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052179286X - State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and
Constitute One Another

Joel S. Migdal

Excerpt

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PART I

Introduction

1

The State-in-Society Approach

A NEW DEFINITION OF THE
STATE AND TRANSCENDING
THE NARROWLY CONSTRUCTED
WORLD OF RIGOR

This introductory chapter frames the ideas that have preoccupied me over the past two decades, when the remaining essays in this book were written. I have four primary goals here. First, I want to present a concise statement of the state-in-society approach that is the centerpiece of the book, especially in light of the literature that I have drawn on – and have found wanting. My second aim is the principal one for this chapter: I present a new definition of the state in place of Max Weber’s widely used one, which I believe has led scholars down sterile paths. My hope is that the new definition will offer social scientists a better, more grounded way to conceive of the state and will suggest new, innovative lines of inquiry to them. Third, implicitly these essays reject what has become standard method in political science and related social science disciplines. I want to spell out the point of how better to approach comparative research and state why I think political scientists should abandon the blinders that have limited their work. And, finally, I want to show how a state-in-society perspective can provide new and exciting answers to well-studied issues in comparative studies by recounting the work of several young scholars who have used the approach.

State-in-Society as an Approach to Studying Domination and Change

The themes explored in the essays in this book, domination and change, are by no means original. Identifying and analyzing patterns of domination – the recurring ways in which some use violence, threats, and other means to make others behave in ways they would not have otherwise chosen – and when and why those patterns change have preoccupied

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thinkers in every period and in practically every culture. They have been at the center of modern social science for the last two centuries.

As for me, these issues first began to enter my consciousness when I was still a college student in the tumultuous 1960s, as I viewed the topsy-turvy world around me. I and thousands of other college students like me hooted, sat-in, and marched in the hope of bringing about change in U.S. Vietnam policy and, eventually, to transform the way authority was exercised both in the United States and in the international arena. I do not think that I can underestimate the lasting impact of the Vietnam War on me, especially in cultivating what would become my life-long preoccupation with how authority and power are established, maintained, and transformed.

From a far more distant perch, I witnessed during my high school and college years an epic revolution in the world map. The crumbling of the great European empires led to the appearance of dozens of new states in Africa and Asia. New political leaders made all sorts of bold claims about the prospects for social change inside their borders as well as their intention to break the stranglehold of outmoded forms of authority internationally. It was a moment of great optimism. Even in the midst of the never-ending background noise of the Cold War, with its own not-so-subtle messages about world power – about governmental mastery and personal vulnerability – the Vietnam War and the larger process of decolonization of which it was a part made me acutely aware of patterns of domination and gave me confidence that the more pernicious forms of it could be upended.

The books that I consumed in those years grappled – sometimes explicitly, more often implicitly – with the question of who makes the rules for how others behave, who forces his or her will on others, and when such patterns are transformed. The social science works I read fell into several camps as authors tried to put their finger on the heartbeat of the new postwar world. By far the most popular, and probably the most unsatisfying, was the literature drawing from Talcott Parsons's social-systems theory.¹ Parsons's approach subsumed both state and society in a broad conception of the so-called social system, whose various parts are bound together by an overarching and unified set of values. Ultimately, according to the social-system approach, it is that package of values that takes center stage in the analysis of power, structure, and change. Parsons

¹ Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1951).

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stressed that the study of political structure and process was “in the context of a general theoretical analysis of the total society as a social system.”² He noted that “the core of a society, as a system, is the patterned normative order through which the life of a population is collectively organized.”³ His analysis relied on the concept of a singular set of social values and norms, which he argued were internalized by society’s members.⁴ Following his lead and using a somewhat tendentious reading of Weber, other scholars saw norms and values weaving together elites and institutions from the social, political, religious, and economic realms.

In the United States and sometimes in Europe, scholars characterized the operation of these forces – the controlling values and their ties to elites and social institutions – as pluralism, a harmonious operation of competing interest and status groups. Again, Parsons explains the rationale for pluralist theories of the period: “No society can maintain stability in the face of varying exigencies and strains unless interest constellations of its members are grounded in solidarity and internalized loyalties and obligations.”⁵

For other parts of the world, especially the newly formed countries in Asia and Africa where such normative solidarity was presumed to be absent, the focus was on the development of an ethic powerful enough to transform divergent (unharmonious) norms and institutions (often seen as traditional and inferior). The key in effecting (desirable) change, then, was to knit together a normative consensus that would be the center or engine for a functioning social system. While that would seem a daunting task – after all, which of all the dissenting normative sets would win out? – the problem was wished away by assuming teleologically that modern, Western values would inevitably triumph in the end.

