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## We are the State. Pierre Bourdieu on the State and Political Field

Not so long ago I found myself standing at the corner of the rue de l'université and the Boulevard Saint-Germain. Behind me was the building I had just left which houses the political science centre CEVIPOV, the very heart of France's intellectual establishment. On the opposite side of the Boulevard Saint-Germain stands the Ministry of Defence. I remember idly wondering whether this was the spot that inspired Louis Althusser to draw the distinction between the state's ideological and repressive apparatus. Reading Bourdieu on the state raises a similar suspicion: when theorists talk about an abstraction called 'the state' are they really talking about a particular state, namely that which they know best, their own nation state? Is Althusser's or Bourdieu's 'state' really the French state, the capitalized *l'Etat*?

Bourdieu is best known in the Anglophone world for his analysis of the relationship between class and habitus; for perhaps the most influential account of the cultural reproduction of social differences. His writings on the state – substantial though they are – are less influential. One barrier is that much of this work is offputtingly obscure even by the standards set by his more conventionally sociological writings. While one can defend this level of complexity by arguing, as Richard Terdiman has done,<sup>1</sup> that Bourdieu wishes to avoid a 'comfortable and unproblematic understanding [between reader and writer] of the meaning of words, of categories' because it precisely these that need to be problematized, the effect is alternately disheartening and irritating, even for those who honestly seek to avoid any 'hint of wilful incomprehension'.<sup>2</sup> A second, and more important, possible reason for this relative lack of interest is that his conception of the state does not speak to those who have been exposed to thirty or more years of the – at least apparent – rolling back of the state. In this discussion, I wish to link the latter of these points to that made in my opening paragraph: the embeddedness of Bourdieu's account of the state (the State) in a French – or at least Continental European – context; a context which, from the perspective of much of the Anglophone world, looks atypical, not to say exotic. Before doing this, I shall seek to contextualize Bourdieu's thoughts on the state in his general sociology.

Bourdieu's account of modernity as a process of increasing differentiation is a mainstream – even commonplace – one in sociology. Weber's separation of spheres, Simmel's crossing of social circles, Elias's lengthening chains of interdependence are all variations on this by now standard sociological theme. In Bourdieu, this theme takes the form of the differentiation of 'fields'; a notion that Terdiman<sup>3</sup> has usefully compared to a magnet: 'a force upon all those who come within its range', but one where the source of the 'pull' remains obscure. The economic, religious, political, artistic, bureaucratic, etc. fields separate and become increasingly monopolized by competing professional groups each deploying its own forms of capital to maximize its material and symbolic interests.

In the sphere of the politics, this increased differentiation takes the form of a shift from a 'dynastic state', in which the basic unit and organizing principle is the (royal) house (*maison*), to the modern state in which the house has been displaced by the bureau, and the private interests of the monarch by 'reasons of state.' Bourdieu's reconstruction of this gradual shift has echoes of both Weber's account of the emergence of the modern politician (who must live off politics) out the court

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<sup>1</sup> R. TERDIMAN, *Translator's introduction* to P. BOURDIEU, *The force of law: towards a sociology of the juridical field*, in "The Hastings Law Journal", 38(1987), p. 810.

<sup>2</sup> J. B. THOMPSON, *Editor's introduction* to P. BOURDIEU, *Language and Symbolic Power*, edited by John B. Thompson, Polity, Cambridge 1991, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> R. TERDIMAN, *op. cit.*, p. 806.

advisor<sup>4</sup> and of the Cambridge School's – clearly related – account of the development of the modern state in terms of the depersonalization of power.<sup>5</sup>

With the idea of the crown, the notion of an autonomous entity, independent of the king as individual, takes shape little by little through a reinterpretation of the idea of the house transcending its own members.<sup>6</sup>

