

# General Introduction

The first and most difficult task confronting analysts of the state is to define it. For the state is a complex phenomenon and no single theory or theoretical perspective can fully capture and explain its complexities. States and the inter-state system provide a moving target because of their complex developmental logics and because continuing attempts to transform states and the state system leave their own traces in turn on their forms, functions, and activities. Theorizing the state is further complicated because, despite recurrent tendencies to reify it as standing outside and above society, there can be no adequate theory of the state without a theory of society. For the state and political system are parts of a broader ensemble of social relations and one cannot adequately describe or explain the state apparatus, state projects, and state power without referring to their differential articulation with this ensemble. This calls for a distinctive type of theoretical orientation that can take account not only of the state's historical and institutional specificity as a distinctive accomplishment of social development but also of its role as an important element within the overall structure and dynamic of social formations. It is just such an approach to the paradox of the state and state power that is elaborated in the present book, an approach that treats the state apparatus and state power in 'strategic-relational' terms.

The strategic-relational approach (hereafter SRA) starts from the proposition that the state is a social relation. This elliptical statement, first proclaimed by Nicos Poulantzas, requires extensive unpacking. Indeed, the strategic-relational approach in its state-theoretical application could be described as the meta-theoretical, theoretical, and empirically informed process of elaborating the implications of this initial proposition. Thus it is an ongoing project rather than a finished product, and the changing nature of the state and state power continues to generate new theoretical and empirical problems for strategic-relational analysts to address. However, while the SRA as presented below originated in critical engagement with debates about the state, it has a much wider field of application – one that is potentially co-extensive with social relations and, indeed, the increasingly complex interactions between

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the human and natural worlds. This book does not apply the strategic-relational approach so expansively – even though an adequate critique of political ecology (itself a small, if significant, part of this potential field) would certainly require serious examination of humankind's changing interactions with nature. Instead it explores the development of the SRA regarding state theory and critical political economy and its subsequent extension as a heuristic to social relations in general. It follows that the SRA is presented and elaborated below in a very uneven manner. Thus I present the overall strategic-relational heuristic in relatively abstract-simple terms through some basic ontological propositions with limited empirical content, with the result that the dialectical form of the argument takes precedence over the substantive content. In contrast, the strategic-relational analysis of the state, state power, and political economy more broadly is developed through a much richer set of increasingly substantive concepts as the argument moves towards more concrete-complex accounts (for the methodological principles informing this argument, see Jessop 1982: 211–20; 2002a: 91–101; see also M.J. Smith 2000).

## What is the State?

No definition of the state is innocent because, as the strategic-relational approach itself implies, every attempt to define a complex phenomenon must be selective (for one review of attempts to define it, see Ferguson and Mansbach 1989). Moreover, as Bartelson remarks about attempts to define the state:

If we accept that the state concept is foundational and constitutive of scientific political discourse, we should not be surprised to find that it cannot easily be subjected to the practices of definition [i.e., making stipulations about its meaning and reference within a given context of employment and according to given criteria], since the term state itself figures as a positive and primitive term in the definitions of other, equally central, concepts. This is what makes clarification both seem so urgent and yet so difficult to achieve. Hence, and as a consequence of its centrality, the concept of the state cannot be fully determined by the character of its semantic components or by its inferential connections to other concepts, since it is the concept of the state that draws these components together into a unity and gives theoretical significance to other concepts on the basis of their inferential and metaphorical connections to the concept of the state, rather than conversely. (2001: 11)

These problems of centrality and ambiguity, of the foundational nature of the state for political discourse and the constitutive nature of definitions of

the state for political imaginaries and political practice, pose real difficulties for a rigorous analysis of the state. Indeed the variety of attempts to solve (or dissolve) them could be used to organize a critical review of state theory. They raise interesting questions about historical semantics as the concept of the state emerged hesitantly in the early modern period and was then selected and consolidated as an organizing concept of political practice in the high early modern period (cf. Luhmann 1990e; Skinner 1989). They also pose serious questions for historians, political geographers, and social scientists concerned with the process of state formation and transformation and with political practices oriented to the state both in Europe (where the 'modern state' first arose) and in other historical-geographical contexts. The same problems occur in more prosaic forms in everyday discourses, ordinary politics, and routine statal practices (cf. Bratsis 2006; Painter 2006). I consider these first.