Parsons was the leading sociologist of his era, but his influence extended beyond his discipline to other social scientists, as well. As a political science major in college, I initially engaged the problems of domination and change through variants of social-systems, or simply “systems,” theory. Among the most prominent political science authors

² Talcott Parsons, “The Political Aspect of Social Structure and Process,” in David Easton (ed.), *Varieties of Political Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 71.

³ Talcott Parsons, *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 10.

⁴ Parsons, *Societies*, p. 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*

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in this stream were Gabriel A. Almond and David Easton.⁶ To me, the clearest and deepest thinker promoting this view of domination and change in new states was Edward Shils, an important collaborator of Parsons and a person whose work I continue to find endlessly fascinating and largely relevant.⁷ For all his extraordinary insights, Shils also slipped into teleological traps, repeatedly writing of the “not-yet” developed centers outside the West.

Shils seemed to have an intuitive feel for both the material and ethereal sources of authority that eluded many other writers. He grasped the elusive point that societies are not, and cannot be bound only through material and instrumental relations. People’s connection to one another rests just as fundamentally on a transcendental notion: they seek and create powerful common understandings or meaning in their relationships, forming a strong relational glue that binds them together. For him, a “community is not just a group of concrete and particular persons; it is, more fundamentally, a group of persons acquiring their significance by their embodiment of values which transcend them and by their conformity with standards and rules from which they derive their dignity.”⁸ I admired the way Shils, as an academic engaged in secular analysis, did not shy away from the difficult issue of the transcendental, absorbing into the core of his analysis how people seek larger meaning in their lives and in their relations with others. I began to think that social connections go beyond the cognitive to affective factors, beyond the instrumental to emotional dimensions.⁹ And I continue to feel that social science has erred badly in ignoring phenomena such as revelation and redemption, which have played such a central role in human history. Only a handful of major scholars, such as the brilliant legal scholar Robert Cover, have made revelation a pivotal part of their thinking.¹⁰ Weber made some

⁶ Gabriel A. Almond and G. Bingham Powell, Jr., *Comparative Politics: System, Process, and Policy* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1978); David Easton, *The Political System: An Inquiry into the State of Political Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

⁷ Edward Shils, *Center and Periphery: Essays in Macrosociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975); Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils, *Toward a General Theory of Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951).

⁸ Shils, *Center and Periphery*, 138.

⁹ On the role of emotion in analysis (in this case, the analysis of nationalism), see Kenneth Gregory Lawson, “War at the Grassroots: The Great War and the Nationalization of Civic Life,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 2000.

¹⁰ Robert Cover, “Nomos and Narrative” in Martha Minow, Michael Ryan, and Austin Sarat (eds.), *Narrative, Violence, and the Law: The Essays of Robert Cover* (Ann Arbor: University

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references to the centrality of redemption but did not pursue its importance in the modern state. For Shils and others dealing with such issues as the creation of shared meaning, including people's feelings about the purpose of society and their place in it, there was an understanding that the forging of social bonds through non-instrumental means excludes as well as includes, setting demarcation lines of who is part of society and who is outside it.

One difficulty that I had with Shils and others was the way in which their use of the systems approach and its cognates blurred the locus of authority. In his celebrated essays on center and periphery, for example, Shils saw the source of authority and change as inhering in a witch's brew of elites, institutions, and shared values.¹¹ But the source and coherence of this brew, particularly of the shared values, seemed mysterious. Somehow it came together and then used its powerful ideas, resources, and people to seep outward, incorporating in its path less powerful others who operated according to different sets of rules. It all seemed so elusive to me.