For Bourdieu, as for Weber before him, mechanisms such as the limitation of the powers of office to the lifetime of the incumbent<sup>7</sup> facilitate the emergence of the schooled professionals whose merit- and competence-based legitimacy slowly undermines the dynastic principles of 'blood and birth'.<sup>8</sup> The former comes to constitute a new usurpatory 'state nobility' (*noblesse de robe*). Like the king and nobles before it, this class gains access to the material benefits that the state, as a 'profitable enterprise',<sup>9</sup> provides, but no longer via personal *largesse* and the '*private appropriation of public resources by a few*',<sup>10</sup> as was the case in the dynastic state, but via a struggle, for which the state becomes the site, for 'power over statist capital and over the material profits (salaries, benefits) and symbolic profits (honours, titles, etc.)'.<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu draws his inspiration here less from Weber's political writings than from his sociology of religion: if you want to explain the power of a religion look not first to its books and doctrines but ask which social groups have an interest – material and symbolic – in the resources that religion (as another profitable enterprise) can generate.<sup>12</sup>

Because interest in the class-taste relationship has been so great, most of the reception of Bourdieu's work in sociology has focused on his argument that the logic of economics – the maximization of various forms of capital – shapes the strategies of actors in modern, differentiated societies. This can easily lead to a (mis)interpretation of Bourdieu as an economic reductionist;<sup>13</sup> as a neo-Marxist or as a rational choice theorist minus the usual assumption of methodological individualism. An alternative here would be to read Bourdieu's argument as variant of Karl Polanyi's view that while the 'natural' inclination of actors is not to maximize material profit but rather to defend their 'social standing', 'social claims' and 'social assets',<sup>14</sup> where the economy has become 'disembedded' it reshapes all other social relation in its own image turning the actor into the 'market subject' bent on maximizing utility (or various forms of 'capital' in Bourdieu's terms). Such a reading would historicize Bourdieu's theory and avert the accusation that he commits what Polanyi calls the 'economic fallacy': the view that the economy is prior and primary.<sup>15</sup> But even such a charitable reading can miss the point that in Bourdieu there is a second field that is likewise disembedded and comes to acquire a significance that may even rival that of the economy, namely the state.

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<sup>4</sup> M. WEBER, *Politik als Beruf*, in *Gesammelte politische Schriften*, edited by Johannes Winckelmann, Tübingen J. C. B. Mohr 1988 [1919].

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. Q. SKINNER, *The state*, in T. Ball- J. Farr - Russell L. Hanson (eds), *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989.

<sup>6</sup> P. BOURDIEU, *From the king's house to the reason of state: a model of the genesis of the bureaucratic field*, in "Constellations", 11(1/2004), p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Ivi, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Ivi, p. 25

<sup>9</sup> Ivi, p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> Ivi, p. 26 (original emphasis).

<sup>11</sup> Ivi, p. 34.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. P. BOURDIEU, *Legitimation and structured interests in Weber's sociology of religion*, in S. WHIMSTER – S. LASH (eds.), *Max Weber, Rationality and Modernity*, Allen & Unwin, London 1987.

<sup>13</sup> For a corrective, see E. P. THOMPSON, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> K. POLANYI, *The Great Transformation. The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, Beacon Press, Boston 1957 [1944], p. 46.

<sup>15</sup> I would like to thank Antonino Palumbo for drawing the parallel between Polanyi and Bourdieu to my attention.

This view becomes apparent in one of his major statements on the nature of the modern state.<sup>16</sup> This piece starts with a telling quotation and a no less telling example. The quote is from Thomas Bernhard, one-time *enfant terrible* of Austrian theatre and literature, which starts 'School is the state school where young people are turned into state persons and thus into nothing other than henchmen of the state'.<sup>17</sup> These 'state persons' might be thought of as the equivalent, in the political sphere, of Polanyi's market subjects in the economic. While noting the hyperbolic nature of Bernhard's prose, Bourdieu does nothing to distance himself from these sentiments. Why should he? They embody well two aspects of his own understanding of the state: (i) its omnipresence and (ii) its monopoly not only of 'legitimate coercion' but also of the 'symbolic violence' that allows it to shape the dominated; to impose upon them one legitimate discourse that becomes internalized and naturalized. The example he then uses is orthography. Each spelling reform is merely the revision of an older 'decree', and yet those who defend orthographic orthodoxy 'mobilize in the name of natural spelling and of the satisfaction, experienced as intrinsically aesthetic, given by the perfect agreement between mental structures and objective structures' (ibid: 2). The example is meant to illustrate the naturalization of that which had once been imposed, and which itself may have been resisted by earlier defenders of orthographic orthodoxy. This process of internalization and naturalization in turn demonstrates the state's symbolic power over cultural and linguistic discourse; its capacity to categorize and constitute.

