

PART ONE

Political Concepts and Ideas

“Political theory” might sound dull and dry to some people, but it is the stuff that revolutions are made of. Ideas about justice, equality, and freedom; power and morality; and war and peace are not the exclusive domain of the ancient Greeks and nineteenth-century Germans with enormous moustaches. Around the world, these concepts and ideas inspire people to think creatively about life and how to improve it, both inside their own societies and outside, in the global society in which all of us are increasingly united. At the same time, political philosophers revisit the work of earlier theorists and reinterpret it in the light of the present. In this way political theory, far from remaining static, keeps pace with the changing world. In 2011, when hundreds of thousands of people joined together in the Middle East to protest against long-standing dictatorships and demand a better life for themselves, they were inspired by centuries of political ideals.

In principle, political philosophers ask just two kinds of questions about political phenomena: semantic and normative. As we saw in the Introduction, however, empirical observation does have an important role to play in the normative realm. In Chapters 1 and 2, therefore, in addition to introducing the central concept of the state, we look at a number of empirical observations regarding the location of power in it.

Among the fundamental questions that political theorists ask is what gives a state legitimacy; in other words, why should we obey it? This question of political obligation is discussed in Chapter 3. Questions of freedom and justice—what limits should be placed on the state, and how state goods ought to be distributed—are the subjects of Chapter 4. Finally, Chapters 5 and 6 explore political ideologies, both traditional and contemporary.

Political philosophy has a checkered history. Some have argued that its last great age was during the nineteenth century and have blamed its decline on the rise of secularism. Some have questioned the worth of philosophy in light of the Jewish Holocaust, all the more so given that Germany was widely considered the most philosophically sophisticated country in Europe (Horton, 1984, p. 115). Another challenge was posed by the school of thought known as *logical positivism*, which (as we discussed in the Introduction) questioned the value of normative analysis of any kind. Finally, by the early 1960s much of the Western world had enjoyed more than a decade of economic prosperity and consensus politics, and there seemed little reason to look at alternative political arrangements when the existing ones—based on a mixed economy, the welfare state, and nuclear deterrence—were working so well.

That consensus was about to change radically, however. First there was the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, followed by protests against the war in Vietnam in the mid-1960s; then came the massive economic problems of the 1970s. Suddenly it seemed that long-standing certainties were open to question, and political ideologies were becoming polarized. At the same time, the influence of logical positivism began to decrease. An important factor here was the appearance of significant new works of political philosophy in the 1970s, most notably John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, which we will discuss in detail in Chapter 4.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, political theory was facing yet another challenge. To the extent that globalization throws into question the centrality of the sovereign state, it casts doubt on the political theory that has developed with the latter as its focal point. But political theorists have been grappling with the impact of globalization for some time now. Thus we consider cosmopolitan theories of democracy and justice, for instance, in Chapters 3 and 4. And among the newer ideas that we examine in Chapter 6 are two whose growth reflects the increasing interconnectedness of peoples and nations around the world: environmentalism and multiculturalism.



CHAPTER 1

Politics and the State

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

We begin this chapter by stressing the importance of the sovereign state to the study of politics. We follow a brief survey of the basic state types by a discussion of four schools of thought regarding the distribution of power in the state: pluralism, elitism, socialism, and the New Right. We then look at several views on the proper

role of the state, from the classic liberal insistence on minimal intervention to the communitarian idea that the state should work to unite the community around specific social objectives. Finally, we consider the challenges—both empirical and normative—that confront the sovereign state today.

▲ The Reichstag dome in Berlin, Germany (@nagelestock.com/Alamy Stock Photo).

The Political Importance of the State

See Chapter 7, p. 140, for a discussion of the rise of the European state system. See Chapter 7, pp. 140–7, and Chapter 14, p. 295, for more on the rise and spread of the state system.

The state is a difficult concept to define, and there is considerable debate about what a good definition should include (Gallie, 1955–6). Max Weber defined the state as an institution claiming a “monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force in enforcing its order within a given territorial area” (Gerth & Wright Mills, 1946, pp. 77–8). As the highest form of authority in a particular territory, the sovereign state is, in theory, above any challenge: There is no higher authority within that territory and—equally important—no external challenge to it. Theoretically, no states have the right to tell another state what to do. The first sovereign states emerged in Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, replacing the feudal societies in which authority had been shared between the aristocracy (emperors, kings, princes, dukes, and so on) and the Roman Catholic Church (Tilly, 1975). Since that early period, most countries in the world have adopted the sovereign state model; today, the only stateless societies are small communities of nomadic peoples.

Does the concept of sovereignty really describe political reality? In constitutional theory the state is sovereign; but in practice it faces challenges from both inside and outside its borders—challenges that limit its autonomy. In this sense, sovereignty has always been something of a myth. There is a crucial distinction between *de jure* sovereignty (the legal right to rule supremely) and *de facto* sovereignty (the actual ability of a government to wield political power). As David Held (1989, p. 216) points out, “Sovereignty has been an important and useful concept for legal analysis, but it can be a misleading notion if applied uncritically as a political idea.” For example, the concept of sovereignty is of little relevance when discussing a “failed state” such as Somalia, which is unable to perform the basic functions of sovereignty: controlling the territory, enforcing the laws, collecting taxes, and so on.

See Chapter 7, pp. 149–54, for a discussion of weak states.

A Typology of the State

A common way of classifying states is according to how much they intervene in society and the economy. At one end of the continuum is the so-called **night-watchman state** in which the government concentrates on ensuring external and internal security, plays little role in civil society, and allows the economic market to operate relatively unhindered. For such a state, the primary duty is to protect the individual’s rights to life, liberty, and property against any threat, external or internal. It does not intervene to promote social programs, for example, or institute a welfare state to ensure equal access to schools, employment, or healthcare. The idea of the state as night-watchman was central to classical liberal thought and played a large part in shaping nineteenth-century politics not only in Britain but throughout the Western settler world, including Canada and the United States.

