police forces while others can barely exercise authority over their territories. All of them, how-

Critical Review 14 (2000), nos. 2–3. ISSN 0891–3811. © 2001 Critical Review Foundation.

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ever, exhibit a significant degree of “autonomy” from the societies they govern.

Positing a clear division between the state and society may seem counterintuitive to those of us who have grown up under democratic states, which are generally understood as reflecting their citizens’ interests and demands. As Richard T. Ely (1894, 85-88), the founder of the American Economic Association, put it, “the state is not something apart from us and outside us, but we ourselves.” In democratic societies the state is supposed to be both directed and constrained by public opinion.

This view of the relationship between state and society was dominant in American political science up until the 1960s. Mainstream “pluralist” scholars operated under the assumption that state policies were the result of the interaction of competing societal groups. Even the Marxist critics of pluralism did not debate whether the state was autonomous from society. Instead, the question they asked was whether the state was controlled by all of society, in the form of its many interest groups; or by just one segment of society, the ruling class.

David Ciepley argues below that the pluralists’ neglect of the state originated in their attempts to draw meaningful distinctions between the postwar American state and the Nazi and Soviet regimes. Because pluralists focused on differences between the democratic and totalitarian features of these states, they shifted attention away from the possibility that increasingly powerful democratic governments could institute policies without the consent of those they governed.

In the 1970s and 1980s Marxism and pluralism were challenged by scholars who argued that government policies are often the result of officials pursuing goals of their own, goals that are not generated by the societies over which the officials preside. The high point of these scholarly efforts was the publication of *Bringing the State Back In* (1985). This volume not only contained empirical studies of “state autonomy,” but was prefaced by Theda Skocpol’s foundational essay, “Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research.” Skocpol’s article set out the assumptions and central claims of state theory, and outlined the promise of its future applications.

The chief contribution of *Bringing the State Back In* was to substantiate the claim that “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” (Skocpol 1985, 9). Numerous contributors to

Bringing the State Back In highlighted instances in which states pursued goals set by their officials, and in the process often shaped the societies that previous theorists assumed controlled the state. Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Peter Evans noted that autonomy was almost a prerequisite for states to act at all: "We take the importance of relative autonomy to be as established as the need for a bureaucratic apparatus. . . . In particular . . . a certain autonomy is necessary not only to formulate collective goals but to implement them as well" (Rueschemeyer and Evans 1985, 49).

The contributors to *Bringing the State Back In* describe a variety of circumstances that enable states to act autonomously. These circumstances tend to produce military control over a given territory by means of standing armies backed by loyal bureaucracies. Charles Tilly (1985) argues that only states that monopolized the control of legitimate domestic coercion could meet international threats from hostile states; and that only states that developed bureaucratic means of extracting resources from society could secure such a monopoly. But while independent bureaucratic organizations were initially developed to support states' war-making capacities, these organizations were often subsequently used to pursue other goals, such as industrial policy in the Third World (e.g., Haggard 1990, Wade 1990). Thus, in many cases state actors were instrumental in the economic development of their countries. Evans (1985, 216) notes that "in the Third World, trade and capital flows are associated, not with supine and inhibited state apparatuses, but with an expansion of the domestic role of the state." Similarly, Alice Amsden (1985, 86) shows that the Taiwanese state parlayed its military might into control over the economy. Aided by bureaucratic organizations that stemmed from Taiwan's military origins, the Taiwanese state dispensed credit to farmers, used its monopoly over fertilizer production to favor some forms of agriculture over others, and controlled the dissemination of information by manipulating the agricultural associations previously developed by the Japanese.

