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**Do we need to redefine the state ?**

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Abstract

If we are to be redefining classic concepts for the twenty-first century, then surely one of them should be ‘the state’, particularly as it is now argued that the state (in Britain, at least – it is never clear how far these formulations extend) is now ‘stateless’ and ‘consists solely of contingent practices’. The concept of central authority – whether it be ‘the Prince’, ‘the government’ or ‘the state’ has long been central to thinking about the process of governing, but it is now argued that it is inappropriate in contemporary circumstances. This paper explores the way in which the formation and operation of public authority has been conceptualised, and in what way these concepts are seen as inconsistent with contemporary practice. It investigates the nature of organisational complexity and how this is reflected in the mapping of the process of governing, and addresses the implication of Foucault’s comment that ‘in our political and social thought, we have not yet cut off the king’s head’. This takes us to a discussion of the relationship between conceptualisation and practice, and the place of analytic concepts in the practice that they describe.

**Do we need to redefine the state ?**

1. **Concepts and challenge**

This conference makes a welcome call for the re-examination of the concepts that we use in the analysis of the way we are governed, suggesting that political change may have made them less relevant to contemporary practice. Particular attention is drawn to the concepts of democracy, inequality and power; this paper as addressed to the equally fundamental question of the concepts we use in making sense of public authority itself: ‘the state’, ‘the government’, or ‘the Crown’. This is perhaps particularly appropriate in the light of the conference’s recognition of the 800th anniversary of the signing of *Magna Carta,* which can be seen as the first attempt to frame the process of governing in England in a way that distinguished it from the will and actions of the sovereign.

1. **Conceptualising public authority**

The conceptualization of public authority has proved difficult because of what appears to be a structural tension between the terms of the concept and the experience of the practice. Abrams (1988) terms it the tension between the ‘state idea’ and the ‘state system’. The ‘state idea’ can be seen crystallising in 18th and 19th century Europe, though it can claim descent from earlier normative models of appropriate behavior by the Christian prince (and even earlier theorizing by thinkers in classical Greece), supplemented by strategic modeling such as Machiavelli’s, though these were more concerned with how the ruler should operate than the nature of the domain. Although Louis XIV might declare *‘L’Etat, c’est moi’* (‘The state is me’), the process of governing in 18th century Europe was accomplished by a multitude of offices and practices with diverse and often indirect relationships with the monarch.

In this perspective, one can see the 19th century as an era of state-building, in both conceptual and empirical terms. In England, the Reform Bill of 1832 ushered in an era of reform aimed at drawing the diverse forms of public authority into a single framework which saw all public governing as taking place under the authority of a minister who was answerable to the elected parliament, and served by a corps of career officials selected on merit. The mainstream account, though, sees the development of ‘the state’ in Britain taking place rather later, in the 20th century. (See the useful discussion in Green and Whiting 1996.) We can see parallels in Europe in the Napoleonic consolidation of central authority in France, and the drawing-together of some of the diverse German-speaking states into the German Empire, underpinned by the Hegelian philosophy of the state and the Weberian definition of the state as a body with a monopoly of the legitimate use of coercion over a given geographical area.

So there emerged a shared discourse about ‘the state’ or ‘the modern state’ (Hall and Ikenberry 1989) or ‘the modern capitalist state’ (Ham and Hill 1984). But this discourse tends not be pay much attention to what it means to theorise public authority as an entity called ‘the state’, or how this relates to whatever is ‘not state’; it seems to be sufficient to cite the growth of official organisations and powers. So ‘the state’ becomes an organizational category, a particular way of institutionalizing political and bureaucratic practice. In this discourse,

a number of themes can be identified: distinctiveness, coherence, hierarchy and instrumentality.

