

The Origins of the Modern State

What is the State?

Max Weber: The state “is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.”

A **state** is an entity that uses coercion and the threat of force to rule in a given territory.

A **nation** is a group of people who share some sort of common identity like a language, a religion, an ethnicity, or a shared history.

A **nation-state** is a state in which a single nation predominates and the legal, social, demographic, and geographic boundaries of the state are connected in important ways to that nation.

A **failed state** is a state-like entity that cannot coerce and is unable to successfully control the inhabitants in a given territory.

In reality, there is a continuum of 'stateness' or state effectiveness.

Samuel Huntington: “the most important political distinction among countries concerns not their form of government but their degree of government.”

Social Contract View of the State

Early modern political thinkers engaged in thought experiments to think about the role of the state.

What would life be like without a state?

The State of Nature

The **state of nature** is the term used to describe situations in which there is no state.

Hobbes: The state of nature is a “war of everyone against every man” in which life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

Individuals in the state of nature face a dilemma.

- Everyone would be better off if they could all agree not to take advantage of each other.
- But if an act of violence or theft were to happen, it would be better to be the attacker than the victim.

Claim: Without a “common power to keep them all in awe,” the people will choose to steal and kill.

Social contract theorists argue that there's something structural about the state of nature that makes it difficult for citizens to behave themselves.

Game theory can shed light on the structural aspects of the state of nature that might lead to problems.

- A stylized interaction between two individuals who can steal or refrain from stealing.

A **payoff table** represents the strategies and payoffs available to players in a strategic or normal form game.

State of Nature Game without Payoffs

		B	
		Refrain	Steal
A	Refrain		
	Steal		

A **preference ordering** indicates how a player ranks the possible outcomes of a game.

Individual A

- $(\text{Steal; Refrain}) > (\text{Refrain; Refrain}) > (\text{Steal; Steal}) > (\text{Refrain; Steal})$

Individual B

- $(\text{Refrain; Steal}) > (\text{Refrain; Refrain}) > (\text{Steal; Steal}) > (\text{Steal; Refrain})$

Numbers – ordinal payoffs – can be assigned to represent the preference orderings.

- Given four possible outcomes, one could use 4, 3, 2, and 1.

Ordinal payoffs allow us to know how a player ranks the possible outcomes.

Individual A

- (Steal; Refrain) \succ (Refrain; Refrain) \succ (Steal; Steal) \succ (Refrain; Steal)
- 4
3
2
1

Individual B

- (Refrain; Steal) \succ (Refrain; Refrain) \succ (Steal; Steal) \succ (Steal; Refrain)

4
3
2
1

State of Nature Game with Payoffs

		B	
		Refrain	Steal
A	Refrain	3,3	1,4
	Steal	4,1	2,2

Solving the State of Nature Game

What would a rational decision maker do?

Solving the State of Nature Game

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A **strategy** specifies the choices that are made by a player at every point in a game where that player has a choice to make.

A **Nash equilibrium** is a combination of strategies, one for each player, such that each player in the game doesn't want to unilaterally change their strategy given the strategy adopted by the other player.

We can find Nash equilibria by looking for each player's **best replies**.

A player's **best replies** indicate the choices that are 'best' for *each* of the possible choices the other player might make.

If both players are doing the best they can given the strategy adopted by the other player, then neither player wants to unilaterally change their strategy – we have a Nash equilibrium.

Put yourself in the shoes of individual A .

1. What is your best reply if individual B chooses to refrain?
2. What is your best reply if individual B chooses to steal?

Solving the State of Nature Game I

		<i>B</i>	
		Refrain	Steal
<i>A</i>	Refrain	3,3	1,4
	Steal	<u>4</u> ,1	2,2

Steal is the best reply if individual *B* refrains.

Solving the State of Nature Game II

		<i>B</i>	
		Refrain	Steal
<i>A</i>	Refrain	3,3	1,4
	Steal	<u>4</u> ,1	<u>2</u> ,2

Steal is the best reply if individual *B* steals.

Now put yourself in the shoes of individual B .

1. What is your best reply if individual A chooses to refrain?
2. What is your best reply if individual A chooses to steal?

Solving the State of Nature Game III

		<i>B</i>	
		Refrain	Steal
<i>A</i>	Refrain	3,3	1, <u>4</u>
	Steal	<u>4</u> ,1	<u>2</u> ,2

Steal is the best reply if individual *A* refrains.