Although they view the state as relatively autonomous, many of the contributors to *Bringing the State Back In* recognize that even "autonomous" states are frequently constrained by elements of society. Rueschemeyer and Evans argue that the tendency for autonomous state policies to affect societal groups can stimulate attempts to capture various state bureaucracies, a process that can lead to the "balkanization" of the state that is the subject of so much of contemporary public-choice theory. Similarly, Alfred Stepan's comparative study (1985) of states' eco-

conomic policies in Latin American countries suggests that state policies that led to successful economic development often empowered various social groups, increasing their capacities to pressure the state with their demands. In contrast, state policies that failed to produce economic growth often destabilized social efforts to pressure the state, ironically leading to greater state autonomy. Peter Katzenstein contends that the dense networks of state and societal actors involved in the formation of Austrian and Swiss public policy have had differential effects on the comparative strength of the Austrian and Swiss states. In Austria the inclusion of business, labor, and other societal groups in drafting policy has weakened state capabilities, while in Switzerland, the state's role as a mediator among clashing social interests gives it "the role of an arbiter that enjoys wide discretionary powers among plural conflicts" (Katzenstein 1985, 241).

Katzenstein's chapter, however, is one of the few in Skocpol volume that discuss the autonomy of *democratic* states. Most contributors to the book focus on premodern states, or on modern states, such as those governing the newly industrialized countries, that are not fully democratic. And when democratic states are discussed in the book, the paradoxical coexistence of state autonomy and democratic control of the state is not squarely addressed.

For example, Katzenstein argues that the Swiss Permanent Economic Delegation for Economic Negotiations—a highly exclusive body of government officials, senior bureaucrats, and powerful interest-group elites—drafts foreign economic policy autonomously from Swiss society. Katzenstein (1985, 244) writes that "here all the threads run together, for under the auspices of the state one small group makes the fundamental decisions that Switzerland confronts in the international economy." But how can this be, since the state in question is democratic, and especially since the Permanent Economic Delegation's decisions are subsequently submitted to the general public by referendum? Katzenstein (*ibid.*) notes without comment that the public infrequently takes advantage of its veto power: "incursions of the public into the interlocking corridors of power are very rare in the area of foreign economic policy . . . normally, then, the close cooperation between peak associations, the state bureaucracy, and the government is not challenged by the public in the area of foreign economic policy."

In principle, no matter how powerful the Swiss army or how inventive the Swiss bureaucracy is, the Swiss state's autonomy should

vanish to the extent that Switzerland is democratic. Certainly once government actions are subjected to referenda, there should be no space left for state autonomy, regardless of how effective the state is in dreaming up policies or in implementing those that survive public scrutiny. Does this mean that state theory is inapplicable to democratic governments? The editors of *Bringing the State Back In* suggest as much, writing that “strong popular demands and social exigencies” (Evans et al. 1985b, 364)—not “sheer sovereign integrity[,] the stable administrative–military control of a given territory . . . loyal and skilled officials and plentiful financial resources” (Skocpol 1985, 16)—are responsible for “continuing expansions of state activities in the economies and the social life of both developed and developing nations” (Evans et al. 1985b, 364).

Does democratic control really spell the irrelevance of the notion of state autonomy to modern government? Does the advent of mass politics automatically consign state theory to the dustbin of premodern history?

Not if mass democratic control of the state is more an ideal than a reality. And that is exactly what is suggested by research on public opinion, which shows most fundamentally that the public’s knowledge of politics and government is so rudimentary that the people who are allegedly in control are not even aware of most of what modern governments do (Somin 1998).

Public ignorance of what the vast modern state is doing may well give state officials room to pursue their own interests and ideals (Friedman 1997, 456). This freedom of maneuver would not rely principally on the state’s ability to suppress challenges to its monopoly on domestic violence, which would in any case tend to be quelled in advance by the stamp of legitimacy conferred on modern states by their democratic credentials. Rather, the key source of democratic states’ ability to act autonomously would be public unawareness of state actions. (Is it realistic to think that the Swiss public really understood the state initiatives it approved by referendum?) Indeed, the expansive organizational and resource capabilities available to modern states may be a *consequence*, not a *precondition*, of modern states’ autonomy, if public ignorance is what first allows the nominally democratic state to escape effective societal scrutiny. Public ignorance, then, may be the crucial variable responsible for the expansion of modern states’ power and, as well, for their their freedom to use it.