Everyday language sometimes depicts the state as a subject – the state does, or must do, this or that. Sometimes it treats the state as a thing – this economic class, social stratum, political party, or official caste uses the state to pursue its projects or interests. But the state is neither a subject nor a thing. So how could the state act *as if* it were a unified subject, and what could constitute its unity as a 'thing'? And how do social actors come to act *as if* the state were a real subject or a simple instrument? Coherent answers are hard because the state's referents vary so much. It changes shape and appearance with the activities it undertakes, the scales on which it operates, the political forces acting towards it, the circumstances in which it and they act, and so forth. When pressed, a common response is to list the institutions that comprise the state, usually with a core set of institutions with increasingly vague outer boundaries. From the political executive, legislature, judiciary, army, police, and public administration, the list may extend to education, trade unions, mass media, religion, and even the family. Such lists typically fail to specify what lends these institutions the quality of statehood. This is hard to do because, as Max Weber famously noted, there is no activity that states always perform and none that they have never performed (1948: 77–8). Moreover, what if, as some theorists argue, states are inherently prone to fail in the tasks they undertake? Should the features of failing or failed states (ignoring for the moment the typically ideological construction of this term in contemporary political discourse) be included as part of the core definition of the state or treated as contingent, variable, and eliminable? Does a theory of the state require a theory of state failure? Finally, who are the principals and who are the agents in the activities that states undertake? Are the principals restricted to 'state managers', or do

they include top advisers and other direct sources of policy inputs? Likewise, where does the boundary lie between (a) state managers as principals and (b) state employees as routine agents or executants of state programmes and policies? And do the agents include union leaders involved in policing incomes policies, for example, or media owners and media workers who circulate propaganda on the state's behalf?

An obvious escape route from these problems is to define the state in terms of its formal institutional features and/or the foundational instruments or mechanisms of state power. The *Allgemeine Staatslehre* (general state theory) tradition pursues the first approach. It focuses on the articulation of three key features of the state: state territory, state population, and state apparatus (e.g., Heller 1992; Jellinek 1921; Oppenheimer 1908; Schmitt 1928, 2001; Smend 1955; and for commentary, Kelly 2003; Stirck 2006). Max Weber largely follows the second approach. This is reflected in his celebrated definition of the *modern state* as the 'human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory' (Weber 1948: 78, parenthesis and italics in original; cf., more elaborately, 1978: 54–6). Yet other definitions highlight the modern (especially Westphalian) state's formal sovereignty vis-à-vis its own population and other states. This does not mean that modern states exercise power largely through direct and immediate coercion – a sure sign of crisis or state failure. For, where state power is regarded as legitimate, it can normally secure compliance without such recourse. Indeed, this is where the many state-theoretical traditions concerned with the bases of political legitimacy and/or social hegemony are so important in exploring the character of the state projects that endow the state with some institutional and operational unity as well as the nature of the societal projects that define the nature and purposes of government in relation to the social world beyond the state and/or inter-state systems. Nonetheless, organized coercion is a legitimate last resort in enforcing decisions. Even when blessed with political legitimacy, of course, all states reserve the right – or claim the need – to suspend the constitution or specific legal provisions and many also rely heavily on force, fraud, and corruption and their subjects' inability to organize effective resistance. Indeed, for theorists such as Carl Schmitt, it is the effective power to declare a state of emergency that defines the locus of sovereignty within the state system (Schmitt 1921, 1985; for a critique, see Agamben 2004).

Another solution is to regard the essence of the state (pre-modern as well as 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 relatively fixed population on which

political decisions are collectively binding. The key feature of the state would then become the historically variable ensemble of technologies and practices that produce, naturalize, and manage territorial space as a bounded container within which political power can be exercised to achieve various, more or less well-integrated, more or less changing policy objectives. Nonetheless a system of territorially exclusive, mutually recognizing, mutually legitimating national states exercising formally sovereign control over large and exclusive territorial areas is a relatively recent institutional expression of state power that is historically contingent rather than an inevitable and irreversible result of social development (Teschke 2003, 2006). The existence of such an inter-state system is also the source of the increasingly artificial division between domestic and international affairs (Rosenberg 1994; Walker 1993). This is reflected in recent debates about the future of the national territorial state and attempts to define emergent forms of political organization of a statal, semi-statal, or non-statal character. For other modes of territorializing political power have existed, some still co-exist with the so-called 'Westphalian system' (allegedly established by the Treaties of Westphalia in 1648 but realized, as Teschke notes, only stepwise during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries), new expressions are emerging, and yet others can be imagined. Earlier modes include city-states, empires, protectorates, enclaves, the medieval state system, absolutism, and modern imperial-colonial blocs. Emerging modes that have been identified, rightly or wrongly, include cross-border regional cooperation, a new medievalism, supranational blocs (e.g., the EU), a Western conglomerate state, and an embryonic world state. Nonetheless, while state forms shape politics as the 'art of the possible', struggles over state power also matter. State forms have been changed before through political activities and will be changed again.