Solving the State of Nature Game IV

		<i>B</i>	
		Refrain	Steal
<i>A</i>	Refrain	3,3	1, <u>4</u>
	Steal	<u>4</u> ,1	<u>2</u> , <u>2</u>

Steal is the best reply if individual *A* steals.

State of Nature Game

		<i>B</i>	
		Refrain	Steal
<i>A</i>	Refrain	3,3	1,④
	Steal	<u>4</u> ,1	<u>2</u> ,②

The Nash equilibrium is where both players are playing best replies.

State of Nature Game

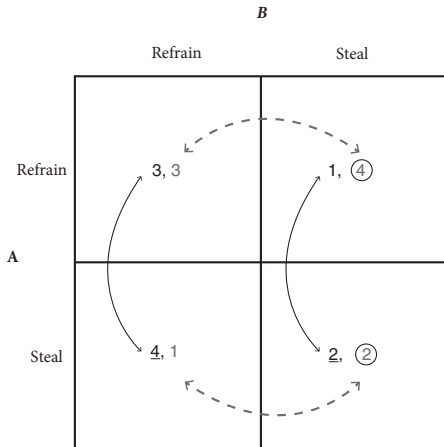
		<i>B</i>	
		Refrain	Steal
<i>A</i>	Refrain	3,3	1, <u>4</u>
	Steal	<u>4</u> ,1	<u>2</u> , <u>2</u>

Nash equilibrium: (Steal; Steal)

Observed outcome: Both individuals steal.

Payoffs: Individual *A* obtains 2 and individual *B* obtains 2.

Visualizing the Method for Solving the Game



A player has a **dominant strategy** if that strategy is a best reply to all of the other player's strategies.

A **dominant-strategy Nash equilibrium** occurs when both players have a dominant strategy.

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Is the Nash equilibrium (Steal; Steal) a *dominant-strategy* Nash equilibrium?

State of Nature Game

		<i>B</i>	
		Refrain	Steal
<i>A</i>	Refrain	3,3	1, <u>4</u>
	Steal	<u>4</u> ,1	2, <u>2</u>

Both players have a dominant strategy to steal.

(Steal; Steal) is a **dominant-strategy Nash equilibrium**.

Individuals will live in a persistent state of fear when there's nobody to keep them in a state of "awe."

The state of nature may seem abstract but . . .

- Yemen, Syria, Sudan, regions of Mexico affected by cartel violence, New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

Nobel Laureate Robert Fogle argues that Hobbes' state of nature describes most of human history.

Humans have spent almost their entire evolutionary history in small bands of hunter-gatherers where looting and violent death were about as commonplace as the Hobbesian state of nature would suggest they'd be.

State of Nature Game

		<i>B</i>	
		Refrain	Steal
<i>A</i>	Refrain	3,3	1, <u>4</u>
	Steal	<u>4</u> ,1	<u>2</u> , <u>2</u>

What's weird about the Nash equilibrium?

State of Nature Game

		<i>B</i>	
		Refrain	Steal
<i>A</i>	Refrain	3,3	1, <u>4</u>
	Steal	<u>4</u> ,1	<u>2</u> , <u>2</u>

Both players could do better if they refrained!

Individual rationality leads to an outcome that's inferior in the sense that *both* players agree that some alternative outcome is better.

It's not enough for the actors to recognize their mutually destructive behavior.

How comforted would you feel if the other individual promised, perhaps in a contract, not to steal from you?

Civil Society and the Social Contract

Hobbes' solution to the state of nature was to create a sovereign – a form of centralized authority – with sufficient force that people would stand in awe.

Individuals should transfer power to the sovereign in exchange for protection.

Individuals would give up their **natural rights** in return for **civil rights**.

- **Natural rights** are universal and exist in the state of nature.
- **Civil rights** don't exist in the state of nature but are instead created by states through laws.

This exchange would be achieved with the help of a social contract.

A **social contract** is an implicit agreement among individuals in the state of nature to create and empower the state. In doing so, it outlines the rights and responsibilities of the state and the citizens in regard to each other.

Social contract theorists have differed over the extent to which individuals should delegate authority to the state.

Social contract theorists view the state as a third-party enforcer that can dole out punishments to individuals who engage in socially destructive behavior that violates the social contract.