Although the public is usually ignorant of the most basic political in-

formation, sustained media attention can occasionally cut through the public's ignorance and provide society a means of monitoring state policies. Ilya Somin argues below, however, that such control over state actors can be deflected if state elites successfully manipulate public opinion to conform to their own preferences. Given "the state's" manipulation of public preferences, even if "society" becomes aware of policy alternatives, the state can checkmate society's *de jure* electoral control over public policy.

Earl Ravenal argues below that the foreign-policy process is essentially liberated from societal control by virtue of the public's attention only to the visible side-effects of foreign policy: casualties and, indirectly, expenditures. The American foreign-policy establishment, at least, tries to create policies that will meet policy goals effectively not because otherwise it faces public disapproval, but because otherwise, the formulators of the policy will face the disapproval of their peers. Even more disturbing for democratic ideals, Reihan Salam suggests that states actively form the ethnic identities of the members of society. Salam argues that national and ethnonational identities are often the product of state actions during periods of nation formation. Salam contends that people's ignorance of their true interests is the result. In Salam's view, ethnic identities need to be seen as yet another realm of state influence, one that is just as open to manipulation and state-induced creation as any other.

Are there institutional constraints that are more effective than public opinion in blocking autonomous state actions? One possibility is interest groups, whose closer proximity to government and higher levels of attentiveness may enable them to constrain state actors. Several prominent economic approaches to politics contend that interest groups or interested economic actors may be able to "capture" the very regulatory agencies that were intended to alter and monitor their actions.

However, Rogan Kersh, Anthony Woodlief, and Steven Sheffrin argue below that it is more by assumption than by demonstration that economic approaches to politics reduce political acts as disparate as voting behavior and government regulation to the self-interest of social actors. Sheffrin shows that state and federal regulatory policy in the United States often fails to conform to the theory of interest-group capture. Instead, Sheffrin argues, regulations are just as likely to be the product of satisficing corporate behavior, voters' pursuit of their conception of the common good, or state actors' ideologically inspired goals. Using the push for deregulation beginning in the 1970s as a

prime example, Sheffrin argues that autonomous state elites often drive policy in a manner that economic theories would not seem to allow.

In his review of Sam Peltzman's *Political Participation and Government Regulation*, Anthony Woodlief expresses admiration for the unusually high level of realism Peltzman brings to the economic analysis of politics. However, Woodlief contends that political scientists' focus on noneconomic motivations may provide an even more accurate understanding of political processes. Woodlief argues that the unrealistic assumptions made in economists' analyses of political phenomena generate formally elegant models of politics that tell us little about actual state decisions. He joins Sheffrin in directing attention to the role that personal convictions may play in even the decisions of legislators who are supposed to be the state personnel most responsive to public sentiment.

On the other hand, Kersh shows that interest groups are often too ignorant of legislative activity to form an opinion about what they want the state to do; and that even when an interest group does have an opinion, the superior knowledge possessed by the group's lobbyists may allow them to betray their employer, effectively turning the lobbyists into agents of policy directions that run counter to the group's demands. The close relationships between professional lobbyists and state actors may mutually reinforce their autonomy from their societal "clients."

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As the articles in this issue suggest, public ignorance may open a gap between democratic theory and political reality that allows us to bring the state back into the analysis of modern states. The democratic features of modern states—regularly occurring elections and the resulting attention political elites pay to public opinion—can, in the rare case when an issue grabs public attention, constrain state action. However, the pervasive informational deficits that afflict the electorate suggest that this constraint is rather weak. Given the public's political ignorance, it is likely that the states governing modern democracies are far more autonomous from social actors than is commonly assumed. Bringing the mass public's ignorance into studies of state autonomy extends the scope of Skocpol et al.'s project by offering a new way to understand how states can act autonomously, even in democratic societies. The papers in this volume barely scratch the surface. How and when the bureaucrats, politicians, and judges who

compose the modern state use their power autonomously, and the extent to which this is made possible by the largely illusory aura of democratic accountability that surrounds their actions, are topics to which these pages only begin to do justice.

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