Emphasizing the individual’s right to private property, the night-watchman model continues to be popular with libertarians. Libertarians believe that the state’s role should be minimal, and most are very critical of large state bureaucracies. They also object to the maintenance of a large military force, especially when it is deployed to fight overseas. Thus most American libertarians opposed the 2003 invasion of Iraq, since it’s not the business of governments to intervene in the sovereign affairs of other countries. The only time military force should be used is in self-defence when the country is under attack. Nor do libertarians approve of **welfare state** programs such as universal health care. Libertarians believe that local governments and private enterprise are the most efficient providers of the services that citizens really want and need. The basis of libertarianism is an almost utopian belief

that individuals know what is best for themselves and are capable of living their lives ethically and responsibly without undue interference from government (Machan, 2005, p. 38). Indeed, by meddling governments actually make matters worse for individuals.

In reality, the minimal state as an ideal has probably never existed. (Perhaps the closest example of it was Hong Kong under British colonial rule, when government activity was limited to basic services such as policing and garbage removal; but of course Hong Kong was a colony, not an independent state.) Nevertheless, the degree and character of state intervention in the world today varies enormously.

Toward the interventionist end of the continuum is what has been called the **developmental state**. States that adopt this hands-on model forge strong relationships with private economic institutions to promote economic development. This approach has been popular in East Asia, where it has developed rapidly since 1945. The prime example of a developmental state is Japan (Johnson, 1995), but the model is also relevant to South Korea and even Malaysia—a so-called **illiberal democracy** (see below).

Developmental states are associated not just with economic development but with government efforts to secure greater social and economic equality. A common criticism of Britain's post-1945 political and economic development has been that the country embraced **social democracy**, with its emphasis on the welfare state, but neglected the developmental aspect (Marquand, 1988), limiting the economic growth that would have helped to further the social democratic project. The same criticism was levelled at Canadian and American governments when they were establishing their welfare state programs during the 1950s and 1960s. This issue remains important today, especially as the price of oil has been reduced in recent years.



See Chapter 20, p. 405, for an exploration of the relationship between the state and economic institutions.



Official White House Photo by David Lienemann

PHOTO 1.1 | Former US Vice-President Joe Biden (centre left) meets with Chinese President Hu Jintao (centre right) at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing in 2011. While China continues to develop positive relationships with Western countries, it remains an authoritarian regime controlled by a small and unelected elite.

We can also define states in terms of the degree to which their political leaders are subject to the will of the people. Here we can make a useful distinction between **liberal democracies**, illiberal democracies, and **authoritarian** regimes (Hague & Harrop, 2007, pp. 7–9). Liberal democracies, such as Canada, the United States, and India, are characterized by relatively free and fair elections, universal suffrage, a high degree of personal liberty, and protection of individual rights. None of these democracies is ideal—all experience some corruption, election fraud, lack of transparency, and economic inequality. Often people are frustrated and angry with their governments after they have been in power for many years, and support for other parties begins to increase in polls. This happened during Canada’s 2015 elections, where a strong ABC, or “Anything but Conservative,” movement developed, which eventually put the Liberal Party in power. For the most part, though, voters, elected officials, and international organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) are satisfied that their governments are effective and accountable to the people they represent.

Illiberal democracies, such as Russia and Malaysia, do hold regular elections, but they give relatively little protection to rights and liberties. Furthermore, these states control the means of communication—television, radio, newspapers—and may even attempt to control Internet content and access. This has been particularly true in Vladimir Putin’s Russia, where the state employs hundreds of “trolls” (paid commentators and bloggers) to flood the Internet with pro-Kremlin posts. They are also employed to denounce enemies of the state. Many write in Russian, but some “elite English-language trolls are assigned to target western news sites like *The New York Times* and CNN as well” (Zhang, 2015). This creates a situation in which opposition leaders and parties are disadvantaged, and as a result there are relatively few transfers of power through elections.

Authoritarian regimes do not have fair elections and their political rulers lack accountability. About a third of the world’s people live under regimes that can be described as authoritarian. China—with just under 20 per cent of the world’s population—is a good example, as are many states in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia. In such regimes the political elite may centre on a royal family, the military, the ruling party, or an individual dictator, such as Iraq’s former leader Saddam Hussein. However, recent events in Egypt, Libya, and other Arab states have shown that even the most repressive governments can be overthrown if the popular will is strong enough.

The degree to which authoritarian regimes intervene in economic and social life varies widely. At the extreme end is the totalitarian state; here, intervention is often total. Totalitarian regimes use brutal and oppressive state police to try to control all aspects of life. Whereas liberal states give priority to civil society and seek to intervene in it relatively rarely, under **totalitarianism** civil society is severely repressed. Totalitarianism is very much a twentieth-century phenomenon, associated with Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union under Stalin, East Germany, China under Mao Zedong, and North Korea under Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un. The rise of totalitarianism is strongly associated with the advent of modern communications technology. Beginning in the early twentieth century, the development of mass media made it increasingly easy to spread state propaganda (Curtis, 1979, p. 55); radio broadcasts of leaders’ speeches were especially useful, encouraging listeners to feel a sense of personal connection with dictators such as Adolf Hitler in Germany and Benito Mussolini in Italy. At the same time, these states were able to spy on opposition groups using surveillance technologies, monitor foreign radio broadcasts, and discourage plots against the regime by imposing severe punishments for any communication (including conversations and letters as well as publications) critical of the government.

KEY POINTS

- However difficult it is to define, the state is a central institution for students of politics.
- Sovereignty is a defining feature of the state, although it is arguably more important in the legal context than the political one.
- An empirical typology of the state would run from the minimalist night-watchman state typical of nineteenth-century capitalist regimes at one end of the spectrum to the totalitarian state of the twentieth century at the other.

Theories of the State

Another crucial dimension of the state involves power. Although we will examine the concept of power at length in Chapter 2, it's important at this stage to note that different theories of the state tend to centre on different accounts of power distribution. In this chapter we will look at three major theories of the state (pluralism, elitism, and Marxism) and one that is slightly more peripheral (that of the New Right).



See Chapter 6, p. 112, for a discussion of feminist perspectives on the state.