Both the quote and the example are telling because they appear to presuppose a particular kind of state. In Bernhard's Austria, like Bourdieu's France, teachers were civil servants. Moreover, in the neo-corporatist Austria of the time in which Bernhard was writing most public service employees (whether train drivers or players in the Wiener Philharmoniker) were civil servants and both a photo of the Federal President and the crucifix typically hung in the classroom (the latter, of course, unthinkable in republican France). In such a context, Bernhard's observations do not appear as hyperbolic as they would if applied to the state in general. But this is just what Bourdieu is doing. In taking the case of spelling reform he is, furthermore, assuming a context in which there is a state institution charged with policing the national language, namely the veritable and grandly housed l'Académie française. Such institutions are not uncommon, but by no means universal. More generally, Bourdieu's analysis assumes what Michael Mann might call an 'immodest state'; a state which actively seeks to shape society in detail:

«The state is the *culmination of a process of concentration of different species of capital: capital of physical force or instruments of coercion (army, police), economic capital, cultural or (better) informational capital, and symbolic capital. It is this concentration as such which constitutes the state as the holder of a sort of meta-capital granting power over other species of capital and over their holders*».<sup>18</sup>

While Mann, like most political sociologists, acknowledges the role of the state in shaping national culture, he argues that the dominant model that emerged was that of the 'modest' nation state in which 'much of social life remained or became *more* private, outside the competence of the nation state'.<sup>19</sup> The state learned to live alongside spheres over which it did not have direct control, not least capitalism.<sup>20</sup> Those states that were immodest in this sense, notably fascist states and Soviet Communism, failed. Furthermore, 'most Northwestern states *lost* some of their functions during the

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<sup>16</sup> P. BOURDIEU, *Rethinking the state: genesis and structure of the bureaucratic field*, in "Sociological Theory", 12(1/1994), pp. 1-18.

<sup>17</sup> *Alte Meister. Komödie*, 1985, quoted in P. BOURDIEU, *Rethinking the state: genesis and structure of the bureaucratic field*, cit., p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Ivi, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> M. MANN, *Has globalization ended the rise and rise of the nation-state?*, in "Review of International Political Economy", 4(3/1997), p. 447.

<sup>20</sup> G. POGGI, *The constitutional state of the nineteenth century: an elementary conceptual portrait*, in "Sociology", 11(1977), pp. 311-332.

period of their expansion' relinquishing 'powers over moral regulation'.<sup>21</sup> Although Mann goes on to argue that some of this autonomy may have been lost with the rise of the welfare state (or what Bourdieu calls the state's 'left hand') and demands emanating from civil society actors, he would be unlikely to go as far as Bourdieu in viewing the state as the possessing 'meta-capital granting power over other species of capital and over their holders.'

