PART I

The state: origins and development

It was already late at night on 4 August 1789 when the French National Assembly continued its debates. The situation was disastrous. A new wave of social unrest, upheaval and looting had swept the country and people were near starvation in many cities. The problems seemed insoluble and the three classes – nobility, clergy and bourgeoisie – were fighting each other and the king. If no reconciliation could be reached soon, the country would collapse into chaos and civil war. Instead of dealing with these burning problems directly, the Assembly argued about a list of principles that should be used as a guideline and benchmark for political activities. On 26 August 1789, the ‘Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen’ was proclaimed. It sought to smash the ancient institutions and end privilege. From that moment on, the power of the state was to be based on the consent of its citizens and the protection of individual rights.

Until the National Assembly declared these principles, France was ruled by the king and his royal clique. The heated debates in August 1789 mark the rise of a new type of government and politics. Political power was no longer based on some ‘natural order’, God’s will, or long-established rights of the nobility. As a citizen, every person had basic and equal rights, and the state was the property of its own citizenry. This double recognition indicated a radical break with previous thinking. Power, government, politics, the state – all these had existed long before the Declaration was proclaimed, but in August 1789 the Assembly knocked down many conventional ideas and replaced them by new interpretations consciously focusing on the crucial position of ‘the people’. In this way, the much older idea of the state was given a radically new interpretation.

We start our treatment of comparative politics in this volume with an overview of the historical development of the ‘state concept’ as well as the actual establishment of states around the world. Part I consists of two chapters. Chapter 1 examines the emergence of the state, its main characteristics, and its spread and variety in the latter half of the twentieth century. As will become clear, states are the most important agencies for the organisation of political power. In chapter 2, we will take a closer look at democratic states and welfare states as they originated in the last two centuries.
At the outset, you should note five important features of this book:

1. It is restricted to the functioning of democratic states of the world and to the ways in which they meet the needs and demands of their citizens.
2. It emphasises the close links and correspondence between government and politics, on the one hand, and the social and economic conditions of wider society, on the other.
3. It pays attention to the political relevance of organisations such as the European Union, Greenpeace or Microsoft, but it considers the state as the most important agency for the organisation of political power.
4. It emphasises the nature of government and politics as being essentially concerned with power – that is, with the capacity to make people do things that they do not want to do.
5. It shows how, despite enormous variation in the detail of government and politics in different states, the democratic countries of the world tend to fall into a small number of types, and to follow a rather limited number of patterns. This is very good news indeed for those studying comparative politics: they would otherwise be overwhelmed by a mass of detail about different countries.
The development of the modern state

Watch any newsflash or open any newspaper and you will see headlines such as ‘France and Britain agree on migration’, ‘Reforms in Costa Rica problematic’, ‘US presents new plan for the Middle East’, or ‘Germany objects to Dutch tomatoes’. These phrases are shorthand. They refer to an agreement among French and British diplomats to check all passports of passengers from Paris to London, or to an initiative of the German minister for agricultural affairs to reduce the import of watery vegetables. Messages such as these are the alpha and omega of politics and current affairs. And states are always at the centre.

Indeed, the study of states and the similarities and differences in their political institutions and forms of government are at the centre of the study of comparative government. Even fashionable debates about the ‘withering away’ of the state in an era of globalisation are possible only if we are clear about the concept of the state to start with. Nor can we understand the politics of the European Union, a form of political organisation that is above and beyond individual states, unless we understand what states are and what they do. This does not mean that states are the only things that matter, nor does it mean that ‘the state’ is a perfectly clear and straightforward concept. But it does mean that the centrality of states in the modern world cannot be neglected, and that the ‘state concept’ is one of the most important building blocks of comparative politics. Virtually every spot on earth belongs to some state. The starting point of our account of comparative government and politics is therefore the nature
of the modern state. And the starting point of our account of the state is a pragmatic approach to the question: How do we recognise a state when we see one?

In this introduction, we shall deal with the emergence of the state and the state concept. In spite of the common use of the term, it is not easy to discern states from other organisations and institutes.

The five major topics in this chapter are:

- What is a state?
- Territory, people and sovereignty
- The rise of the modern state
- Catalysts: warfare and capitalism
- Growth after 1945.