First of all, it is clearly distinguishable from the rest of social life: ‘It is easy to identify the institutions of the Australian state today’, says one authority: ‘the government departments … the police …the armed forces… the executive and the parliament … the judiciary..’ (Davidson 1991: xi) It is its official character which distinguishes it from what is not ‘state’. Coherence has tended to be assumed rather than discussed, embedded in the tendency to personify the state and see it as an actor: the state was seen to intervene, regulate, allocate, using its knowledge, capacity and preferences, and as an actor, it must be seen as a whole. Hierarchy is seen in two dimensions. The state itself is seen as hierarchical, with the dynamic flowing down from authoritative figures at the top (‘decision-makers’) through ranks of subordinate officials with diminishing levels of autonomy – the ‘machinery of government’. And the state is seen to stand in a hierarchical relationship to what is not state (‘society’, ‘the market’, ‘civil society’, ‘associations’, etc.), underlined by its capacity to coerce – by regulation, confiscation, imprisonment and (*in extremis*) killing. And this capacity to act is seen as being exercised instrumentally: to obtain desired outcomes, whether it be the maintenance of order (Hobbes), securing the self-evident rights of individuals (the US Declaration of Independence), enabling capitalist expropriation (Marx) or compensating for market failure (welfare economics). The existence of this shared conceptual discourse enabled argumentation about what ‘the state’ might do without too much attention to just what it was that was being talked about.

1. **Encountering public authority:**

The experience of the realm of public authority – what Abrams called ‘the state system’ – has been rather different to the state idea. While it is certainly possible to see ‘the state’ as an organizational form distinguished by its official character, it is, as Davidson says, ‘a labyrinth of authority’ (*loc. cit.*), a complex of organizational forms with their own specialized (often rival, sometimes conflicting) agendas, acting like ‘tectonic plates, colliding or pulling apart’ (Howard 2005: 5). Moreover, official practice is interwoven with non-official: officials tend to develop stable relations with ‘relevant others’ outside the official sphere, initiatives comes from outside government as often as from inside it, and the ‘outsiders’ play an important part in both the framing and execution of official acts. In some cases, they might be left to ‘self-regulate’ – that is, to govern without invoking state power – but this is a form of order developed ‘in the shadow of hierarchy’, and these governing bodies might have ‘state’ powers vested in them, or be superseded by more official bodies, if the governing was felt to be inadequate. So while governing can be seen as the work of a distinct and coherent ‘state’, there are at the same time other, more specialized identities, forms and practices engaged in particular and specific realms of governing, and that these might not only find themselves opposed to one another, but also to demands for a single, coherent, official position.

The experience of hierarchy is similarly ambiguous. The ‘state idea’ depicts hierarchy as the dynamic and the means of governing: what distinguishes government is its ability to command, and to back its commands with sanctions. But practitioners and researchers found that often, the dynamic ran the other way: the demand for governing was coming from below, from those involved in the activity and seeking an acceptable ordering. This led to a debate in the literature about ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ perspectives (see, e.g. Barrett and Fudge 1981), but it was clear that the dynamic could run both ways. Similarly, participants found that those with the authority to make commands tended to be slow to exercise it and reluctant to rely upon it, and that much of the activity of governing was taken up with interaction between participants from diverse organizational bases, trying to craft an outcome which would be broadly acceptable – and which could then be announced as a hierarchical ‘decision’.

There might seem to be less ambiguity about instrumentality, since the activity of governing is traversed by plans, projects, targets, benchmarks, goals, etc. From Scott’s ‘seeing like a state’ (Scott 1998) right down to the ‘performance indicators’ applied to individual officials; the pursuit of objectives seems to be an integral part of governing. But the connection between these statements of objectives and subsequent practice is not always clear. Plans are proclaimed, but seem only marginally related to allocations of resources or the flow of organizational routine. Leaders make public commitments to targets but show little interest in their achievement. Evaluations of projects are commissioned but seem to have little impact on subsequent decisions (Feldman and March 1981, March and Olsen 1989). The stated objectives seem to be less significant as predicted future destinations than as assurances that present commitments have been made in an appropriate way (March and Olsen 1989: 50). They provide an opportunity for technical experts to frame a rationale for practice and to make claims on attention and resources – in competition with other claims, some articulated, many not – and enunciating objectives seems to be more important as an element *of* the practice of governing than as a prediction of outcomes.