Pluralism

Until the mid-twentieth century, governance was generally assumed to be the business of government and elite decision makers. There was the idea that governing was best left to the experts, who had the experience and the education to run the country. Beginning in the 1960s, however, North American political scientists increasingly focused on a pluralist theory of the state, moving away from the study of elected elites to a wider variety of political actors. There are several varieties of **pluralism**, some more accurate than others. According to proponents of classical pluralism, such as Robert Dahl (1963, 1971), society comprises thousands of groups of all shapes and sizes pursuing thousands of activities and competing for political, social, and economic influence. For pluralists, the existence of competing groups is a natural feature of all societies of any complexity. The only way to prevent the formation of groups is through suppression, as under the old Soviet system.

For pluralists the role of the state can also be defined in terms of the activities of groups. In this *political* pluralism, the state's role is to regulate and mediate between these groups, who each have their own agenda. Some pluralists see the state as a neutral arbiter in this system; others see it as a group in itself, competing against other groups in society. The outputs of government are the result of group pressure. What governments do will reflect the balance of power among the groups that make up the society, all of which are able to make their voices heard in the political process, and all of which will get at least some of the things they want. This is not to say that all groups or interests are equal; however, competition ensures that none of them can become predominant.

As Chapter 12 will explain in more detail, an **interest group** is an organization set up to promote or defend a particular interest or cause. We can distinguish between two sorts of interest groups. First, *sectional groups* are concerned with protecting the (usually economic) interests of their members. Examples include unions, such as the Canadian Union of Public Employees and the Public Service Alliance of Canada, and business organizations, such as the Canadian Council of Chief Executives. Second, *cause* (or *promotional*) groups promote



See Chapter 12, pp. 245–7, for a detailed discussion of interest groups.



The Canadian Press/Amber Bracklen

PHOTO 1.2 | Alberta voters rejected the Progressive Conservative government in favour of a more left-leaning New Democratic government under Rachel Notley. Here she unveils Alberta’s climate strategy in November 2015. The plan includes a carbon tax and cap on oilseeds emissions among other strategies.

the interests of a particular group of people (for example, the homeless or an ethnic group) or an ideal (such as environmental protection or opposition to pornography). Some political scientists argue that business organizations often have a stronger influence on government policy than environmental or other groups. This is particularly true when it comes to key economic issues.

Pluralists argue that power in society is diffuse or fragmented. In pluralist theory, most interest groups will be able to influence public policy outcomes, at least to some extent. Thus Dahl (1971) defines modern liberal democratic politics in terms of “minorities rule” rather than majority rule, or **polyarchy** rather than democracy. The idea here is that politics is based on the permanent interplay of numerous groups,

each of which constitutes only a minority within the society. Successful political parties are the ones that are able to forge a majority coalition of minority groups. In other words, political parties operate as umbrella organizations, uniting many groups with different ideas and interests.

The pluralist conclusion that power is fragmented is based on a number of arguments. The first is that political influence is not dependent on one particular resource. In fact, there are many important resources—among them wealth, organization, public support, a group’s position in the economy, and the ability to exercise (or threaten to exercise) sanctions—and none of them is the preserve of a single interest group. Rather, different groups have different strengths and weaknesses. For example, key workers such as nurses or doctors may not be particularly wealthy or even have much public support, but they can gain influence through the crucial functions they perform.

Second, even though it may seem that one group or small set of groups is influential in a particular issue area, the same groups are not influential in other issue areas. To give a classic example, the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool was traditionally influential in setting agricultural policy, at least for grain prices (Watts, 1990, p. 191). The power of the Wheat Pool (now known as Viterra, after merging with several other organizations) is still considerable. However, it confirms the pluralist position because it has little or no influence in other policy areas such as education or healthcare; different groups are important in those areas.

Third, the influential groups in various policy areas are almost always challenged by some “countervailing influence.” In the economic sphere, for instance, the influence of business groups is checked by the influence of trade unions (Watts, 1990).

A Continuum from Pluralism to Elitism

The position we have just described is classical pluralism. But we can see a number of other theories of the state that lie on a continuum between classical pluralism and classical elitism. The first, elite pluralism or **elitism**, was developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s

See Chapter 3, p. 62, for a discussion of democratic elitism.





Bruce MacDonald

PHOTO 1.3 | A former Wheat Pool grain elevator in Kronau, Saskatchewan. Hundreds of these once dotted the prairies.

after the classical form was systematically challenged by critics such as American sociologist C. Wright Mills. Wright Mills argued in his 1956 book, *The Power Elite*, that power in American society was concentrated in the hands of a powerful elite that dominates the economic, military, and governmental spheres.

The pluralist response, led by Dahl (1958), was to agree that participation in decision making was not as balanced as pluralists had initially assumed, to accept the existence of political elites, and to concede that the latter played a disproportionate role in groups. Far from abandoning pluralism, though, Dahl suggested that it still existed because political elites compete with each other to achieve their aims. Politics may be hierarchical, but there is no single homogeneous elite group. Thus pluralists would see business as divided between, say, the financial and the manufacturing sector, or between major industries with competing interests.

Further down the continuum between pluralism and elitism is **corporatism** (see the Case Study below). Traditionally, *corporatism* referred to a top-down model in which the state incorporated economic interests, coordinating policy with trade unions and industries, in order to control them and civil society in general. Corporatism was attempted in Spain, Portugal, and Greece during the early part of the twentieth century, and was a staple of Mussolini's Fascist regime. From 1922 to 1939 Mussolini maintained the illusion that the government consulted widely with labour unions and corporations, but in reality he centralized power in his own hands and merely pretended to consult with other sectors of society (Wiarda, 1997, p. 40).



See Chapter 5, p. 102, for a discussion of fascism.

Modern societal corporatism, or neo-corporatism, reflects a more genuine attempt by governments to incorporate economic interests into the decision-making process (Held, 1989, p. 65). This version of corporatism shares with pluralism the belief that groups are a crucial part of the political system. But it rejects the pluralist notion that the various groups theoretically have an equal opportunity to be heard. Instead, corporatism attributes a special role to economic elites, arguing that government outputs are the product of a tripartite relationship between elites in government, business, and trade unions. The state sanctions the insider role of economic elites in return for their co-operation in securing their members' support for government policy.

CASE STUDY BOX 1.1

Corporatism: Europe versus North America

Corporatism, more specifically neo-corporatism, has been quite common in certain European states, but far less so in North America. A study of 18 industrialized countries published in 1991 ranked Austria, Norway, Sweden, and the Netherlands as the most corporatist political systems, and New Zealand, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States as the least (and hence closer to the pluralist model). The same study examined the factors explaining the existence of corporatism and found the influence of social democracy in government to be the most important variable, followed closely by the degree of consensus in the political system (Lijphart & Crepaz, 1991).

