

## CONSIDERATIONS ON THE STATE

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### Abstract

United States is no longer a state, but a 'Homeland' (homeland). There is a tendency to attempt to replace the mention of State, replacing it with nation, or associating the two terms to express the same meaning. Many euphemisms for State were created. Many governments have an interest in the centrality of the state, but the term statist is always derogatory. Then comes the longing for untying the notion of strong state to the notion of strong Patria o Strong Nation. In the American case, the fundamental rights which are the substance of democracy and should be guaranteed by the state have been left to market vagaries and almost all state investment turns to national defense and militarization, under the pretext of expansion and defense of borders of democracy. The American "State" then reveals itself as a centralized state which uses the democratic mantle and euphemisms to camouflage its statist character of government.

**Keywords:** State; Homeland; society; representation, centralization.

Gore Vidal recently, and caustically, observed that we no longer live in a state. We live in a 'Homeland'. The Cold War is over and done with, but the US National Security State (supposedly called forth by the Cold War) is alive and well, fortified – now that the State Department is no longer sufficient unto the day – by its Department of Homeland Security.

This subterfuge should take the wind from nobody's sails. The verbal legerdemain involved in the transposition of 'state' into 'Homeland' is scarcely without precedent, and the 2001 Patriot Act is but the latest incident in a long history of US counter-subversion that long predated the Cold War, as Michael Rogin presciently pointed out (Rogin, 1987). Euphemisms for 'state' ('Motherland,' 'Fatherland,' la patrie) have long abounded, and so has the unwieldy and often inaccurate composite 'nation-state'. Note also the conflation of "nation" and "state" in names such as United Nations, the International Monetary Fund: the list goes on.

The centrality of 'the state' to 'the political' seems simplistically self-evident to some. Quentin Skinner, a prominent British contemporary political theorist who takes his cue from the liberal- nationalist writings of Max Weber, regards the very use of the word 'state' as a 'decisive confirmation' of his thesis that 'the state,' (as opposed to 'the ruler') as 'legitimate' monopolizer of the means of violence is foundational to (what

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Skinner, following Weber) calls ‘modernity’ (Skinner, 1978, ii, p. 352; cf. I, x). Political science at large has long proved adept at trying to substitute for ‘the state’ some semantically equivalent term (‘governmental process,’ ‘political system’). Such attempts were invariably futile. By reintroducing ‘the state’ through the back door, they merely reinstated ‘the state’ as a keyword that both defines the field of political science and characterizes various positions within that field, as Jens Bartelson has recently, and mordantly pointed out.

It is not enough simply to cut through such subterfuge. Even those who have a vested interest in the centrality of ‘the state’ to the political would not wish to be accused of ‘statism,’ which is always a derogatory term (Bartelson, 2001, p. 4). Many others have - for other reasons also- long suspected, with good reason, that politics may be too important a human activity to be left to the tender mercies of ‘the state.’

Still, states do exist, and they matter. They appear as unitary entities when seen from the outside looking in; their claims to sovereignty have no counterpart in the international (or inter-state) sphere. At the same time, viewed from the inside looking out, any state is distinct from its civil society. Marx, responding to Hegel’s original formulation of this latter disjuncture, claimed that the state ‘is based on the unhampered development of bourgeois society, on the free movement of private interest’; ‘it is not the state that holds together the atoms of civil society ... in reality, the state is held together by social life’ (Marx and Engels, 1975, iv, p. 113). In assessing Marx’s claim, it is important to remember that the state as representative of alienated communal capacities is no less Marxian than is the familiar Marxist ruling class theory of the state (Thomas, 1994, pp. x, 7-8). Marx indicts the modern state not because he rejects the need for community to which the state lays claim, but because the alien state by its very nature, by its very distance and partiality, cannot deliver on its promise to furnish and provide for this need.

The question remains: how can something singular and purportedly unitary, ‘the state,’ be ‘based on,’ or ‘held together by,’ something as fragmentary, fissiparous, divided and as inherently unstable as ‘civil society’? Contemporary cultural studies help indicate the answer. The play of private interests in civil society generates artificial political divisions (such as class, race, and gender) among its human constituents. The state must then step in to reunite or claim to reunite people by transcending, but not obliterating, these same divisions. The state, that is to say, must represent what its citizens have in common, an identity or equivalence. But this equivalence, in any radically unequal society – and all known societies are radically unequal – can only be formal, not substantive (Lloyd and Thomas, 1998, *passim*; cf., 1995, pp. 268-304).

Take as one example nineteenth-century struggles for extension of the franchise in Britain, the US and elsewhere. These struggles introduced a developmental narrative intended to produce an equivalence (political citizenship), which then becomes a potential category.