What has been emerging here is an awareness that governing is a complex and many-handed activity, involving a range of participants – some official, some not, some in organizational positions, others less so – and that their activities are accounted for and validated in a discourse which draws on these themes of distinctiveness, coherence, hierarchy and instrumentality, but in various ways seen as appropriate, a way that ‘makes sense’ of practice in that particular context.

1. **The tension between the ‘state idea’ and the ‘state system’**

That there is a difference between the concept of the state and the practice of governing is not particularly remarkable; the question is how it is recognized in the analysis. Perhaps the most common response is to ignore it or to trivialize it as local variation (‘but in this case …’). Other scholars give more attention to the divergence between concept and experience, but take different normative positions on how to treat it. In their book *The State* (in a series on Concepts in the Social Sciences), Hall and Ikenberry state that ‘There is a great deal of agreement among social scientists about how the state should be defined’ and spell out the elements of this definition, but add that most actually-existing states do not meet the requirements of the definition, and their stateness ‘consists of hope rather than reality’ (Hall and Ikenberry 1989: 1-2). The concept seems to have become more of a statement of an idea rather than an analytic device. On the other hand, Abrams, who confronted the tension directly, saw the ‘state idea’ as ‘the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is’ (Abrams 1988: 57).

Alternatively, the difference may be recognized, but form the basis of a reform agenda – usually, that the practice should be made more like the concept: that there should be ‘super-ministries’ or ‘joined-up government’ (to give coherence), ‘agentification’ (to strengthen hierarchical control), or more evidence-based evaluation (to ensure the instrumental utility of practice). Sometimes, the argument is to seek escape from the state idea by the advocacy of market mechanisms, or ‘community participation’ as surer means of control.

But the dominant explanation over the last couple of decades has been that the difference arises because practice has changed, and we need a new concept to reflect the new practice. Rhodes (1997) argued that (at least in the UK) government by authoritative direction was being replaced by ‘governance’ – coordination by ’self-organising networks’:

The state becomes a collection of interorganizational networks made up of governmental and societal actors with no sovereign actor able to steer or regulate. (1997: 57)

- so that the state is now a ‘stateless state’ (Bevir and Rhodes 2010). This argument was soon challenged on both empirical and conceptual grounds (e.g. Johansson and Borell 1999, Bache 2000, Marinetto 2003), but the term ‘governance’ came to be widely used, though in a variety of different ways. Torfing (2014), like Rhodes, sees governance as governing through networks – that is, the state as a central actor has retreated - but others, such as Bell and Hindmoor (2009) and Howlett and Ramesh (2014) see governance as a technique by which the state governs. Offe (2008, 2009) points out that the term is being used both to refer to a particular mode of governing, and as an umbrella term for all forms of governing, and asks if it has become an ‘empty signifier’. The common thread seems to be that there are many participants in the process of governing, and that negotiated outcomes are preferred to imposed ones. This has been taken up with enthusiasm by both participants in and observers of the consolidation of the European Union, who have generated a new vocabulary for negotiation (e.g. ‘soft law’, ‘open method of coordination’) and refer to the outcome as ‘new governance’, perhaps illustrating the ambiguity involved in constructing a state-like supranational entity out of out of entities still claiming to be states.

But political scientists have long recognized the multiplicity of participants in governing, the need for negotiation, and the development of stable relationships which underpin the exercise of authority, and have expressed this in a stream of metaphors. Davies talked about the official and non-official participants ‘camped permanently around each source of problems’ (Davies 1964: 3), Griffith (1939) about ‘”whirlpools” of special social interest and problems’, Truman (1951) about the ‘web of relationships’ , Schmitter (1974) about ‘corporatism’ , Heclo (1978) about ‘issue networks’, and Richardson and Jordan (1979) coined the metaphor with the longest shelf-life, the ‘policy community’. It is not that the phenomena are new; the problem has been to relate them to the terms of the ‘state idea’. This calls for a closer examination of organizing and labeling in the process of governing.