When I went to graduate school in 1967, I came into contact with a different school led by the person who was to become my dissertation advisor, Samuel Huntington. Huntington, along with a few others in the 1960s such as J. P. Nettles, insisted that the place to look for the sources of power to enforce order is in political institutions specifically. After a detour into dependency and world-systems theory, both of which properly insisted on the importance of taking into account international power relationships for the purpose of understanding domination and change in any single society, social science theory returned to Huntington's insight in the late 1970s and 1980s. Authors began to insist that the state should be seen as an organization maintaining a special, autonomous status; it has been, in fact, the locus of change.¹² Indeed, that premise has remained a powerful part of social and political theories right up to the present, expressed in statism, structuralism, rational choice theories, neorealism, and more. Domination and change have frequently been analyzed as part of a process in which the state is the fulcrum. Through law, bureaucracy, violence, and other means, the argument goes, the

of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 108. Cover writes intriguingly about the "*imagined* instant of unified meaning."

¹¹ Shils, *Center and Periphery*, p. 4.

¹² Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, *Bringing the State Back In* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

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modern state has reshaped people's behavior and, by extension, their sense of who they are.

The most important line of criticism the new statist literature aimed at the social systems models and Marxist theories was their inability to distinguish analytically between the state – with its seemingly central role in shaping social relations and personal identity – and other sectors of society. The critics, instead, posited the power and autonomy of the state in determining patterns of behavior and stratification.¹³ The argument of state theorists was that states do not simply blend into an array of elite-run institutions – as Parsons had described it, the political “must systematically articulate with the other sub-systems”¹⁴ – but stand out as autonomous, highly powerful organizations in their own right. The call was for researchers to shift their focus from the general social system to the unique place of the state in rule making and in effecting social change. In so doing, state theorists aimed to move from the emphasis on the harmony or consensus at the center to the conflicts between a headstrong state and other groupings in society. Like the systems theorists, the state-oriented scholars drew heavily from Max Weber. But the Weber they followed was the one who stressed the conceptualization of the state as an autonomous organization with extraordinary means to dominate.

In 1974, a couple of years after I had finished my dissertation, I led a seminar of five masters students at Tel-Aviv University in Israel, where I held my first teaching post. The course examined the city and its role in larger societal and political change through history. We looked into the centrality of the city in popular imagination and, directly or indirectly, in the various social science theories of change and domination. I think that my years in Israel itself, including the traumatic three weeks of the Yom Kippur War and its long, painful aftermath, as well as the months I spent in the villages of the occupied West Bank researching a book,¹⁵ unconsciously brought into doubt many of my assumptions about how authority is exercised and how it changes.

¹³ Ibid. State-centered theory aimed its general critique at another type of literature, though one far less popular in the United States, which was the home of much of social science writing in the decades after World War II. That was neo-Marxism. As with the systems approach, the state theorists faulted the neo-Marxist literature for failing to account for the state's autonomy from social forces, in this case, from the dominant social class.

¹⁴ Parsons, “The Political Aspect of Social Structure and Process,” p. 104.

¹⁵ Joel S. Migdal, *et al.*, *Palestinian Society and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980).

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Despite the almost mythical power of the Israeli state, especially after its resounding six-day victory against three Arab states in 1967, I found that the situation in the Palestinian villages that it occupied bore only slight resemblance to its carefully designed policies. The same impression of a disjunction between state leaders' will and the actual outcomes of their policies came through strongly during and after the 1973 war, as I sat in Tel Aviv glued to the radio and then visited both fronts, the Golan Heights and Suez Canal. Nor did the United States fare any better with its policies in Vietnam. At about that time, too, I heard a lecture by a visitor in the department, Seymour Mann, arguing that, while the Model Cities program in the United States had indeed initiated substantial social and political change in inner cities, the results were a far cry from what policymakers had planned or anticipated.

I began to grow increasingly uncomfortable with what I was teaching in that seminar in the wake of the Yom Kippur War. During one of the class sessions, it struck me that the various schools of social science literature may have been posing their questions in an unhelpful way. They implicitly asked where they could find that center or state or distinctive set of institutions that could have its way with the population, that could effectively make and enforce the rules for daily life and, in so doing, mold people's understanding of themselves. Once that magical site was discovered, it would unlock the secrets, whether material or cultural, depending on the theory, that could tell us how patterns of domination are established and how they change. The assumption was that the city or center or core or state or dominant social class – some integrated locus of authority – held superior resources and ideas that it could use in order to extend its will throughout an entire society.