These punishments would be structured in such a way that 'steal' is no longer a dominant strategy for individuals in society.

But how does this work?

Civil Society Game

		<i>B</i>	
		Refrain	Steal
<i>A</i>	Refrain	3,3	$1, 4 - p$
	Steal	$4 - p, 1$	$2 - p, 2 - p$

Cardinal payoffs allow us to know how much more the players prefer one outcome to another.

Civil Society Game

		<i>B</i>	
		Refrain	Steal
<i>A</i>	Refrain	3,3	$1, 4 - p$
	Steal	$4 - p, 1$	$2 - p, 2 - p$

How big does the punishment need to be for the individual to prefer refraining?

Civil Society Game when $p > 1$

		B	
		Refrain	Steal
A	Refrain	$\underline{3}, \textcircled{3}$	$\underline{1}, 4 - p$
	Steal	$4 - p, \textcircled{1}$	$2 - p, 2 - p$

Nash equilibrium: (Refrain; Refrain)

Observed outcome: Both individuals refrain.

Payoffs: Individual A obtains 3 and individual B obtains 3.

Problem solved, right?

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But why would anyone want to do us all a favor by acting as our policeman?

One common story is that members of civil society are engaged in an exchange relationship with the state.

The sovereign agrees to act as a policeman in exchange for 'taxes' that the citizens pay.

Given that the state will demand tax revenue to carry out its job, it's not immediately obvious that the citizen will choose to leave the state of nature for civil society.

When is civil society preferred to the state of nature?

Choosing between the State of Nature and Civil Society

State of Nature

		B	
		Refrain	Steal
A	Refrain	3, 3	1, ④
	Steal	④, 1	2, ②

Civil Society

		B	
		Refrain	Steal
A	Refrain	<u>3 - t</u> , ③ - t	<u>1 - t</u> , 4 - p - t
	Steal	4 - p - t, ① - t	2 - p - t, 2 - p - t

Civil society is preferred to the state of nature only if

1. The punishment imposed by the state is sufficiently large that individuals prefer to refrain rather than steal.

and

2. The tax charged by the state for acting as the policeman isn't so large that individuals prefer the state of nature to civil society.

In our particular game, these conditions require $p > 1$ and $t < 1$.

The comparison between the responsibilities that the state imposes on its citizens and the benefits that the citizen obtains from living in civil society is central to the very nature of politics.

Hobbes lived through civil and religious war and was therefore willing to allow the state to impose almost any level of taxation in return for protection.

Locke saw the state of nature as workable, if inefficient, and so wanted more restrictions on the state.

Contemporary debates about civil liberties and the power of the state focus on the same tradeoff.

The creation of the state *may* solve the problem individuals have with each other, but it creates a problem between individuals and the state.

If we surrender control over violence to the state, what is to prevent the state from using this power against us?

Social Contract View of the State: Overview

The state is created when individuals contract with each other to create a centralized authority (the state) that can prevent or resolve conflicts of interest they have with each other.

State creation is a voluntary, consensual, and intentional process.

The state has a duty to protect its citizens.

The state is viewed as a magnet of civil peace and social order, a 'civilizing' force that attracts individuals into its orbit.

Predatory View of the State

The predatory view of the state proposes a quite different explanation for the emergence and role of the state.

The state emerges as an unintentional by-product of individuals seeking increased power, authority, and domination over others in an anarchic environment.

Unless prevented by competing forces, the desire for security and domination can lead to the emergence of a centralized political hierarchy that concentrates power in the hands of an elite few.

The search for power often leads to the creation of institutions we typically associate with the state: police force, military, bureaucracy, judiciary, tax system, and so on.

The individuals who seek and obtain power don't create these institutions with the goal of creating the state. Instead, they create them because these institutions help them achieve their goal of staying in power.

The creation of the state isn't an intentional or consensual process, and there's no presumption the state has a duty to protect its citizens.

There's an explicit recognition that the interests of state elites may well be in conflict with those of the citizenry.

The masses aren't necessarily in a rush to enter the state's orbit and may actively seek to prevent the emergence of the state.

The Market for Protection

The predatory view of the state posits a history that starts out pretty close to the state of nature imagined by social contract theorists.

Some individuals have a comparative advantage in the use of violence and thus have an incentive to provide protection.

As with the social contract view, the predatory view sees the state as an organization that trades security for revenue.