What is a state?

The state is only one of many different ways of organising government. In the eighteenth century, when the French Assembly issued its 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen' (see briefing 1.1), states were not widely spread across the globe. Other forms of political organisation such as city-states, empires, princedoms and tribes were much more widespread. The state is a relatively recent political invention. Today, however, the whole world is divided into states, and the concept of the state has triumphed as a form of political organisation. With the exception of the high seas and Antarctica, every place on earth belongs to a state (see figure 1.1). Several areas are disputed among states and wars over territory are waged, but in general there is no quarrel about the fact that states are the main actors in these disputes.

Though states are universal, they still present a puzzle. Philosophers, politicians, jurists and political scientists have argued about them for centuries. It goes without saying that France, Denmark, Uruguay, or South Africa are states: all are independent political entities and each of them is recognised by the others as a state. You can find them on maps, their representatives meet in

**Declaration of the Rights of Man**

The seventeen articles, describing the purpose of the state and the rights of individual citizens, proclaimed by the French National Assembly in August 1789. A similar list had been proclaimed in the USA thirteen years earlier, in 1776.

**First three articles of the 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen' (Paris, 1789)**

1. Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded only upon the general good.
2. The aim of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.
3. The principle of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation. No body nor individual may exercise any authority which does not proceed directly from the nation.

1 *Imprescriptible* means self-evident and obvious, and not derived from or dependent upon any external authority.
New York or Paris and you hear their national anthems on various occasions. Still, seven key difficulties can arise when we try to characterise states in general terms:

- States vary hugely, ranging from France under Louis XIV to the most modern democracies. They range from India and Canada, to Denmark and New Zealand, and from Stalin’s Soviet Union to Germany under Hitler. How can we put such a diverse collection of political phenomena into the same box labelled ‘states’?
- Some forms of government look like states in some respects, but they are not actually states. The European Union and the Russian Federation perform many state-like functions, but are they the same as states such as Argentina, Latvia, or Taiwan?
- The Vatican, Luxembourg, Monaco and San Marino look like states in some respects, but they are not the same as their neighbours, France and Italy.
- States are certainly not the only political actors in the world. The political impact of organisations such as the IMF, Al Quaida and Microsoft are obvious. Why should we focus on states instead of these powerful organisations?
- Some states have been recognised for centuries, but others, such as Israel and Palestine, are highly disputed. Is the latter a state simply because it calls itself one?
- Even for undisputed states such as France it is not easy to reach agreement about the exact date of its beginning. Was it in 1789? Or should we go back to the Treaty of Verdun in 843? Did states exist in Africa or Asia before European colonisers drew borders, almost haphazardly, through these continents? Were Babylon or Ancient Rome states as we understand them today?
- The term ‘state’ is quite close to other but different terms, such as country, nation, political system, nation-state and empire. To make things even more complicated, these terms are often confused or loosely used as synonyms.

We do not get a clear picture of what is meant by the term ‘state’ by simply looking at the different ways it is used (or misused) today. We have to be more systematic, and we can do this by following in the footsteps of the Greek philosopher Aristotle. He began with the question: What distinguishes a state from other forms of social life? In the opening sentences of book I of his Politics, Aristotle remarks:

> Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good... But, if all communities aim at some good, the state or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims, and in greater degree than any other, at the highest good.


This characterisation contains a number of important assertions. First of all, a state is not some abstract construct, but a variant of human social life...
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(a ‘community’). It is, furthermore, not just any variant of social life, but the most important one (‘the highest of all’) and it can also be called a ‘political community’. Finally, all other communities are included in the state because it ‘embraces all the rest’. Modern states still claim to be the dominant force, just as Aristotle noted. In order to obtain and keep its place as the highest and most encompassing ‘community’, a state must be in charge: that is, it must be more powerful than any of the ‘communities’ it incorporates. This characterisation immediately suggests that power is vital for any discussion of states and politics. And yet even this focus on power, important though it is in defining the state, is not sufficient. States also have other characteristics to do with territory, people and sovereignty (controversy 1.1).

Controversy 1.1

What is a state?