The Austrian system of “social partnership” remains the most corporatist structure, with trade unions and employers organized in four institutions: a trade union organization (OGB) and three “chambers” established by law with compulsory membership and the power to consider government bills before they are put before Parliament: one Chamber of Labour (BAK) and two employer chambers, the Economic Chamber (WKO) and the Chamber of Agriculture (PKLWK). This structure has traditionally been characterized by informal relationships between the various actors (Talos & Kittel, 2002), but its key features are the centralization and hierarchical character of the peak associations of labour and business.

Until the 1970s, corporatism was applauded for its economic success. Since then, however, it has been losing favour. A survey of Scandinavian corporatism, for instance, reveals a decline both in the number of corporatist actors in public bodies and in the degree to which governments base decisions on corporatist-style agreements (Blom-Hansen, 2000). Even in Austria corporatism has begun to weaken. Although the structure remains intact, public support for it is decreasing, opposition from some rank-and-file organizations is growing, and relations between the chambers are becoming more adversarial. As a result, government has become more autonomous, relying less on the peak associations of economic interests (Talos & Kittel, 2002, p. 44–8).

Although this form of corporatism does not have the negative connotations associated with the top-down variety practised by fascist and authoritarian regimes, it has not escaped criticism. First, many argue that neo-corporatist governments tend to be unduly influenced by business interests. Even if trade unions are successfully integrated, neo-corporatism is still regarded as less open and democratic than pluralist systems because it is hierarchically organized and gives disproportionate power to economic elites. Second, from the perspective of the New Right (see below), it fails to allow the market free rein and gives in to “unrealistic” demands by unions and social pressure groups.

Elitism

At the other end of the spectrum we find the elite theory of the state. While classical pluralists hold that in Western liberal democracies a multitude of groups compete to influence the government, elite theorists argue that all societies, regardless of their democratic rhetoric, are ruled by a single, unified, and self-conscious elite. A diagram of elite pluralism would show a series of pyramids, whereas a diagram of elitism would show one pyramid containing the elite on top and the masses at the bottom.

Elitism is particularly associated with a group of scholars writing in Italy at the turn of the twentieth century (in particular Robert Michels, Gaetano Mosca, and Vilfredo Pareto), although their work was built on by later writers, mainly American. Rejecting Marx's vision of a future egalitarian society, the original elite theorists believed that a ruling elite was an inevitable feature of all complex societies, whether capitalist democracies or communist systems based on the working class. They claimed to have discovered what Michels (1911/1962) called the "iron law of oligarchy": In all organizations of any complexity, whether political parties or interest groups, there will always be one dominant group that for some reason—whether because of the resources it can muster, its psychological characteristics, or its position within society—is able to take control. In this system, unlike Marxism (see below), no single resource is necessarily crucial. Thus it is possible to conceive of elites based on military, administrative, or religious factors as well as economic ones.

Later scholarship on elitism came from the United States. Whereas the original Italian version saw elite rule as inevitable (and preferable to Marxist egalitarianism), modern thinkers such as James Burnham (1941) and C. Wright Mills (1956) argued that it is illegitimate and should be challenged.

Socialism and the State

For much of the twentieth century, a large proportion of the world's population lived under regimes inspired, at least in part, by the ideas of Karl Marx (1818–1883); socialist thought also played a role in the development of the social democratic principles that inspired the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation and the New Democratic Party in Canada. Socialism of the Marxist variety (and there are forms of socialism that have moved on from Marxism) shares with elitism the belief that every modern capitalist society is dominated by a united, self-interested ruling group and that, despite elections, the influence of the mass of citizens in such societies is minimal.

There are two crucial differences between elitism and socialism, however. First, unlike elitists, socialists are very specific about the character of the ruling group in capitalist societies. As we saw, the elitists argued that the power of the ruling group could derive from any of several sources. For Marx, by contrast, the power of the ruling group in capitalist societies was always based on its control of the primary economic resource: the means of production. In Marxist socialist terminology, the dominant class was the **bourgeoisie** and the dominated class was the **proletariat** (or working class).

Marx produced an enormous and disorganized body of literature that has been interpreted in a number of ways. The dominant interpretation holds that it is pointless for the working class to seek emancipation by gaining the vote and winning power through elections, since the real base of political and economic power is not the elected government. Rather, power lies in the economic sphere of society: Those who have economic power also have political power.

So it is not Prime Minister Trudeau and his government who are in charge, but the bankers on Toronto's Bay Street. Likewise, the US president is constrained by Wall Street. To win power, therefore, the working class needs to attack its source in the economic sphere.

BIOGRAPHY BOX 1.2

Milovan Djilas (1911–1995)

Milovan Djilas fought alongside Yugoslav communist leader Josip Broz Tito in World War II and played a key role in creating the Yugoslav federal state in 1945, which Tito led until his death in 1980. But Djilas soon experienced the reality of the scenario proposed by elitist theorists in the United States: In any complex society, the leaders will form a tight-knit oligarchic group with firm control of power. Communist leaders, Djilas found, were just as likely as bourgeois capitalists in other countries to concentrate power for themselves. He spoke out openly against Tito's corruption and elitism and suffered as a result. Stripped of his party positions, he was imprisoned for several years and lived the remainder of his life as a dissident intellectual. Having contributed to the creation of communist Yugoslavia, toward the end of his life he witnessed its fall into civil war as Serbian and Croatian nationalists split the country apart.

Among his many books, *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System* (1955/1983) remains a classic dissident account of the excesses of communist rule. It cautions us that in any society we have to pay close attention to how state power is exercised, not just how leaders say it is exercised. Djilas lived into the 1990s, to witness the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the violent ethnic conflict that resulted.



AP Photo/Harry Koundakjian

PHOTO 1.4 | Dictators old and new: Tito welcomes Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi to Belgrade in 1973. Like Tito, Gaddafi was welcomed as a breath of fresh air when he first took power in 1969, but both regimes degenerated into authoritarian rule and corruption.

