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Source: *International Political Science Review / Revue internationale de science politique*, Vol. 7, No. 2, The State and the Public Sphere (1986), pp. 115-119

Published by: [Sage Publications, Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1600784>

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THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF THE CONCEPT OF THE STATE

KLAUS VON BEYME

The article begins with a critical review of the use or non-use of the concept of state among contemporary authors, in particular Olson, Crozier, Cassese and Lowi. The notion of state as a mediator of a variety of interests is asserted to be particularly useful to the neo-corporatists but appears useful also to the neo-Marxists.

Some readers may consider a discussion of the state outmoded and irrelevant. American scholars have sometimes argued that the state is either a legal or a Marxist term, and British scholars have claimed that they are not even sure that the state is a legal term, given that the concept of the state is virtually unknown in British law and, more generally, appears not to have crossed the English Channel. British scholars describing processes of state intervention have usually referred to “government” when their French colleagues would talk about “l’Etat.” Is there more to be said than the remark made by an American scholar in a recent international debate: “Let them have their state—we’ll keep our government”?

Mancur Olson’s book, “The Rise and Decline of Nations” (1982), sticks to the Anglo-Saxon tradition, which underlies his basic conclusion about the detrimental impact of small special-interest groups for prosperity and consensus in a country. There is no hint of the state; reference is made only to government. Crozier and Friedman’s book, “L’acteur et le système” (1978), does not have the state as a reference in its index. More than Olson, Crozier emphasizes the reciprocity of “collective action and organization” (1978: 17), although he accepts many basic propositions of Olson’s former study, *The Logic of Collective Action*. Even in Cassese’s study on the Italian administrative system (1983), the state appears rather late on the scene. Cassese emphasizes, however, that today, in contrast to the times of Cavour and Giolitti, the public functions can no longer be referred to as “the

state.” The state seems to be only a unifying element in what he calls *lo Stato-finanziatore*. He argues that although the state is not implementing most public functions, it has to finance them, and thus it ultimately remains responsible for most state functions (Cassese, 1983: 274).

Are there reasons to question the usefulness of the concept of the state? One could argue merely in terms of the strategy of interdisciplinary work. Notions that deviate too much from a common sense understanding of certain words and that are too intimately related to the respective terminological jargons of their discipline do not facilitate interdisciplinary discussions. So “the state”—or “government”—for those who insist on this term—may be offered as the largest common denominator, because “system” or “power”—basic concepts in Crozier’s work—might be less prone to an interdisciplinary consensus.

There have to be more substantive reasons, however, for justifying the use of the concept of the state. The “changing state” refers to the continuity of the problem of the relationship between state and society as it was formulated in a more schematic way in many political and social theories of the nineteenth century. Modern political science no longer merely compares formal characteristics on the input side of political systems. It is problem oriented and compares the solutions that various political systems find for problems on the output side. This policy analysis approach no longer incorporates the view—as some behavioralists have assumed—that institutions barely matter. Policy analysts study institutions in their systems’ environments, and they know that policy implementation is never a one-way street. Some scenarios—like that of Olson (1982: 237)—see the power of social forces as exaggerated and view special-interest groups as an imminent danger to growth, full employment, social mobility and equal opportunity. Olson’s vision is too liberal to amount to admiration for a strong state. But in pursuit of what he calls “coherent government,” he advocates the repeal of all special interest legislation or regulation and the application of rigorous anti-trust laws to every type of cartel or collusion that uses its power to obtain prices or wages above competitive levels. If his solution for stagnating societies were correct, then a coherent agent like the state, struggling with the demands of special interests, presents itself as a valuable object for scientific investigation. The frequently invoked British disease seems to be the classic example to demonstrate this. Olson’s (1982: 236) almost populist conclusion, namely that if most people came to accept the argument of his book

there would be irresistible political support for policies to solve the basic problem he identified, seems to have been endorsed by Mrs. Thatcher in Britain. But her conflict management has in many cases—from the miners' strike to the Northern Ireland question—demonstrated that she has internalized Olson's message too strongly. She has successfully limited the impact of organized groups, but she has given little attention to developing a substitute for the old pluralism. No constitutional devices, almost no new institutionalized opportunities for interest intermediation that exclude the possibility of the government being blackmailed by individual interests, have so far been developed in Britain.

My hypothesis is that the call for coherent government in the messages of Olson and Thatcher does not suffice. We need a broader notion of the state (or of government) guiding interest intermediation without resorting to the illusion of the old authoritarian *Obrigkeitstaat* in which the state has to plan, to control and to implement everything. Cassese's *Stato-finanziatore* could be supplemented by *lo Stato-coordinatore*. Olson might suspect such a role would just lead to a situation in which the state again becomes the victim of the strongest special interests in society. Policy analysis does not always comfort such misgivings. If Lowi's (1978: 178) finding that "policy causes politics" is true, the state has only limited power to coordinate when it cannot subject interest intermediation to a uniform procedure in all policy arenas. However, analysis suggests that the primacy of policy over politics is very much linked to an American-centered view of the political process.

In continental Europe, the political administrative system has for the most part been too strong to live up to Lowi's expectations. But even in Europe the policy-making process is partly determined by extra-governmental actors, as the whole debate on neo-corporatism has shown. Neo-corporatist policies (oddly enough never mentioned by Olson) could serve as a kind of compromise between the populist drive for coherent government—which wins battles in the short run but tends to lose the war for lack of institutional provisions—and a neo-pluralist acceptance of mild forms of anarchy in modern polyarchies.

The need for an analytical concept, such as the state, is felt only when tension is seen between the two most important organizing principles of Western society, the political and the economic spheres. The liberal credo does not recognize such a tension. Market society and parliamentary pluralist political decision making are fully compatible.

Frictions between the two principles are looked upon as temporary and not fundamental. In this perspective, it is not necessary to rely on the state as an arena for conflict mediation between the two principles. It is sufficient to name the actors, arenas and institutions where partial temporary conflicts are negotiated.

It is not by chance that only two schools in the modern social sciences feel an urgent need for the use of the concept of the state in their analyses: the neo-Marxists and the neo-corporatists, though for different reasons outlined in a previous issue of the *IPSR* (vol. 6 no. 1) of which the present collection is a direct continuation; these reasons will reappear in the articles that follow. The neo-corporatists see the state as an actor which channels demands originating with the administration, the owners of capital and labour; for many neo-Marxists, the autonomy of the state cannot be excluded as a possibility capable of empirical verification.

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