Those acted upon, the objects of control, played little role in the theories; they were the ones who changed, the passive recipients of others' rules. More often than not, they were assumed to be a supine mass. Only later would subaltern theories from South Asia and works by scholars such as James C. Scott challenge those views. In 1974, Western social scientists seemed nearly unanimous in the mechanics of domination and change that discounted the active role of the masses. Beyond that, they variously asked why some loci of authority succeeded more and others less?¹⁶

¹⁶ For example, Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968); a more recent example is David Waldner, *State Building and Late Development* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

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why some states took on particular forms, such as democracy, and others not²;¹⁷ and so on. Even various shades of Marxists seemed to reserve a role for lower classes only in fiery revolutions, not in day-to-day patterns of domination.

Possibly, I suggested to the participants in the seminar, domination and change were not best understood in terms of the outcomes of purposeful, goal-oriented loci with overpowering resources and ideas at hand, such as the state, as we found in prevailing theories. Perhaps, we should look at multiple sites to understand domination and change – and at results that did not fit any of the parties' designed policies. I submitted to the students that the unintended outcomes of multiple conflicts in society – over whose rules should prevail, over which ideas should predominate – may explain more about domination and change than did existing theories.¹⁸ States (or any other integrated site of resources and ideas) engage in pitched battles with other powerful figures and groups with entrenched ways of doing things. Sometimes, the power of these other social formations is obvious, as in the ability to withhold badly needed credit; sometimes, it is veiled, as in ostracism in a small community. In either case, the struggles over revenues, other goodies, and which ideas should prevail are fierce and real.

In Israel in the wake of the 1967 and 1973 wars, these conflicts were intense and pervasive. The students witnessed them daily in the form of wildcat strikes, the overnight establishment of illegal settlements in the West Bank, resistance of numerous couples to state-mandated religious weddings, marches by so-called Black Panthers protesting Ashkenazi domination, scattered acts of resistance by Palestinians in the occupied territories, and much more. Israel was in turmoil, and the sorts of conflicts that were hard to detect prior to these two wars were now out in the open and impossible to overlook. I asked if the conflicts that underlay these acts, as well as the coalitions that formed around them, might not tell us far more

¹⁷ Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966); Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

¹⁸ Recently, a scholar made this point by noting that any "attempt to preserve particular hegemonic representations of class, gender, and community . . . are interrupted by moments of contestation." Leela Fernandes, *Producing Workers: The Politics of Gender, Class, and Culture in the Calcutta Jute Mills* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), p. xiii.

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about patterns of domination and change than the designs and goals of single, admittedly powerful sites or actors. Indeed, could the apparently rock-hard Israeli state remain fundamentally the same after engaging in these difficult domestic battles? (The answer was soon to be clear; it could not.¹⁹)

Of course, I could not imagine during the seminar that my questions to the students back then would lead me to think and write about these issues for the next quarter of a century. In fact, the ideas generated in that class turned out to be the seed of the “state-in-society” approach developed in the following essays, as well as the origin of a revised definition of the state, which I will offer later in this introductory essay. Throughout the book, my emphasis will be on process – on the ongoing struggles among shifting coalitions over the rules for daily behavior. These processes determine how societies and states create and maintain distinct ways of structuring day-to-day life – the nature of the rules that govern people’s behavior, whom they benefit and whom they disadvantage, which sorts of elements unite people and which divide them, what shared meaning people hold about their relations with others and about their place in the world. And these processes also ordain the ways that rules and patterns of domination and subordination are challenged and change.

My view of the inner workings of domination and change starts with the axiom that no single, integrated set of rules, whether encoded in state law or sanctified as religious scriptures or enshrined as the rules of etiquette for daily behavior, exists anywhere. Quite simply, there is no uncontested universal code – in law, religion, or any other institution – in any society for guiding people’s lives. The state-in-society model used here zeroes in on the conflict-laden interactions of multiple sets of formal and informal guideposts for how to behave that are promoted by different groupings in society.²⁰ These multiple groupings, all of which use subtle and not-so-subtle rewards and sanctions – including, at times, out-and-out violence – to try and get their way, comprise loose-knit informal collections of people as well as highly structured organizations with manifold

¹⁹ See Joel S. Migdal, *Through the Lens of Israel: Explorations in State and Society* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

²⁰ Yoav Peled and Gershon Shafir, “The Roots of Peacemaking: The Dynamics of Citizenship in Israel, 1948–93,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28 (1996): 391–413. They describe this axiom as a “conceptual framework that deconstructs the multiple and competing conceptions of citizenship” (p. 392).