The problem here is twofold. First, Bourdieu generalizes from a particular case – a highly centralized and strong nation state – and views this as an appropriate model of the state as such. This is the possible confusion of the state with the French state that I alluded to at the start. Secondly, his analysis does not provide criteria for distinguishing between styles of state rule: modest/immodest, pluralist/totalitarian, liberal/authoritarian, etc. The latter point is apparent in his scepticism towards representative democracy. Representation, for Bourdieu, is primarily an act of *delegation* into the hands of political professionals with their posts and salaries. In the case of the 'most deprived' this grants '*en bloc*' 'a sort of unlimited credit to the party of their choice' giving 'free rein to the mechanisms which tend to divest them of any control over the apparatus'.<sup>22</sup> The professionalization of politics, like that of law,<sup>23</sup> leaves this field in the hands of competing factions within the state nobility leaving the rest excluded from the game and unable to 'see the interest in it'.<sup>24</sup> It is thus not surprising that Bourdieu should see popular abstention from politics – the right *not* to have an 'opinion' – whether in voting or in responding to opinion polling as a political act; as an intelligible response to exclusion.<sup>25</sup> There is much in this sceptical picture of representative democracy that is plausible, as the growing literature on representative democracy as oligarchy testifies, but it raises again the question: how do we distinguish between degrees and styles of state rule? Are they all to be tarred with the same brush? Bourdieu's distinction, for example, between the state's right and left hand (respectively, the maintenance of the economic/legal order and the provision of public goods) roughly corresponds to Weber's distinction between those forms of social and economic welfare based upon the principle of 'police' and those based upon the principle of 'charity' ('Karitativ-polizeilicher Wohlfahrts- und Wirtschaftspflege').<sup>26</sup> But whereas for Weber the collusion of these principles represents a nightmarish possibility – unrestrained bureaucratic domination – for Bourdieu it is a routine and mundane feature of the modern state.

The young Bourdieu was the prodigy of Raymond Aron but in the patricidal logic of much academic life he quickly distanced himself from Aron and all he stood for. By one could wish that some of Aron's moderation and more nuanced view of politics had rubbed off on Bourdieu. At the heart of Aron's political writings was a concern not so much with the state, but with regimes; with the particular groups that struggles for power and the values ('spirit') they embody.<sup>27</sup> There are faint echoes of this in Bourdieu account of the competition between differing professions and the varying types of capital they are able to mobilize. But taken together these groups still constitute a bloc; they are all part of the state nobility. There is little sense of the ways in which society beyond the state can influence the state, or even of this possibility. Aron's concern was above all to distinguish between pluralistic and totalitarian regimes. This is less pressing now that it was in the 1960s and 70s, but there are other distinctions between regime types that we may wish to draw now but which Bourdieu's totalizing conception of the state necessarily precludes. We might, for example, wish, as Colin Crouch does,<sup>28</sup> to distinguish between democracy, when at least one social force – the labour movement – was able to

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<sup>21</sup> Cfr. M. MANN, *op. cit.*, p. 447.

<sup>22</sup> Cfr. P. BOURDIEU, *Political representation: Elements for a theory of the political field*, cit., p. 174.

<sup>23</sup> Cfr. P. BOURDIEU, *The force of law: towards a sociology of the juridical field*, cit.

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. P. BOURDIEU, *Political representation: Elements for a theory of the political field*, in P. BOURDIEU *Language and Symbolic Power*, cit., p. 184.

<sup>25</sup> Cfr. P. Bourdieu, *Opinion polls: a 'science' without a scientist*, in P. BOURDIEU, *In Other Words*, Cambridge 1990.

<sup>26</sup> M. WEBER, *Die 'Objektivität' sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis*, in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, edited by Johannes Winkelmann, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, 1988 [1904], p. 153.

<sup>27</sup> A. SCOTT, *Raymond Aron's political sociology of regime and party*, in "Journal of Classical Sociology", 11(2/2011), pp. 155-171.

<sup>28</sup> Cfr. C. CROUCH, *Postdemocracy*, Polity, Cambridge 2004.

wring real concessions from the state, from 'postdemocracy' in which that force is so weakened that state actors are able to act more autonomously. In Bourdieu's analysis all such distinctions are elided.