The conservative argument against extension of the franchise, an argument that carried the day for a markedly long time, was cultural, involving the claim that those to be excluded were insufficiently formed, ethically incomplete beings, unprepared to exercise the faculty of disinterested judgment that representation and citizenship require. Matthew Arnold put it in a nutshell: ‘culture suggests the idea of the state’ (Arnold, 1965, v, pp. 134-5). Now that democracy has become figurable only as representative democracy, Marx’s words in the Eighteenth Brumaire about the French peasantry (‘they cannot represent themselves ... they must be represented’ [Sie muessen vertreten werden]) become pregnant indeed (Marx, 1954, p. 106). People are to be made worthy of the state, and not (as in radical participatory theories as different from each other as Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s from Thomas Paine’s) the state to be made worthy of them that carried the day for a markedly long time, was cultural, involving the claim that those to be excluded were insufficiently formed, ethically incomplete beings, unprepared to exercise the faculty of disinterested judgment that representation and citizenship require. Matthew Arnold put the matter, cryptically but succinctly, in a nutshell: ‘culture suggests the idea of the state’ (Arnold, 1965, v, pp. 134-5.)

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The conjuring trick this transposition involves was of course to take hold just about everywhere, not least in twentieth century struggles for national liberation from colonial hegemony. Its shelf-life has been remarkable. States make universalist claims, but popular participation in the state is always and everywhere necessarily limited (Thomas, 2001, pp. 3-118). Limitation may be horizontal (how much participation is to be enjoined by those who are to participate? Casting ballots in periodic elections is a common answer) and/or vertical (who, among those who can or could participate, may or will participate? Citizens, as opposed to ‘undocumented aliens,’ is a familiar answer, especially in the recent political history of USA.) Either way, basic priorities are observed with extreme care: representation, which (alone) unites, takes place apart from, and outside, the sphere of production, civil society, which divides and separates. The state is in this Marxian sense inseparable from the division of labor in society, which – heaven forbid - is on no account to be disrupted, globalization or no globalization

What then is the state, so characterized, so circumscribed, supposed to do? Hegel in 1821 demolished the familiar but too easy answer that it is there to protect property and preserve the peace: states, he archly observes, by their very nature amerce and tax their citizens (thus depriving them of their property,

any way you cut it) and wage wars on (the citizens of) other states (Hegel, 1962, Sect. 324, pp.209 -210.) There remain, to be sure, the claims of citizenship. But these are not all of a piece. Personal rights (freedom of speech, assembly, religion) are conceptually and practically distinct from political rights (which center around the right to participate in the state, as outlined above); and these, in turn, are distinct from what T.H. Marshall called rights of 'social citizenship' (Marshall, 1965, *passim*). Guaranteed education, full employment, decent housing and free medical care: These, the warp and woof of the twentieth century 'welfare state,' are essential, according to Marshall, if citizenship of the state and participation in the state are to be meaningful, and not just formal or ideological categories. However, the emergence of the 'Homeland', the persistence of the National Security State – which are different ways of saying the same thing –should remind us that the state was a formal phenomenon all along, and that attempts to give it substance in the form of 'social citizenship' – a category which has never counted for much in the US or in countries controlled by the US (there is a long and lengthening list of these) – can readily enough be short-circuited from above, in a way that affects neither a burgeoning military budget nor the precious and valued play of 'personal' or 'political' rights.

Such rights can then be fetishized as though they were ends in themselves. This helps explain why recently influential reactionary writers like Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, who stridently denounce the use of state power to promote the claims of 'social citizenship' – and who do so in the name of 'liberty' or 'democracy' – have been more influential (to date) in the US than anywhere else outside the US orbit . It also helps explain why US foreign wars (Vietnam, El Salvador, Afghanistan, Iraq – again, the list goes on – and on), which claim, no less stridently, to advance the frontiers of 'democracy,' clothe themselves in the mantle of elections (as though these were ends in themselves), while blithely leaving the substance of democracy (education, employment, housing, medicine) to the vagaries of the market – the 'freedom' of which is held, in all seriousness, to be commensurate with what is called (but may not be) 'political' freedom. A moment's thought will demonstrate that these are anything but cognate, let alone mutually reinforcing, categories, conceptually or in practice, and that for all (and indeed because of) the felt need of various regimes for 'legitimacy,' we are not yet done with officially sanctioned but no less spurious verbal conjuring tricks. They will be back to haunt us further.

## CONSIDERAÇÕES SOBRE O ESTADO

### Resumo

Nos Estados Unidos não vive-se mais em um Estado, mas sim em um 'Homeland' (pátria ou nação). Há uma tendência para a tentativa de substituir a menção a Estado, substituindo-a por nação, ou associando os dois termos para expressarem o mesmo sentido. Foram criados muitos eufemismos para Estado. Muitos governos têm interesse na centralidade do Estado, mas o termo estatista é sempre depreciativo. Então surge o anseio por desvincular a noção de Estado forte para a noção de Pátria forte ou Nação Forte. No caso americano, os direitos fundamentais que são a substância da democracia e que deveriam ser assegurados pelo Estado vêm sendo deixados aos caprichos do mercado e todo o investimento estatal se volta para a defesa nacional e a militarização, sob o pretexto da ampliação e defesa das fronteiras da democracia. O "Estado" americano então revela-se como um Estado centralizado que se utiliza do manto democrático e de eufemismos para camuflar seu caráter estatista de governo.

**Palavras chave:** Estado; nação; sociedade; representação; centralização.

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*Trabalho enviado em 14 de abril de 2015.*

*Aceito em 25 de abril de 2015.*