The second difference between socialism and elitism is that socialists believe a communist revolution will bring about a truly egalitarian society, one that will abolish hierarchical power. By contrast, elite theorists argue that a hierarchical system of power is an inevitable feature of all complex societies and that it is unrealistic to think otherwise. This would include any communist society, which might continue the same patterns of inequality as before. The actual leaders and the groups involved may change, but the power dynamics could remain constant.



See Chapter 2, p. 52, for a discussion of socialist ideas on state power.

The New Right Theory of the State

A different theory of the state was promoted from the 1970s onwards by members of the New Right, who credited their ideas to liberal free-market advocates such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Adam Smith (see below). According to the New Right, the state has a tendency to expand its activities far beyond what is healthy for society for two reasons. First, competitive electoral politics encourages politicians to offer ever-increasing benefits to attract votes, but once elected, governments find it difficult to meet their promises and as a result sometimes sail perilously close to bankruptcy; Britten (1977) referred to this pattern as the “economic consequences of democracy.”

The second force, according to New Right thinkers, is the tendency of the state bureaucracy to expand because it is in its interest to do so (Niskanen, 1971). To increase intervention and “big” government, bureaucrats will create relationships with interest groups. Both the bureaucrats and the groups have an interest in governments offering more (mainly financial) benefits. Dunleavy and O’Leary (1987, pp. 117–19) call this the “oversupply thesis.”

For the New Right, the pluralist theory of the state is wrong on two counts. First, the state is not neutral, but serves its own interests. Second, the interplay of competing interests in a democracy does not encourage stability and equilibrium, as pluralists suggest, but leads to “a hyperpluralism of powerful groups confronting weak governments,” which can result in legislative paralysis (Dearlove & Saunders, 2000, p. 220). These New Right perspectives reached the height of their popularity in Canada, the United States, and the UK during the 1980s, when the Mulroney, Reagan, and Thatcher governments began cutting taxes and rolling back the welfare state while promoting the privatization of state assets and increased contracting-out to private companies for services formerly provided by government. In Canada, Mulroney created a “privatization secretariat” that sold off a number of Crown corporations (state-owned enterprises), including Teleglobe Canada, Canadair, and De Havilland (Donner, 2013). New Right policies also involved promoting freer trade and looser restrictions on the flow of foreign capital into and out of the country.

Many of these policies were controversial, but Mulroney remained proud of his government’s accomplishments in privatizing state industries and opening Canada to foreign investment. Reflecting on those accomplishments in a speech in China in 2009, he said that when he became prime minister,

[f]ormidable protective trade barriers, a maze of opaque and restrictive foreign investment barriers and heavy handed regulation hobbled the Canadian economy. There was no choice but to grasp the nettle of change and that is what we did. We implemented a free trade agreement with the US, extended it to Mexico and created the North American Free Trade Agreement. We

converted a foreign investment review agency into a foreign investment promotion agency and declared that “Canada was open for business.” We now offer binding guarantees for the fair treatment of foreign investment in our country, embedded in our free trade agreements or foreign investment protection and promotion agreements. Domestically, we moved to free the economy through deregulation, the privatization of government-owned companies and substantial tax reform. (Mulroney, 2009)

The Empirical Dimension of the State

The theories of the state outlined above have two dimensions: empirical and normative. We will examine the normative dimension in the next section. First, though, it’s important to consider the degree to which each of those theories reflects the reality of any particular political system.

An empirical analysis of pluralism might say that it exaggerates the extent to which power is fragmented in liberal democratic societies and too readily assumes that all groups have a reasonable chance of influencing policymaking. Unfortunately, there is strong evidence to suggest that certain interests are much more powerful than others. The elitist and Marxist theories of the state can also be challenged on empirical grounds. Do ruling elites remain *entirely* untroubled by elected bodies in liberal democracies? Do economic elites *always* control politicians? Certainly we can challenge many, if not all, Marx’s claims about the future direction of capitalism; indeed, as we shall see in Chapter 5, post-Marxian Marxists adapted the classical theory to circumstances very different from the ones Marx imagined.

See Chapter 2, p. 47, for a more developed critique of pluralism.

See Chapter 5, pp. 91–3, for a discussion of the development of socialist ideas.



AP Photo/Lionel Cironneau

PHOTO 1.5 | US President George H.W. Bush talks with British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney before the start of the 1989 NATO Summit in Brussels. Mulroney and Thatcher in particular were seen as embodying New Right ideals of the state, increasing privatization and corporate influence in government.

KEY POINTS

- We can arrange empirical theories of the state on a continuum from classical pluralism at one end to elitist theory and Marxism at the other.
- While pluralism sees the power structure as diffuse and fragmented, both elitism and Marxism see it as concentrated.
- One key difference between Marxism and elitism is that for the former the dominant group is always the class that owns the means of production, distribution, and exchange, whereas the latter recognizes that the sources of power can be diverse. Another is that Marxism looks forward to a future egalitarian society, while elitist theory sees elitism as an inevitable feature of all societies.
- All three of the theories outlined above can be criticized on empirical grounds as failing to adequately describe the reality of the world as it is.

The Role of the State: What Should the State Do?

We can also assess theories of the state on normative grounds. Here the question is how well they represent how the state *should* be organized. We will spend some time discussing what constitutes the ideal polity and the good society in Chapters 3 and 4, particularly in the context of the crucial question of political obligation. First, though, we will sketch out some of the major answers to this normative question.

Pluralism and Elitism: A Normative Critique

Two main normative critiques can be made of pluralism. First, in emphasizing the differences in society, it tends to devalue the idea of the general or public interest. It simply accepts the pessimistic view that society consists of a diverse range of competing, sometimes hostile, interests, ignoring the possibility of common interests and values as well as the human capacity for co-operation and the desire to work together. Similarly, the revised elite version of pluralism can be criticized from a normative perspective for dismissing the importance of political participation. Is competition between political elites really the best outcome that democracy can achieve? Political philosophers have argued that it is not and that opportunities to participate should be enhanced.