1. Do we have a clear idea about the state?

What is a (or the) nation? No satisfactory criterion can be discovered for deciding which of the many human collectivities should be labelled in this way. (Eric Hobsbawm, Nations and Nationalism since 1780, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990: 5)

As a concept the State has been somewhat overlooked in the political theory and research of the last century, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, and still creates a good deal of confusion and uncertainty.


2. Is the rise of states self-evident?

Of the many theories addressing the problem of state origins, the simplest denies that there is any problem to solve. Aristotle considered states the natural condition of human society, requiring no explanation. His error was understandable, because all societies which with he would have been acquainted – Greek societies of the fourth century B.C. – were states. However, we now know that, as of A.D. 1492, much of the world was instead organised into chiefdoms, tribes, or bands. State formation does demand an explanation.

(Jared Diamond, Guns, Germs, and Steel, New York: Norton, 1999: 283)

3. Where do states come from?

If we now ask, where the state comes from, the answer is that it is the product of a long and arduous struggle in which the class which occupies what is for the time the key positions in the process of production gets the upper hand over its rivals and fashions a state which will enforce that set of property relations which is in its own interest. In other words any particular state is the child of the class or classes in society which benefit from the particular set of property relations which it is the state’s obligation to enforce . . . the state power must be monopolised by the class or classes which are the chief beneficiaries.

Territory, people and sovereignty

States collect taxes, offer protection against crime, provide schools and highways, wage wars, control the opening hours of shops and promote economic growth. They erect police stations and Inland Revenue offices, municipal swimming pools and embassies abroad, mints and hospitals and they employ fire fighters and soldiers. Some states improve the living conditions of their citizens and provide services for the young and old, the sick and disabled, and the poor and unemployed. But it is not difficult to find examples of states that behave quite differently – ranging from the protection of illegal money deposited in Swiss banks to war and the genocidal killing of innocent millions for ‘reason of state’. How, then, do we recognise a state if virtually anything can and has been done by them?

In spite of confusion and continuing debate about the ‘nature’ of the state, it seems to be rather easy to recognise a state. Almost every state call itself a state and emphasises its uniqueness by having a national anthem, a flag, a coat of arms, a national currency, a national capital and a head of state. States are acknowledged by other states as ‘states’, and they exchange ambassadors. These are, however, the symbols of statehood. At the heart of the matter lie three core features of the state:

- A state entails a territory that it considers to be its own. This area can be as huge as Canada or India, as small as The Netherlands or Switzerland, or even as tiny as Slovenia and Tuvalu. It can be an island or a continent (or, in the case of Australia, both), and its borders may have been undisputed and secure for centuries or constantly challenged. To the territory of a state belongs the air space above it as well as its coastal waters. The only restraint on the territorial aspect of the state is that it has to be more or less enduring; an ice floe – even one as large as France or Uruguay – does not count. Sometimes the label ‘territorial state’ is used to underline the importance of this geographical feature. Less precisely, we commonly use the term country.

- A state entails a people, that is, persons living together. Here, too, numbers are irrelevant (think of China, India, the Palau Islands and Iceland). To be a people, the individuals concerned must have something in common, but exactly what they must share to be called ‘a people’ – language, religion, a common history, a culture – is a highly contested matter. Minorities who do not speak the same language, or share the same religion or culture can be found in almost every state in the world. For instance, 30 per cent of the citizens of Latvia are Russians. For the moment, we shall stick to the requirement that any state requires a population, and say nothing about minimum numbers or what they have in common. In other words a deserted island may be part of a state, but it cannot itself be a state. Equally, not all individuals are citizens of a state. As the number of exiles, migrants, and asylum seekers increases, so the problem of the stateless becomes ever more acute (briefing 1.2).
Briefing 1.2

Not every human being is a citizen . . .

Citizens are protected and supported by the state. They can usually get a passport, a licence to drive a car, admission to elementary education, a job, or assistance if they are unemployed or ill. Yet quite a number of citizens are forced to leave the state they were born in, because they are refugees, exiles, or asylum seekers. Those of us lucky enough to be secure in our citizenship are likely to take it for granted, but its great importance in our lives can be seen in the plight of those who are deprived of citizen rights – no residency rights, no working rights, no passport, no welfare services, no driving licence and perhaps no bank account. More and more people are in this situation as the number of migrants, exiles and asylum seekers grows. Which state should provide a stateless person with a passport, work rights, or unemployment support? Many are very reluctant to take in citizens of other states and offer them the same rights as their own citizens.

