

Concept of the State

The concept of the state has figured as the central theme of traditional political

theory. R.G. Gettel {Political Science; 1949) defined political science as 'the science of the state', while J.W. Gamer (Political Science and Government; 1928)

claimed that 'political science begins and ends with the state'. In modern political

theory, the significance of the concept of the state has been fluctuating. Some

exponents of the behavioural approach in political science have even suggested

abandoning the concept of the state altogether. Their main objection is that this

concept does not help in understanding political reality or the political process,

because (a) the term 'state' refers to a formal concept while real politics transcends

the formal organization of the state; (b) the 'state' is usually conceived in terms of

the 'ends' of the state which drags us to the realm of moral philosophy, far removed

from the real world of politics; and (c) the concept of the state postulates a particular type of organization which excludes top organizations of certain societies, real or imaginary, and thus introduces the idea of 'pre-state' societies and

'stateless' societies. This leads to the assumption that political organization is not a

universal phenomenon. David Easton, in his Political System— An Inquiry into the

State of Political Science (1953), observed:

One person sees the state as the embodiment of the moral spirit, its concrete

expression; another, as the instrument of exploitation used by one class against others. One author defines it as simply an aspect of society,

distinguishable from it only analytically; another, as simply a synonym for government; and still another, as a separate and unique association among a large number of other associations such as the church, trade unions, and similar voluntary groups.

After dwelling on these ambiguities in some detail Easton came to the conclusion

that the word 'state' 'ought to be abandoned entirely'.

It is important to note that distaste for the term 'state' was confined to some exponents of liberal political theory, especially to some American political scientists.

Marxist political theory continued to use the term 'state' to denote a specific form of political organization: the terms 'slave-owning state', 'feudal state', 'capitalist state', 'socialist/communist state', as well as 'pre-state society' and

'stateless society' are the current coins of Marxist political theory. Even the empirically-oriented political scientists of the liberal tradition used the term 'state-

building', especially in the context of developing societies, which signified a renewed interest in the concept of the 'state' as an institutional and constitutional

mechanism. Then, in the 1980s attention swung back to the state, as exemplified

by T. Skocpol, 'Bringing the State Back In' (Bringing the State Back in: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research, edited by P. Evans, D. Rueschemeyer

and T. Skocpol; 1985). However, in contrast to the earlier concept of the state as

an institutional structure, it was redefined as an active agent of shaping and reshaping society. It is thus evident that, in spite of some initial suspicions and

objections, the concept of the state never became entirely redundant for the

study of politics. What is, then, meant by the term 'state'?