1. **The organizing of governing**

We still have the problem that clearly, public authority in invoked, in a wide range of situations, and that referring to this category of practice as the work of ‘the state’ appears to ‘make sense’, at least in some contexts; how do we explain this ?

It is helpful to start by taking a leaf from Karl Weick’s book, *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, a title carefully chosen to avoid the reification inherent in the word ‘organization’, and the mystification conveyed by the phrase ‘the organization acts’; what that phrase means is that people act, in systematic and mutually-understood ways (Weick 1979: 34). So let us say that our concern is with the practice of governing, and how this is understood. This avoids confusing our interest in the practice with either the formal politico-bureaucratic structures referred to as ‘the government’, or ‘government’ in the Foulcauldian sense as ‘the attempt to shape human conduct by calculated means … educating desires and configuring habits, aspirations and beliefs’ (Li 2007: 5). Both are relevant to our inquiry, but we would not want to limit it to either.

Of course, there is no ‘governing’ as such: particular fields of practice are governed, and this involves a shared recognition of the situation, and shared judgments about the need for governing, and the appropriateness of the acts taken and the person taking them. At base, activity is governed by the participants themselves, but it is likely that other forms of governing will emerge, and will become institutionalized, particularly when public authority is being invoked – e.g. the governing of medical professionals by their peers, with the explicit or tacit official support (i.e. by persons or practices in ’the government’). The institutionalization of concerns to be governed makes for specialization, both inside ‘the government’ and outside it, which can give rise to uncertainty about how matters should be governed and who should be involved. Gulick (1937) noted four different logics of organizing in governing: it can be organized in terms of purpose, process, people to be served, and place. So a program to improve health outcomes for isolated old people by improving their ability to access on-line services might involve officials concerned with health (purpose), IT (process), ageing (people) and local government (place) – and probably non-officials from any or all of these spheres of activity. The governing that emerges will have been ‘put together’, reflecting the perspectives, experiences, capacities, standing and degree of interest of the various participants, official and non-official. The fact that the letterhead is official does not determine the character of the governing.

We need to be sensitive, then, to the diversity of ways in which public authority is mobilized in the organizing of governing. For instance, in the semi-rural area where I live, the response to the risk of fire includes individual decisions to insure against loss, and official regulation of the location and structure of housing, but the principal measure is a fire brigade staffed by a group of unpaid volunteers. But this brigade, although consisting of unpaid volunteers, is defined as a unit of the NSW Rural Fire Service, an organization consisting of 700 civil servants and 70.000 volunteers; their equipment and most of their funding comes from the state government, supplemented by the proceeds of a levy imposed by the government on insurance companies; is this organization part of ‘the state’ ? Or is this the wrong question ? Perhaps it would be more useful to ask how people (and which people) have responded to the risk of fire by organizing, and in what way this organizing has drawn on the ‘state idea’ to validate activity and generate resources. We would be less concerned to identify a thing called ‘the state’, and more to discern ‘the stateness of things’ – the extent to which the state idea is used in the shaping of practice. We would see the ‘state system’ as a process of organizing governing in which the ‘state idea’ is an important factor, but not an empirical category, or in itself an explanation of practice.

1. **The King’s head: what remains to be done ?**

We are still left with the discrepancy between the concept (‘the state idea’) and the experience (‘the state system’). How do we explain this, and does it call for revision or replacement of the concept ? This questions can be approached in a number of ways.

The simplest way is to declare that the discrepancy between concept and practice shows that the concept is misconceived and needs to be replaced. Abrams sees ‘the state’ as ‘the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is’ (1988: 58). In this perspective, the task for scholarship is to free people from their illusions. Abrams would appear to be supported here by Foucault, who in what is perhaps one of the best known of his aphorisms, commented that ‘In political and social thought we have still not cut off the head of the king; this remains to be done.’ (Foucault 1986: 88-9) – that is to say, we must free ourselves from the self-deception of seeing public authority as a person-like entity which has goals and acts so as to achieve them – though (as we shall see) Foucault’s perspective on the concept of the state was rather more complex than this.