While there are significant material and discursive lines of demarcation between the state *qua* institutional ensemble and other institutional orders and/or the lifeworld, the SRA emphasizes that its apparatuses and practices are materially interdependent with other institutional orders and social practices. In this sense it is socially embedded. Indeed, as Tim Mitchell argues,

The state should be addressed as an effect of detailed processes of spatial organization, temporal arrangement, functional specification, and supervision and surveillance, which create the appearance of a world fundamentally divided into state and society. The essence of modern politics is not policies formed on one side of this division being applied to or shaped by the other, but the producing and reproducing of this line of difference. (1991: 95; on the construction of sovereignty, see also Bartelson 1995)

These detailed processes also divide the globe fundamentally into *different* states and societies and thereby create a more or less complex inter-state system within an emerging world society.

The manner in which these divisions are drawn, reproduced, and changed influences political processes and state capacities. These are always strategically selective.<sup>1</sup> First, although the state apparatus has its own distinctive resources and powers, which underpin its relative autonomy, it also has distinctive liabilities or vulnerabilities and its operations depend on resources produced elsewhere in its environment.<sup>2</sup> Second, state structures have a specific, differential impact on the ability of various political forces to pursue particular interests and strategies in specific contexts through their control over and/or (in)direct access to these state capacities – capacities whose effectiveness also depends on links to forces and powers that exist and operate beyond the state's formal boundaries.<sup>3</sup> Third, the nature and extent of the realization of these capacities-liabilities – hence the nature and impact of state power – depend on the structural relations between the state and its encompassing political system, on the strategic ties among politicians and state officials and other political forces, and on the complex web of structural interdependencies and strategic networks that link the state system to its broader social environment. Together these considerations imply that, from a strategic-relational perspective, the state's structural powers or capacities, their structural and strategic biases, and their realization do not depend solely on the nature of the state as a juridico-political apparatus – even assuming its institutional boundaries could be precisely mapped and prove stable. They also depend on diverse capacities-liabilities and forces that lie beyond it. Putting states in their place like this does not exclude (indeed, it presupposes) specifically state-engendered and state-mediated processes. It does require, however, that they be related both to their broader social context and to the strategic choices and conduct of actors in and beyond states (Jessop 1990b, 2002d).

States do not exist in majestic isolation overseeing the rest of their respective societies but are embedded in a wider political system (or systems), articulated with other institutional orders, and linked to different forms of civil society. A key aspect of their transformation is the redrawing of the multiple 'lines of difference' between the state and its environment(s) as states (and the social forces they represent) redefine their priorities, expand or reduce their activities, recalibrate or rescale them in the light of new challenges, seek greater autonomy or promote power-sharing, and disembed or re-embed specific state institutions and practices within the social order. This holds for the international as well as national dimensions of state relations. The state's

frontiers may display a variable geometry and its temporal horizons regarding the past, present, and future are also complex. There are also continuing attempts to redesign its institutional architecture and modes of working to enhance state capacities to achieve particular political objectives.

Two conclusions follow from this. First, we must recognize that the distinction between the state apparatus and the wider political system makes a real difference and is defined (and redefined) both materially and discursively. Thus analysing its constitution and its effects is an important task for the SRA. Second, it is important to accept the idea implicit in systems theory that the political system is self-substituting: that is, that a crisis in the political system leads normally not to its demise but to its reorganization. Clearly a fundamental part of such reorganization is the redefinition (or restructuring) of the forms of institutional separation between the economic and political systems and their relationship to the lifeworld, and, in this context, the redefinition of the 'line of difference' between the state and the political system. This is especially clear for the European Union insofar as it is a polity in the course of (trans)formation and this process is being contested by many different social forces. Indeed, as chapter 9 shows, the process of state formation in Europe provides a real-time experiment in the complexities and contingencies of state formation.