As for elite theory, it makes no value judgment about the validity of elite rule. It simply asserts that, like it or not, modern societies are dominated by a ruling elite. However, people often confuse this empirical claim for a normative one. It is possible to justify elite rule on the grounds that the best should rule, without interference from the less able masses. Plato offered just such an argument to justify the rule of “philosopher kings.” Similarly, the modern theory of democratic elitism, examined in Chapter 3, is based in part on the normative claim that elites should be left alone to govern because the masses tend to have authoritarian values and therefore mass participation in politics is likely to lead to instability and crisis (Dye, 2000). In these circumstances, one might assume that apathy would be encouraged. Nevertheless, proponents of this theory are not arguing against public participation so much as they are trying to give a realistic overview of how society operates.



See Chapter 3, p. 62, for a discussion of elitism.

The Liberal Social Contract Tradition

A classic way of determining what the role of the state should be is provided by the liberal **social contract** tradition associated with the seventeenth-century liberal political thinkers Hobbes and Locke, along with Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1717–1778; see also Chapter 4). The social contract tradition is based on a fairly narrow idea of an imaginary **state of nature**, in which individuals exist without government. These philosophers reasoned that to find out what form of government is justified and why, we should try to imagine what life would be like without the state. Social contract theorists envision individuals coming together to decide the nature of the political system under which they will live. This approach was also adopted by the twentieth-century liberal political philosopher John Rawls, whose ideas we will consider in Chapter 4.

See Chapter 4, p. 80, for an exploration of Rawls's theory of justice.

Although both start from the idea of a social contract, Hobbes and Locke present very different versions of an ideal state. Much of the difference has to do with **human nature**—a key variable in political thought (see Plant, 1991, Chapter 1). Hobbes famously paints a picture of human nature as self-serving and competitive; as he famously put it, life in the state of nature (that is, without government) is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” (1651/1992, p. 186). Under these circumstances, a political system is necessary to impose order and ensure security against the risk of both external threat and internal conflict. The ideal political system for Hobbes, then, is rule by an all-powerful sovereign, the “Leviathan.” One of Hobbes's great contributions was to propose a political system that was entirely secular. Here, people would surrender their freedom in exchange for security, not because a ruler wielded divine authority.

See Chapter 15, p. 309, for a discussion of Hobbes's influence on international theory.

Locke, writing a little later, appeared much less pessimistic about human nature and the ability of human beings to live together. Because, in his view, there were no immediate security considerations, individuals should choose to live under political rule only when it protects the **natural rights** they have in the state of nature (1690/1988); see Box 1.3. Locke promotes what became known as *negative rights*. These rights—to life, liberty, and property—are rights against state interference.

Another distinct view of social contract theory and democracy comes from Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), an influential political commentator. In her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792/1978), she argued that liberty was virtually impossible without equality. A society free from both poverty and inherited wealth would make it possible for everyone, including women, to participate in the running of society. She took particular aim at the British aristocracy, led by “voluptuous tyrants” and their “cunning envious dependents.” For her, human reason and the ability to participate in political life are skills that have to be developed. If women were excluded from the public sphere, it was not because they were naturally inferior, but because men dominated society and refused to extend the same rights and privileges to women. Women had less protection under the law than men, and little if any formal education. Social mores prevented them from being equal members of society. If Hobbes attacked the “divine right of kings,” Wollstonecraft attacked the “divine right of husbands” (Held, 2006, pp. 49–51; see Box 1.4).

Following on Wollstonecraft's critique of social contract theories, J. Ann Tickner (1992; see Box 1.5) observed that the assumptions about human nature held by figures such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau were extremely partial, based on a narrow male-centred

KEY CONCEPT BOX 1.3

Natural Rights

Many philosophers draw a distinction between natural rights and legal rights. Legal rights are those that exist in a particular society at a particular time. They are simply statements of what the existing law is. Natural rights, by contrast, are rights that humans are considered to possess no matter what legal and political system they live under. They are said to derive from **natural law**, a higher law handed down from nature or God. During the Nuremberg trials (1945–6), which brought many German Nazi leaders to justice, the concept of natural law played a key role. Although none of the people prosecuted in Nuremberg had broken the laws of their own state, they were judged to have violated higher natural laws against causing war and systematically killing civilians. Such laws were more legitimate than any state law and applied to all humanity. In other words, a strong distinction was drawn between legal and moral wrongs (Washington, 2008, p. 111).

Modern liberal thinkers, particularly since 1945, have argued for the existence of *positive rights*. These are rights to social goods, such as free education and healthcare, and they have been enshrined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, established in 1948. Positive rights have the potential to conflict with the negative rights promoted by Locke. In particular, the right to own property conflicts with the positive rights to basic food and shelter. Some political thinkers, including the Canadian political scientist C. B. Macpherson, have criticized Locke for defending a possessive individualism that justifies selfishness, greed, and vast inequalities (1962).

perspective that considered co-operation and optimism to be more vices than virtues, and violence and competitiveness to be natural for all human beings. Carole Pateman has also produced some groundbreaking work on social contract theories. Her innovative book *The Sexual Contract* (1998) offers a gendered critique not only of liberal and conservative traditions but also of socialist and other left-leaning traditions. It's important to keep Pateman's and Tickner's arguments in mind, because if we assume that human nature favours co-operation and peace, the powers we are willing to give up to a powerful state may diminish considerably.

KEY QUOTE BOX 1.4

David Held on Mary Wollstonecraft

Until the twentieth century, there were few if any writers who traced as perceptively as she did the relation between public and private spheres and the ways in which unequal gender relations cut across them to the detriment of the quality of life in both. The radical thrust of her argument posed new questions about the complex conditions under which a democracy, open to the participation of both women and men, can develop. (Held, 2006, p. 53)

KEY QUOTE BOX 1.5

State of Nature or State of Man? J. Ann Tickner on How Women Can Change Perceptions and Bring Peace

I shall suggest an alternative story, which could equally be applied to the behavior of individuals in the state of nature. Although frequently unreported in standard historical accounts, it is a true story, not a myth, about a state of nature in early nineteenth-century America. Among those present in the first winter encampment of the 1804–1806 Lewis and Clark expedition into the Northwest territories was Sacajawea, a member of the Shoshone tribe. Sacajawea had joined the expedition as the wife of a French interpreter; her presence was proving invaluable to the security of the expedition's members, whose task it was to explore uncharted territory and establish contact with the native inhabitants to inform them of claims to these territories by the United States. Although unanticipated by its leaders, the presence of a woman served to assure the native inhabitants that the expedition was peaceful since the Native Americans assumed that war parties would not include women: the expedition was therefore safer because it was not armed.