An alternative approach is to ask how the concept and experiential accounts manage to coexist: how do practitioners and academic observers deal with the contradiction between them ?

We can distinguish two key elements to the ‘state idea’ – first, the existence of an authoritative, instrumental centre to which the practice of governing can be attributed, and secondly, the equating of this centre with an identifiable cluster of political and bureaucratic officials – ‘the government’ – governing by authoritative command. These two linked assumptions have been challenged, first by experiential knowledge and empirical research, which identified the significance of non-government participants in the process of governing, and he importance of negotiation through continuing relationships in the achievement of outcomes; and secondly by conceptual developments, particularly from the governmentality school, drawing on Foucault, which pointed to the way in which governing is ‘put together’ by multiple hands, drawing on a diversity of technologies, and relying on the diffusion of shared norms and practices by which people govern themselves.

There have been several sorts of response to this challenge to the traditional concept of the state. One is to diminish the significance of the difference between concept and experience, arguing that the concept is a category, like a Weberian ideal-type, and that ‘of course’, the experience of particular cases may differ from the concept.

But if we recognize the discrepancy between concept and experience and take it seriously, we see that the idea of an instrumental ‘governor’ is grounded in the basic mapping of the world that stems from the Enlightenment: that thought precedes action, that study can predict outcomes, that action stems from choice about outcomes, and that outcomes should be chosen on the basis of relative utility. This is ‘only common sense’, and is available to all participants, but how much significance it has is likely to be determined by the context. It is likely to be more significant for some participants than for others. For instance, it is a message that has been elaborated in the rise of the ‘knowledge professionals’– social scientists with technologies of measurement and calculation, who came to exercise such a voice in official circles in the later part of the 20th century, articulating needs for the application of public authority. These professionals are likely to become ‘problem experts’ and to look to ‘the government’ (or as some would say. ‘the state’) as the vehicle for responding to the problem that they have identified; Li (2007) calls this ‘the will to improve’, and Scott (1998) anthropomorphizes it as ‘thinking like a state’. The problem for the ‘knowledge professionals’ is that they do not encounter this coherent, benevolent, effective agent in their own work. As Rose and Miller put it:

Government is a congenitally failing operation: the sublime image of a perfect regulatory machine is internal in the minds of the programmers. The world of programmes is heterogeneous and rivalrous, (Rose and Miller 1992: 190)

So training and organizational position predispose some participants to think in terms of a benevolent central authority even when they do not encounter this in their own practice. Central agency bureaucrats seeking ‘joined-up government’, and official of development agencies trying to generate ‘national strategies’ are drawing on the ‘state idea’ and trying to mobilise it as part of their practice, and see departures from this view of governing as ‘failures’. Other officials, in search of enough mutual tolerance among competing claims to enable some sort of concerted action, may find it less useful in generating agreement; it may, however, be useful in describing the outcome. These participants are likely to become adept at choosing the discourse appropriate for the context: among trusted colleagues in the agency (‘under stage’), a discourse of rivalry, past experience, and the art of the possible; around the negotiating table (‘back-stage’), a discourse of feasibility, appropriateness, exchange, and consistency with past practice; for public presentations of the outcome (‘front-stage’), a discourse of coherence and efficacy (see Goffman 1959, Degeling *et al.* 1993, Tenbensel 2006)

What this suggests is that the opposition of ‘concept’ and ‘practice’ is misconceived (as it the tacit assumption that the concept should describe practice). The concept is part of practice: it is something drawn on (or perhaps resisted) by participants in their encounters in the process of governing. We can see that in the last couple of decades there has been a significant change in the way in which the process (and the component parts) of governing in some (mostly western European) countries have been discussed. Whether this calls for a re-thinking of our analytical constructs call for an investigation of the place of concepts in the process of governing.