This suggests that an adequate theory of the state can only be produced as part of a wider theory of society, and that this wider theory must give due recognition to the constitutive role of semiosis in organizing social order. Even the neo-statists' principled rejection of a society-centred approach depends critically on arguments about the wider society both to reveal the state's distinctive logic and interests and to explore the conditions for its autonomy and effectiveness. Foucauldian, feminist, and discourse-analytic studies clearly have wider concerns too (see chapter 1). It is precisely in the articulation between state and society, however, that many of the unresolved problems of state theory are located. For the state involves a paradox. On the one hand, it is just one institutional ensemble among others within a social formation; on the other, it is peculiarly charged with overall responsibility for maintaining the cohesion of the social formation of which it is merely a part. Its paradoxical position as both part and whole of society means that it is continually called upon by diverse social forces to resolve society's problems and is equally continually doomed to generate 'state failure' since so many of society's problems lie well beyond its control and may even be aggravated by attempted intervention. Many of the differences between theories of the state considered above are rooted in contrary approaches to various structural and strategic moments of this paradox.

Trying to comprehend the overall logic (or, perhaps, 'illogic') of this paradox could be a fruitful route to resolving some of these differences as well as providing a more comprehensive analysis of the strategic-relational character of the state in a polycentric social formation.

In this context it should be noted that 'societies' (or, better, 'imagined human communities') can be dominated by different principles of societal organization (*Vergesellschaftung*) associated with different projects and priorities (e.g., economic, military, religious, political, social ranking, cultural). This will be reflected in the state as a key site where social power relations may be crystallized in different forms (Mann 1986) and, indeed, where struggles over these principles of societal organization are often conducted because of the part-whole paradox in which the state is so heavily implicated. Thus a state could operate principally as a capitalist state, a military power, a theocratic regime, a representative democratic regime answerable to civil society, an apartheid state, or an ethico-political state. There are competing principles of societalization linked to different functional systems and different identities and values anchored in civil society or the lifeworld, and, in principle, any of these could become dominant, at least for a while. There is no unconditional guarantee that the modern state will always (or ever) be essentially capitalist – although exploration of state forms may indicate certain strategically selective biases in this regard. Moreover, even where capital accumulation is the dominant axis of societalization by virtue of structural biases and/or successful political strategies, state managers typically have regard to the codes, programmes, and activities of other functional systems and the dynamic of the lifeworld in their efforts to maintain a modicum of institutional integration and social cohesion within the state's territorial boundaries and to reduce external threats. But such structural coherence and social cohesion is necessarily limited insofar as it depends on one or more spatio-temporal fixes to displace and/or defer the effects of certain contradictions and lines of conflict beyond its (or their) socially constituted spatio-temporal boundaries and action horizons. Different kinds of fix exist and they depend in various ways on specific forms of government, governance, and meta-governance ('governance of governance') (Jessop 2002d, 2004f, 2006b, 2006c).

Even these few preliminary remarks should have revealed the complexity of the state. They also imply that no definition can be given once-and-for-all; rather, the state will be redefined continually as the analysis unfolds. Moreover, as theoretical and empirical research on the state continues, whatever the initial starting point, as the analysis moves from the abstract-simple to the concrete-complex there could be an increasing overlap in concepts,



arguments, and analysis in the case of progressive research paradigms or an increasing decomposition and incoherence as anomalies and exceptions emerge (on this distinction among research programmes, see Lakatos and Musgrave 1970). My previous work has been especially concerned to develop a coherent set of concepts with comparable ontological depth and complexity in order to facilitate a concrete-complex critique of political economy.

## A Preliminary Definition of the State

Given the preceding remarks, I will now define the state in terms of a 'rational abstraction' that must be re-specified in different ways and for different purposes as a strategic-relational analysis proceeds. In short, in order to initiate the analysis rather than pre-empt further exploration, the core of the state apparatus can be defined as a distinct ensemble of institutions and organizations whose socially accepted function is to define and enforce collectively binding decisions on a given population in the name of their 'common interest' or 'general will' (cf. Jessop 1990b: 341). This broad definition identifies the state in terms of its generic features as a specific form of macro-political organization with a specific type of political orientation; it also indicates that there are important links between the state and the political sphere and, indeed, the wider society. Thus not all forms of macro-political organization can be classed as state-like nor can the state simply be equated with government, law, bureaucracy, a coercive apparatus, or another political institution. Indeed this definition puts the contradictions and dilemmas necessarily involved in political discourse at the heart of work on the state. This is because claims about the general will or common interest are a key feature of the state system and distinguish it from straightforward political domination or violent oppression (contrast Tilly 1973). This approach can also serve as a basis for describing specific states and political regimes and exploring the conditions in which states emerge, evolve, enter into crisis, and are transformed. A particular benefit of this initial cluster definition is its compatibility with diverse approaches to the analysis of the state and with recognition of what Mann (1986) terms the polymorphous crystallization of state power associated with alternative principles of societalization.<sup>1</sup>