Taken together, these two features of Bourdieu's analysis – the reification of the immodest state and his totalizing conception of the state – may explain the lack of take up of his political analysis in the Anglophone world. This simply does not resonate with the experience of a state that has – at least rhetorically – been renouncing its powers and outsourcing as many of them as possible to another 'field': the market. The obvious contrast here is with Foucault's work on governmentality which has been so enthusiastically embraced by political scientists and sociologists in the UK and in Australia, countries that have – to varying degrees – experienced New Right policies, New Public Management and that catch all: neo-liberalism. View from this perspective, it is difficult to recognize the totalizing state as the state at all, or at least as the state we have come to know.<sup>29</sup>

Despite these reservations, are there lessons we can learn from Bourdieu? Can we use his parochialism to counter our own? It is the conflation of the state with styles of state rule/governance – of the state with the regime in Aron's terms – that mars Bourdieu's political analysis and leads him to reify a particular (strong and centralized) regime into a theory of the state *an sich*. But a parallel tendency is to be found in much of the Anglophone literature on so-called 'neoliberalization' which is no less prone to reifying a particular regime into a theory of the state: the 'post-Keynesian state'.<sup>30</sup> This is the mirror image of the shortcoming of Bourdieu's approach and leads much of the Anglophone discourse on 'neo-liberalization' to taken too many of the claims of the New Right at face value: the rolling back of state in favour of the market.<sup>31</sup>

An alternative view is that such strategies have strengthened rather than weakened the state. This was a possibility noted long before the era of New Public Management by Sheldon Wolin:

To reject the state meant denying the central referent of the political, abandoning a whole range of notions and the practices to which they pointed – citizenship, obligation, general authority – without pausing to consider that the strategy of withdrawal might further enhance state power.<sup>32</sup>

More recently, and with greater empirical backing, the point has been made again by Béatrice Hibou<sup>33</sup> for whom the privatization of state assets strengthens rather than weakens political elites. The state's power may no longer be measured by the proportion of the population that is bound to it through the secure employment contract of the Continental European civil servant or the construction of the kinds of grand state building projects for which French presidents were renowned. But these visible manifestations of state power may have been replaced, at least in part, by state-led projects that no less powerfully shape social relations. Such a view would – again – be consistent with a Polanyian reading of the remaking of the market subject, which, no less than the original 'great transformation',

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<sup>29</sup> It is, of course, ironic that Bourdieu, who dedicated the later part of his life to opposing neo-liberalism and positioned himself '*gauche de gauche*' (cfr. L. WACQUANT, (2004) *Pointers to Pierre Bourdieu and democratic politics*, in "Constellations" 11(1/2004), p. 4), should have a view of the state that appears to say so little to debates critical of neoliberalization.

<sup>30</sup> For an extended critique of this tendency, cfr. P. DU GAY – A. SCOTT, *State transformation or regime shift? Addressing some confusions in the theory and sociology of the state*, in "Sociologica" (<http://www.sociologica.mulino.it/main>) 2/2010. DOI: 10.2383/32707. French translation: *Transformation de l'État ou changement de régime? De quelques confusions en théorie et sociologie de l'État*, in "Revue Française de Sociologie" 52(3/2011), pp. 537-557.

<sup>31</sup> This is not always the case. One well-known exception is Andrew Gamble's analysis of the Thatcher period in the UK as a combination of 'free economy' and 'strong state' (cfr. A. GAMBLE, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: the Politics of Thatcherism*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 1988).

<sup>32</sup> S. S. WOLIN, *Politics as Vision*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ (2004) [1960], p. 374.

<sup>33</sup> Cfr. B. HIBOU, *From privatizing the economy to privatizing the state: an analysis of the continual formation of the state*, in B. HIBOU (ed.), *Privatizing the State*, Hurst & Co, London 2004.

requires massive state intervention and planning.<sup>34</sup> In this context Bourdieu's analysis – hyperbolic though it is – provides a health reminder of the power of state to mould and direct social life.

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<sup>34</sup> P. LE GALÈS – A. SCOTT, *Une révolution bureaucratique britannique? Autonomie sans contrôle* “freer markets, more rules”, in “Revue Française de Sociologie”, 49(2/2008), pp. 317-346. English translation: *A British bureaucratic revolution? Autonomy without control or “freer markets, more rules”*, in “Revue Française de Sociologie” 51, Supplement (Annual English Selection) 2010, pp. 117-143.