1. **Concepts in the analysis and practice of governing**

It is widely assumed (though rarely demonstrated) that there has been a substantial change in the way we are governed. The claim (often tacit) is that up till recently, governing was achieved by command from authoritative leaders to subordinate officials (‘the state’), but that now, it is achieved through negotiation among interested participants, and that the official structures of rule have become ‘hollow’, leaving a ‘stateless state’ (Bevir and Rhodes 2010); the question is whether this oxymoron should be replaced by a new concept, a conceptualization of central authority appropriate for the 21st century.

This account of governing has become so pervasive that it becomes its own proof: it must be so because everyone says it is so. But while this account draws attention to the instances of involvement, networks and negotiation in contemporary practice, there is little empirical demonstration that this did not happen in previous times. Current practice is contrasted with what could be called official accounts of governing, and it is assumed that these are empirically accurate, and that the presence of involvement, networks and negotiation in contemporary practice must be evidence of a change, cause by the increasing complexity of governing towards the end of the 20th century.

What we have seen, though, is that these phenomena have been noted in studies of governing throughout the 20th century, but the problem was to relate them to the constitutional map. They were the subject of quirky asides and metaphors, just serving as footnotes to the real business of describing the official forms and practices that made up ‘the state’. And yet, it seemed that these official practices would involve a number of players, and can not be understood without reference to involvement, negotiation, mutual dependence, stable relationships and collaboration – the very characteristics of the supposedly ‘new order’ of governance.

It is unlikely, if not impossible, that public policy of any significance could result from the choice process of a single unified actor. Policy formation and policy implementation are inevitably the result of interactions among a plurality of separate actors with separate interests, goals and strategies. (Scharpf 1978: 346)

Certainly, the practices of governing can be described in authoritative and instrumental terms – ‘the government has decided …’, ‘the taxi industry is regulated by the state’ – but these seem to be ways of describing an outcome rather than explaining practice. Here, we have to recognise that multiple accounts can be given of the same activity, and that participants may choose to use different accounts in different contexts – which bring us to consider the place of the ‘state idea’ in the practice of governing.

We can identify three ‘core accounts’ of central authority - ‘metanarratives’, perhaps (Roe 1994) – which both participants and observers drawn on, in varying combinations, to make sense of the application of authority. The first might be called ‘the state as ruler’: a narrative of decisions by authoritative rulers, acting in appropriate ways to exercise their acknowledged right to decide what shall be done, and to enforce their decisions with coercion. (It is the absence of these characteristics which, according to Bevir and Rhodes (2010) makes the British state ‘stateless’.)

We can see another meta-narrative which might be called ‘orderly problem-solving’, which sees public authority as being used to scan activity, identify aspects of life capable of improvement (‘problems’), make plans for improvement, and evaluate the outcomes. It can be seen in Li’s ‘will to improve’ (2007), and while it finds its natural home in national governments, superimposing ‘national’ standards over local officials, it is equally visible in the enunciation of trans-national standards by such bodies as the OECD, the EU and the WTO (Buduru and Pal 2008).

A quite different meta-narrative might be called ‘arena’. This sees public authority not as an actor making decisions, but as a contested field of structured but fluid practice, in which a variety of participants, official and non-official, seek to secure the right to invoke ‘the state’ and the resources it represents in support of their various agendas. In this narrative, ‘state action’ is a succession of outcomes of contested encounters between a changing cast of participants.

The point is that for the participants, each of these meta-narratives is meaningful, and in the appropriate context, valid. Their position in the game may incline them to think more in terms of one narrative than the others, but they must be aware of the others, and able to express their concerns in the others if the context calls for it (Tenbensel 2006). In particular, they need to be able to represent (re-present) the outcome of the activity as an authoritative choice, appropriately reached and announced through the expected processes; in this way, the outcome of the contest is ‘enacted’ (Weick 1979).