This story demonstrates that the introduction of women can change the way humans are assumed to behave in the state of nature. Just as Sacajawea's presence changed the Native American's expectations about the behavior of intruders into their territory, the introduction of women into our state-of-nature myths could change the way we think about the behavior of states in the international system. The use of the Hobbesian analogy in international relations theory is based on a partial view of human nature that is stereotypically masculine; a more inclusive perspective would see human nature as both conflictual and cooperative, containing elements of social reproduction and interdependence as well as domination and separation. Generalizing from this more comprehensive view of human nature, a feminist perspective would assume that the potential for international community also exists and that an atomistic, conflictual view of the international system is only a partial representation of reality. (Tickner, 1992, pp. 62–3)

The Night-Watchman State

Both Locke and Hobbes are often used by the New Right to legitimate the excesses of the free market. Another classical liberal tradition revived by the New Right is the principle of limited state interference. Until the end of the nineteenth century, classical liberals advocated a minimal state in order to maximize freedom. The political popularizers of the New Right, as we have noted, were political leaders such as Mulroney, Thatcher, and Reagan, but academic support for these ideas was provided by political economists such as Friedrich Hayek (1899–1992) and Milton Friedman (1912–2006), as well as political philosophers such as Robert Nozick (1938–2002). Similar views have more recently been expounded by the Fraser Institute in Calgary, which helped to shape the New Right policies



See Chapter 4, p. 81, for a discussion of Nozick and the minimal state.

introduced in the provinces of Alberta and Ontario in the 1990s and had an influence on the Conservative government in Ottawa.

The New Right criticized the state interventionism that had become standard in liberal democracies after 1945. Intervention took several forms: welfare programs, market regulation, and demand management, as prescribed by the British economist John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946); increasing state spending on public works and the welfare state to stimulate public demand when it falls too low and reducing it when increasing demand threatens to create inflationary pressures. Different models of interventionism had been adopted in the UK, the United States, Canada, and throughout Western Europe. The New Right argued that state intervention was counterproductive because it encouraged excessive reliance on the state, stifling self-reliance, individual initiative, and the entrepreneurial spirit, and was inefficient, propping up unprofitable businesses and large bureaucracies while failing to reward individual effort appropriately.

Utilitarianism

Another strand of liberal thought is **utilitarianism**, a theory of the state associated with the British political thinker Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832). Bentham argued that the legitimacy of a government should be judged by the degree to which it promoted the greatest happiness, or, as he sometimes put it, the greatest happiness of the greatest number (1789/1948). Happiness, for Bentham, was associated with pleasure. If governments maximize happiness they are valid; if they fall short of this goal they are not. Bentham argued that only if rulers were accountable to the electorate would they seek to maximize the happiness of all, rather than their own happiness. This forms the basis of the utilitarian theory of democracy. The main advantage of utilitarianism is that by focusing on the happiness of the community rather than the protection of individual rights, it promotes the kind of collective goals associated with the welfare state. On the down side, utilitarianism, or at least the classical version associated with Bentham, has been criticized for ignoring the risk that the human rights of minorities might be overridden by the majority.



See Chapter 3, p. 61, for a discussion of the utilitarian theory of democracy.

Liberalism and Communitarianism

The classical liberal theory of the state, which is closely associated with pluralism, holds that the state should remain neutral in debates over different conceptions of the good. A liberal society's function, Arblaster (1984, p. 45) suggests, "is to serve individuals, and one of the ways in which it should do this is by respecting their autonomy, and not trespassing on their rights to do as they please as long as they can do so without harm to others." This harm principle, associated with John Stuart Mill, is central to the liberal emphasis on freedom and toleration. It is also the central theme of Rawls's later work as laid out in his *Political Liberalism* (1993).



See Chapter 4, p. 77, for further discussion of the harm principle.



See Chapter 5, p. 89, for a discussion of liberalism.

For much of its history, the major ideological opposition to liberalism came from the left, from Marxism in particular. In more recent years, liberal theory has been challenged by a body of thought known as **communitarianism**. The label "communitarian" embraces a wide variety of views, but in general communitarians call for the state to play a role in uniting society around a common set of values. This contrasts with the liberal insistence that the state should allow multiple belief systems to coexist (see Box 1.6).



See Chapter 4, p. 83, for a discussion of communitarianism.

KEY CONCEPT BOX 1.6

Communitarianism

Since the 1970s, communitarianism has offered a potent ideological challenge to liberalism. The essence of the approach is an attack on the asocial individualism of liberalism. This attack is both methodological and normative (Avineri & de-Shalit, 1992, p. 2):

- Methodologically, communitarians argue that human behaviour is best understood in the context of an individual's own social, historical, and cultural environments. Thus "it is the kind of society in which people live that affects their understanding both of themselves and of how they should lead their lives" (Mulhall & Swift, 1996, p. 13).
- Some communitarians critique liberalism on the normative grounds that liberal theory accurately reflects liberal society and therefore should be transformed. Others suggest that liberal theory misrepresents the reality of modern societies where social ties are more important in determining the belief systems of individuals than liberal theory has realized (Walzer, 1990). Normatively, communitarians emphasize the value of communal existence and the importance of being bound together by a shared vision of the good promoted by the state. This tradition can be traced back to Aristotle (MacIntyre, 1985).

KEY POINTS

- A normative critique of pluralism focuses on its downgrading of the public or general interest, while a normative critique of elitism focuses on its insistence that elites alone should rule.
- The liberal social contract tradition, represented notably by Hobbes and Locke, offers two distinct arguments justifying the existence of the state, the former focusing on security, the latter on the protection of natural rights.
- Wollstonecraft argued that greater economic equality and the emancipation of women were preconditions for creating a fair and equitable democratic system.
- Tickner and Pateman demonstrate that there is more than one view of human nature, and that social contract theorists often confuse their own Western male views for the views of human beings in general.
- Other normative theories propose a limited role for the state (the New Right), the pursuit of happiness or preference satisfaction as the ultimate goal (utilitarianism), the upholding of moral pluralism (liberalism), and a critique of the state in general (anarchism).
- A key debate in modern political theory is the one between liberal and communitarian theories of the state.