In 1950, the UN created the High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), a special organisation to deal with exiles and refugees. Its main aim was to find new places to live for about 400,000 people who had been forced to leave the place they lived in Europe after the Second World War. Initially, UNHCR was founded for three years, but in 2002 it was working harder than ever, faced with the problem of about 20 million people forced to live in exile spread over more than 120 countries. (www.unhcr.ch)

• A state is sovereign; that is, it holds the highest power and, in principle, can act with complete freedom and independence: it has sovereignty. Aristotle had something like this in mind with his remark that the state is a community 'which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest'. Sovereignty is a claim to ultimate authority and power. Usually, two types are distinguished: (i) internal sovereignty, meaning that within its own territory every state can act as it wishes and is independent of other powers and (ii) external sovereignty, referring to the fact that the state is recognised as a state by other states. Sovereignty means that a state is independent and not under the authority of another state or ‘community’. Here, we must distinguish between power and sovereignty: the USA and Luxembourg are, legally speaking, equal as sovereign states, though the USA is vastly more powerful. States are also sovereign in principle, as we noted above. This does not necessarily mean that they are free to do whatever they want, because all sorts of factors may limit their powers – other states, the global economy, even the weather. Moreover, states may voluntarily limit their power by signing international agreements, although if they are sovereign states they may also decide to revoke these agreements if circumstances change. Briefing 1.3 gives an example of how state sovereignty may be conditioned or limited by international agreements.

Each state is characterised by these three features; each claims sovereign power over its people and its territory. More specifically, we can speak of a state as an organisation that issues and enforces rules for a territorially defined area that are binding for people in that area. Sovereignty does not mean that
Briefing 1.3

Sovereignty: (un)limited power?

By definition, sovereignty means unlimited power. But states can and do accept restrictions on their sovereignty, for instance by binding their own exercise of power by constitutional rules. An example of a restriction on the basis of an international agreement is Article 33 of the ‘Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees’ of 1951 which stipulates that:

No Contracting State shall expel or return (‘refouler’) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.’

(www.unhchr.ch)

1 By ‘refouler’ is meant to expel or return a refugee.

the state is above the law. Indeed, most states bind their sovereign power by subjecting them to the rules of a constitution (see chapter 3).

Straightforward as this definition of a state may seem to be, there are still complications. Some regions in the south of Italy are, in effect, controlled by the Mafia in a state-like manner. Multi-national companies (MNCs) such as Nike or Shell, and organisations such as the IMF, are also hugely powerful. Did the states of The Netherlands and Belgium disappear when they were occupied by Germany in the 1940s? What about the Baltic states that were overrun by the Soviet Union in the 1930s?

In order to deal with those complications, the notion of the state is further specified by looking more closely at sovereignty. The German social scientist Max Weber did this stressing, first of all, that the abstract term ‘sovereignty’ meant that the state possessed the monopoly of the use of physical force. Only if the state controlled the use of physical force could it impose its rules and realise its claims as the most important ‘community’. Weber moved one crucial step further. In his view, the control of physical force was not sufficient for statehood. Also required was a ‘monopoly’ that was accepted as right – a monopoly that was not only legal, but also has legitimacy. The Weberian definition of the state, then, consists of four elements:

- Weber accepts the three conventional characteristics of a state – territory, people, sovereignty.
- He specifies the meaning of ‘sovereignty’ by referring to the distinction between ‘legal’ and ‘legitimate’. It is not sufficient to base physical force upon the law (legality). In addition there must be a legitimate use of physical force; that is, the use of physical force by the state must be accepted by its people.
- The use of physical force alone, therefore, does not distinguish between states and other organisations. Organisations such as Microsoft, the World Bank, the IMF, the Mafia and the European Union are powerful, and may be more important for many people than, say, the state of Latvia or Iceland.