

## Chapter Seven

### *The Sociology of the State*

The state is the “*monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory.”<sup>1</sup> So claims Max Weber (1864–1920) in what has become the generally accepted definition of the modern state in the social sciences. While seemingly a mere commonplace, it is, as we have seen, a definition resulting from centuries of institutional and ideological development. This book has focused on the ideological component of the modern state, its genesis and evolution, and it is a crucial feature of Weber’s sociology that it includes the ideological dimension. The monopoly of physical force is the modern form of state power for Weber not merely as an institutional fact, but as an ideological fact, as a form of rule legitimized in a specific way.

As a modern social scientist, however, Weber’s concern was not with legitimizing the modern state, a violation of his scientific ideal of “value neutrality,” but of understanding it. That the state must lay claim to legitimacy is a fact for Weber, but it is not the domain of science to determine the ethical validity of the legitimation. Sociologically, Weber argues “The state cannot be defined in terms of its ends . . . . Ultimately one can define the modern state sociologically only in terms of the specific *means* peculiar to it, as to every political association, namely, the use of physical force.”<sup>2</sup>

Herein lies the most historically notable feature of Weber’s sociology of the modern state: It marks the final end of thinking of the state from the perspective of final ends. This constitutes the culmination of a process that began with Machiavelli (who greatly influenced Weber), perhaps with Marsilius, but now in the form of modern social science with its emphasis upon empirical analysis, methodological rigor, and value neutrality. These factors pre-dated Weber, of course, having their source in nineteenth century materialism and positivism that traces back beyond Comte to Bentham and the early utilitarians. And while Weber modifies these earlier methodological approaches in important ways, his sociology of the state remains a sociology of means, of the empirically verifiable forms of power or, in Weber’s terms, of domination.

Clearly Weber’s sociology constituted a thoroughgoing rejection of the Hegelian theory of the state, the dominant mode of state theorizing in nineteenth century Germany. Hegel’s theory was precisely an attempt to reconstitute within an historical teleology the concept of final ends; Weber’s to abolish it. Ultimately it was Weber’s view that prevailed. No contemporary

social scientist could possibly work from Hegelian premises, and even the still prevalent legitimizing ideology of modern liberalism has been essentially stripped of its Hegelian roots. The modern state is now not only sociologically conceived as a set of mere institutional means, its legitimizing ideology is premised upon only the vaguest notion of ethical ends. In this, the modern state constitutes the political aspect of Weber's famous summation of modernity as "the disenchantment of the world."

This transformation in the conceptualization of the state from an institution premised upon ethical idealism to one conceived purely from a materialist, empiricist, and ethically neutral perspective has remained the basis of all modern social science theories of the state. It was not, of course, Weber alone who rejected idealism for an uncompromising materialist theory of the state. So too did Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936), Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), and numerous other less well-known sociological thinkers. While each of these possessed a unique understanding of the modern state, they all pursued similar lines of reasoning in delineating its sociological foundations. In general, the state was seen as emerging on the basis of increasing social differentiation variously expressed. For Durkheim the state reflected an increasing division of labor, in his terms from "mechanical" to "organic" forms of solidarity.<sup>3</sup> It did as well for Herbert Spencer who combined a concept of increasing social differentiation with Darwinian notions of evolution.<sup>4</sup> For Tönnies the state was the outcome of a shift from *Gemeinschaft* (community) to *Gesellschaft* (society), that is, from traditional and personal relationships to rational and contractual ones.<sup>5</sup>

The Spencerian concept of the state as the end product of an evolutionary process was paradigmatic for these other thinkers as well, an idea that is considered suspect by modern social scientists. So too was the sense that something important in human terms was lost in the formation of the state. Weber's "disenchantment of the world," the overly rationalized and bureaucratized reality characteristic of the state and modern society, was a concept expressed by many early social theorists. Themes of anomie, alienation, and estrangement pervaded the literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These same themes still find faint echoes in mainline social sciences, although the professionalization of these disciplines in the last century has made them very faint indeed. This itself is something that Weber predicted, and lamented, at the same time he helped bring it about.

Of all these early sociological theorists of the modern state, however, Weber has had the most lasting influence in the social sciences, including political science. There is only one rival in this regard, and that is Karl Marx (1818–1883). Indeed, for contemporary theorists of the modern state these thinkers represent the two major theoretical poles of modern state studies. This holds true not only in sociology and political science but in contemporary anthropology as well. The contemporary debate among anthropologists over the sources of state formation essentially revolves around the same issues that divided Marx and Weber. And the same concerns with the