See Chapter 5, p.105, for an exploration of anarchism.



The Future of the State

The concept of the state is now under attack by various scholars who challenge not only its utility but its very existence. There are empirical and normative dimensions to this debate. Empirical arguments suggest that certain modern developments, such as globalization,

are making the state increasingly redundant. From the normative perspective, the state is an exploitative institution that should be done away with.

Is the State Being “Hollowed Out”?

The “hollowing out” thesis (Jessop, 1990) suggests that the state no longer plays the significant role that it used to. The **globalization** thesis, for example, suggests that the world has become so economically and politically interdependent that there is little room for states to manoeuvre, that currency speculators like George Soros have more power than Canada’s minister of finance or the secretary of the treasury in the United States, and that the power of government is far less than it was historically. If this thesis is true, there is a significant gap between the reality of politics in the modern world and both political theory, with its focus on the sovereign nation-state, and the realist tradition in international relations, which centres on a system of autonomous and competing sovereign states. Globalization challenges both assumptions.

We will consider globalization in greater detail later in this book. For now, let’s look at it from our two perspectives, empirical and normative. From an empirical perspective, the major impetus behind globalization is the internationalization of the economy. With the growth of multinational corporations—whose power now rivals the power of states—and the liberalization of world trade, the economic policies of individual states have come to be determined elsewhere (Ohmae, 1995). Partly as a result of greater economic **interdependence** (together with improved communications technologies and the emergence of global environmental problems), supranational institutions have emerged to challenge the power of states.

As a result, critics argue, realists who believe in the primary role of sovereign states in the international system are behind the times. World politics has changed fundamentally since the end of the **Cold War**. We are now living in a period of **new medievalism**, where “as in medieval Europe, sovereignty is shared among societies that interact in an ongoing way” (Cunningham, 2002, p. 203; see also Slaughter, 2003, p. 190). In other words, state borders are no longer rigid; they are porous, and state governments compete for authority with a variety of transnational and international institutions that include the United Nations, multinational corporations, and non-governmental organizations such as Greenpeace and Human Rights Watch. Others argue that the globalization thesis exaggerates the reality that sovereign states still have a great deal of autonomy, and that they were never as self-contained as is often supposed (Robertson, 1992).

For those in favour of this type of globalization, the liberation of world markets is a positive development, facilitating greater prosperity. Furthermore, global environmental problems require global solutions that are beyond the reach of sovereign states. Other problems such as terrorism and human trafficking also require high levels of co-operation. Finally, globalization promotes the cosmopolitan goals of peace, tolerance, and justice in a world where we owe our allegiance not to a single state but to humanity at large—a form of global citizenship (Heater, 1999). Others do not see the nation-state as an obstacle to **cosmopolitanism** and suggest that a system of markets unencumbered by the state is a negative phenomenon, exacerbating inequality in the world and increasing exploitation, particularly in developing countries.



See Chapter 20, p. 405, for a discussion of the relationship between the state and international economic institutions.

Conclusion

We began this chapter by noting the difficulty of defining the state. We then considered various ways of classifying states and saw that one of the most important ways centres on the distribution of power. We identified a range of empirical theories along a continuum from the open and diffuse picture painted by classical pluralism to the closed and hierarchical picture painted by elitists and Marxists.

Overall, theories of the state, with the possible exception of Marxism, do not give enough emphasis to the external constraints operating on the state in the modern world. By this we mean globalizing tendencies, which will be a recurring theme of this book. In Chapters 3 and 4 we will resume our exploration of how the state should be organized and what it should do. First, though, in Chapter 2 we will look closely at the concept of power, because this will help us to understand how difficult it is to determine which of our theories of the state is the most accurate description of a particular political system.

Key Questions

1. What is the state?
2. What functions should the state perform?
3. Can we do without the state?
4. Compare and contrast the pluralist, elitist, and Marxist theories of the state.
5. How adequate is the pluralist theory of the state?
6. Provide a normative critique of pluralism and elitism.
7. What might a feminist version of the social contract look like?
8. How effective is the communitarian critique of liberalism?
9. Are the state's days numbered?

Further Reading

Hall, A.J. (2010). *Earth into property: Colonization, decolonization, and capitalism*.

Montreal, Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. A thought-provoking overview of the development of the modern globalizing world through a history of colonialism, the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, and the spread of global capitalism.

Held, D. (2006). *Models of democracy*. **Stanford: Stanford University Press.** An excellent

book on the history of democracy and its many models that also discusses the contributions of many female writers, including Wollstonecraft.

Migdal, J. (2001). *State in society: Studying how states and societies transform and constitute one another*. **Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.** In this innovative work the

author redefines the state as “a field of power marked by the use and threat of violence and shaped by (1) the image of a coherent, controlling organization in a territory, which is a representation of the people bounded by that territory, and (2) the actual practices of its multiple parts” (pp. 15–16).

Nelson, B. (2006). *The making of the modern state: A theoretical evolution*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan. A concise and readable overview of the evolution of the state as we understand it today, primarily in Europe but also in the developing world.

Pateman, C. (1998). *The sexual contract*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. A classic and robust critique both of social contract theorists such as Locke, Hobbes, and Rousseau and of the way their gendered ideas were implemented by the founding fathers of the United States.

Simpson, A. (2014). *Mohawk interruptus: Political life across the borders of settler states*. Durham: Duke University Press. In this book the author challenges European conceptions of the state and sovereignty, asserting that Indigenous sovereignty can and should operate alongside Western notions. She asserts the “right of ethnographic refusal” to reject the controlling influence of the settler state.

Web Links

www.apsanet.org/section17

On political theory in general, see the home page of the “Foundations of Political Theory” section of the American Political Science Association. Among other things, it will give you access to a wide range of key journals.

www.politicaltheory.info

The Political Theory Daily Review is a portal blog that provides links to the latest news, publications, and reviews covering all fields of political theory and political philosophy.

www.marxists.org

For Marxist literature.

www.ucl.ac.uk/Bentham-Project

The best source on Bentham, this is the website of the Bentham Project at University College London.