This said, six qualifications are required if this multidimensional definition is to be useful in orienting a strategic-relational research agenda:

Six qualifications:

- 1 Above, around, and below the core of the state are found institutions and organizations whose relation to the core ensemble is uncertain. Indeed

2. A state is a political entity that is defined by its territory and population.
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the effective integration of the state as an institutional ensemble pursuing relatively coherent policies is deeply problematic and generates different governmental rationalities, administrative programmes, and political practices oriented to achieving such integration. Moreover, while statal operations are most concentrated and condensed in the core of the state, they depend on a wide range of micro-political practices dispersed throughout society. States never achieve full closure or complete separation from society, and the precise boundaries between the state and/or political system and other institutional orders and systems are generally in doubt and change over time. In many circumstances this ambiguity may even prove productive in pursuit of state policies. Similar problems emerge in relation to inter-state relations in the emerging world political system.

- 2 The nature of these institutions and organizations, their articulation to form the overall architecture of the state *qua* institutional ensemble, and its differential links with the wider society will depend on the nature of the social formation and its past history. The capitalist type of state differs from that characteristic of feudalism, for example;<sup>2</sup> and political regimes also differ across capitalist social formations.
- 3 Although the socially acknowledged character of its political functions for society is a defining feature of the normal state, the forms in which this legitimacy is institutionalized and expressed will also vary. Indeed the whole point of describing such political functions as 'socially acknowledged' is to stress that their precise content is constituted in and through politically relevant discourses. Here lies the significance of contested discourses about the nature and purposes of government for the wider society and the relationship of these discourses to alternative hegemonic projects and their translation into political practices.
- 4 Although coercion is the ultimate sanction available to states, they have other methods of enforcement to secure compliance. Violence is rarely the first resort of the state (especially in consolidated capitalist societies), and it would often prove counterproductive. A full account of the state must consider all the means of intervention at its disposal, their capacities and limitations, and their relative weight in different contexts. This is especially important, as chapter 9 shows, for evolving forms of statehood in an increasingly interdependent world society.
- 5 The society whose common interest and general will are administered by the state should no more be interpreted as an empirical given than should the state itself. The boundaries and identity of the society are often constituted in and through the same processes by which states are

built, reproduced, and transformed. Indeed it is one of the more obvious conclusions of the state-centred approach that state- and nation-building are strongly influenced by the emergent dynamic of the emergent international system formed through the interaction of sovereign states. An effect of globalization and its associated relativization of scale is the increasing difficulty of defining the boundaries of any given society – to the extent that some theorists claim that only one society now exists, namely, world society (Luhmann 1982b, 1997; Richter 1996; Stichweh 2000). Interestingly, the tendential emergence of world society reinforces the importance of national states in many areas of social life (Meyer et al., 1997).

- 6 Whatever the political rhetoric of the 'common interest' or 'general will' might suggest, these are always 'illusory' insofar as any attempt to define them occurs on a strategically selective terrain and involves the differential articulation and aggregation of interests, opinions, and values. Indeed, the common interest or general will is always asymmetrical, marginalizing or defining some interests at the same time as it privileges others. There is never a general interest that embraces all possible particular interests (Jessop 1983). Indeed, a key statal task is to aid the organization of spatio-temporal fixes that facilitate the deferral and displacement of contradictions, crisis-tendencies, and conflicts to the benefit of those fully included in the 'general interest' at the expense of those who are more or less excluded from it. This in turn suggests clear limits to the possibility of a world state governing world society because this would exclude a constitutive outside for the pursuit of a 'general interest' or require a fundamental shift in social relations to prevent social exclusion.

In listing these six preliminary qualifications, I hope to have indicated the limitations of starting analyses with a general definition of the state that is presented once-and-for-all and is never re-specified as the analysis unfolds. It is said that Marx was once asked why he did not begin *Capital* with a definition of the capitalist mode of production and that he replied that the whole of *Capital* was concerned with this topic. It would only be possible to provide such a definition at the conclusion of the work. Apocryphal or not, such a response would have been very apt for any request to define the state at the outset of this study. We will certainly return to this topic when we provide more detailed accounts of the state from different theoretical perspectives and, later still, present some strategic-relational analyses of contemporary states.