But it's not an impartial third-party enforcer that selflessly solves the collective dilemmas that exist between members of society.

Instead, the state resembles a form of organized crime and can be viewed as an extortion racket (Charles Tilly).

There's no reason to believe there'd be only one 'firm' selling security.

As a result, those who specialize in the provision of security face their own sort of security dilemma in that they have potential rivals constantly vying to take their place.

Gangs in Medellín, Colombia compete both with each other and the state in the provision of order and the collection of taxes (Christopher Blattman).

Prison gangs are often responsible for the maintenance of order in many American prisons (David Skarbek).

The 'state' is just a gang that's managed to establish something like a monopoly position in the market for protection over a substantial territory.

The concern for security on the part of potential rulers leads them to build and use their power to extract resources from others.

State institutions such as a security apparatus and bureaucracy help rulers extract the resources they need to stay in power.

Rulers have experimented with many different types of state institutions and forms of centralized political hierarchy in the hopes of gaining a survival advantage over their rivals.

The Rise of the State in Early Modern Europe

Charles Tilly: "War makes the state . . . States make war."

The elimination of internal rivals and the development of the capacity to extract resources is the process of state making.

Fear of the State

What's to prevent the state from predating on the citizenry?

The predatory view of the state doesn't say that the state will always engage in predation. It does, though, argue that the state will, by definition, have the potential for predation.

History is replete with examples of states that have chosen to imprison, kill, impoverish, or generally dominate and control society.

Early States and Predation

Until about 12,000 years ago, almost all human experience involved us living in “small, mobile, dispersed, relatively egalitarian, hunting-and-gathering bands” (James Scott).

The **Neolithic Revolution** began the transition from a lifestyle based on hunting and gathering to one primarily based on agriculture.

The first agricultural communities emerged in Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt, the Yellow River Valley in China, the Indus Valley in South Asia, and in parts of Mesoamerica.

The emergence of agrarian societies played an important role in state formation.

- Agricultural production produced a surplus that allowed for the emergence of central governance, more complex societies, and higher population densities.

This created opportunities for appropriation, stratification, and inequality that individuals seeking power tried to exploit.

Where they were successful, we start to see the creation of state bureaucracies that sought to control the population and protect the interests of the newly emerging political elites.

Early state formation was easier when:

- Agricultural production focused on grains.
- The population was geographically concentrated.
- The population was immobile.

Why?

Early states recognized the need for manpower to increase the taxable surplus.

They adopted policies to restrict people's mobility and engaged in forced resettlement schemes that brought people from the 'periphery' to the center where their labor could be more easily exploited.

Unfree and coerced labor such as corvée labor, debt bondage, serfdom, communal tribute, and various forms of slavery were common in all the earliest states (James Scott).

There was often considerable popular resistance to living within the confines of the states.

Living in the state frequently meant high levels of taxation, onerous agricultural work, poorer nutrition, and greater exposure to diseases.

Many people tried to live beyond the reach of the state because they perceived life as a 'barbarian' to be preferable.

Fear of the state meant that society often tried to prevent the emergence of a centralized political authority.

But doesn't this mean having to live with the endemic conflict associated with the Hobbesian state of nature?

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But doesn't this mean having to live with the endemic conflict associated with the Hobbesian state of nature?

Often times, yes. **But relative peace was sometimes possible without the state.**

Story 1: Competition and Incentives to Collude

Various providers of security may arise and compete with each other and the incipient state.

Conflict is costly and so they have an incentive to bargain with each other. This often results in them colluding with each other to extract resources from the citizens they're purportedly in the business of protecting.

This can keep the scale of conflict and violence constrained.

Story 2: The Cage of Norms

Cooperation can emerge without a state if people repeatedly interact with each other and care sufficiently about the future benefits of cooperation.

But it takes a lot of effort for people to sustain decentralized cooperation in the state of nature.

Social norms can help with this.

Social norms allow society to police acceptable and expected forms of behavior.

They can play the disciplining role that was attributed to the sovereign in the social contract view of the state by creating incentives for individuals to cooperate and refrain rather than steal.

By specifying acceptable forms of behavior, social norms can make it difficult for people to concentrate power in their own hands and create a centralized political hierarchy.

Social norms can limit violence and state formation.

But social norms and systems of social stratification constrain what people can do and what they can become; they inhibit people's liberty and freedom.

Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson: 'cage of norms'

The cage of norms helps to prevent the worst predictions of the endemic conflict associated with the Hobbesian state of nature.

But the non-elite people in these stateless societies aren't necessarily any freer from domination than they would be if they lived in countries with a predatory state.

The Possibility of a Constrained State?

Our discussion so far suggests there are just two possibilities when it comes to the state:

1. **Unconstrained State:** The state is stronger than society.
2. **Absent State:** Society is stronger than the state.

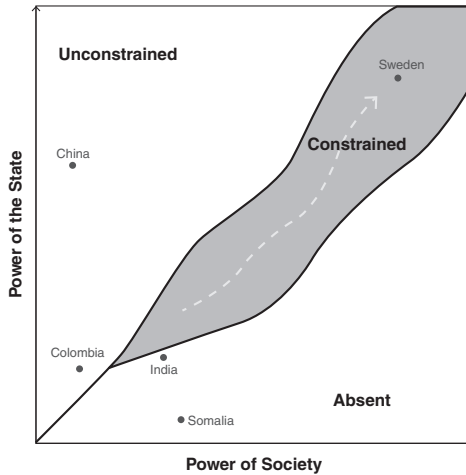
But there is a third possibility:

3. **Constrained State:** The state and society are evenly balanced.

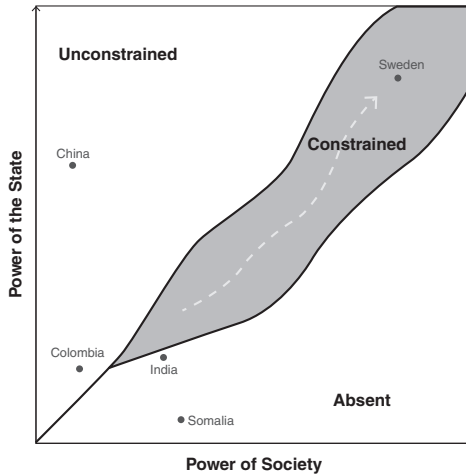
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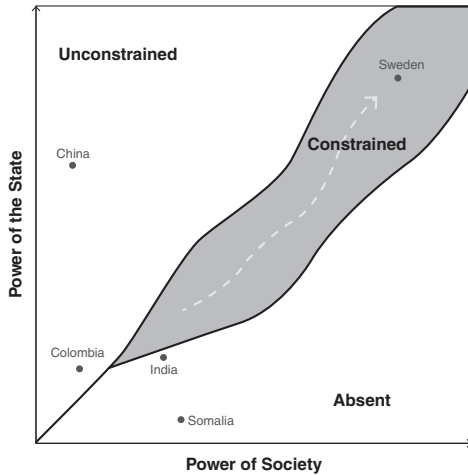
The state isn't responsive to society out of the goodness of its heart. Rather, it's responsive because it's reliant in some way on societal support and societal actors are sufficiently powerful to hold it accountable.



The 'narrow corridor' and a possible positive feedback loop.

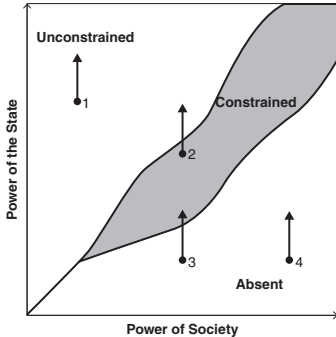


Different types of state behavior, not different types of state.

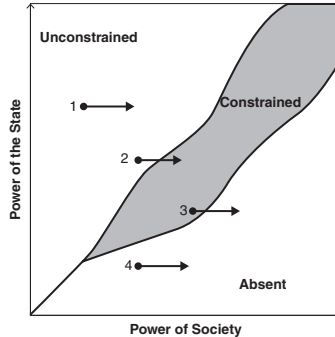


History is not pushing us inexorably towards a single form of state.

(a) The Power of the State Increases



(b) The Power of Society Increases



The impact of structural factors that alter the balance of power between the state and society are necessarily context dependent.

Absent State: When some societal actors are stronger than the state, state institutions have little importance for people's lives.

Unconstrained State: When the state is stronger than society, it's undeterred from predation.

Constrained State: When the power of the state and important societal actors is more evenly balanced, the state is responsive to the preferences and needs of at least some societal actors.

A 'constrained state' isn't necessarily equivalent to modern democracy.