So the reification of central authority as ‘the state’ or ‘the government’ (or in popular usage, ‘They’) becomes part of the practice of governing. It is vaguely linked to the rituals of choice in government which produce ‘decisions’, so that evident practice is assumed to be the result of a decision, even if proof of the decision is not sought at the time and even a subsequent official inquiry may have difficulty in discovering any decision. But the belief in choice by higher authority is stronger than the proof of its existence.

It is hard to imagine a society with modern Western ideology that would not require a well-elaborated and reinforced myth of intentional choice through politics, both to sustain a semblance of social orderliness and meaning and to facilitate change. (March and Olsen 1989: 52

The concept of a coherent central authority as the source of direction in governing has to be seen as a myth, which is (in Yanow’s words) ‘a narrative created and believed by a group of people which distracts attention from a puzzling part of their reality’ (1996: 191). It sustains a discourse about governing which makes the process meaningful and valid, and the actions of the participants appropriate. It is effective because it is not openly contested, and it is not contested because it is needed to validate the outcome of practice.

The question that remains is how the discourse of academic inquiry relates to the process of governing, and in particular, how the conceptualization of central authority (‘the state’ or ‘the government’) relates to this process of meaning-making in governing. Here, there appears not to be a ‘level playing field’: the practitioners can use the ‘state idea’ as a functional myth, a rhetorical device that allows useful activity to proceed, but academic researchers claim to be analyzing governing on the basis of empirical evidence and conceptual clarity.

Academic discussion has tended to assume the existence of some form of central authority, even if it was not quite clear what it consisted of or how it operated. Davis et al (1993: 24-5), for instance, demonstrate the existence of ‘the Australian state’ by listing official institutions, beginning with the legislature and executive, and trailing away through increasingly less-official bodies such as universities, and ending up with a category of ‘semi-state institutions’ including ‘pressure groups’, ‘media’ and ‘policy networks’, and go on to discuss the ‘functions’ of the state: this organisational category becomes an actor. The language used reinforces the assumptions of the model: activities identifies as official are deemed to be the work of ‘the state’, the result of choices by ‘decision-makers’ to achieve some beneficial outcome. Even those strands of academic discourse which challenge the empirical accuracy of this presentation (e.g. the ‘public choice’ school) accept it as a normative model: they accept the idea of a distinct, authoritative and instrumental body, they just want it to do less.

The challenge to the ‘state idea’ as a concept has two distinct but complementary elements. The first is the challenge to the imagery of a central actor and a single, functional logic. This (as we have seen) has been a sort of long-running counterpoint in political science but became more prominent in the last decades of the 20th century, and was by a rather different critique from the ‘governmentality’ school, which pointed to the way that governing was ‘put together’ by multiple hands, extending well beyond the formal structures and functional logics of ‘the government’.

To the extent that the modern state ‘rules’, it does so on the basis of an elaborate network of relations formed among the complex of institutions, organizations and apparatuses that make it up, and between state and non-state institutions. (Rose and Miller 1992: 176)

So governing is not the work of ‘a definite and uniform group of institutions’, but

... an inventive, strategic, technical and artful set of ‘assemblages’ fashioned from diverse elements, put together in novel and specific ways, and rationalised in relation to governmental objectives and goals. (Dean and Hindess 1998: 8).

The other challenge came from the ’argumentative turn’ (Fischer and Forester 1993) in policy analysis, which pointed to the multiple and overlapping ways in which participants made sense of governing, and argued that formal structures have to be understood as the product of particular constructions of meaning. Consequently, discourses of central, instrumental action ‘make sense’ in in some contexts, but in others are overlaid by other, more significant framings. This helps to explain why the same participants might explain the same activity in quite different ways in different contexts, and why reference to formations of central authority (‘the state’ or ‘the government’) might be significant in some accounts but absent in others.

But this brings us back to the original question: if the way in which public authority is deployed is changing, do we need a new concept of the state ? Perhaps the first thing to be noted is that while concepts are derived from practice, they do not describe it. The concept of the state is a logical model built around the features that are regarded as distinctive of public authority, just as the concept of the market is a model built around a logic of self-regarding exchange. The way that 20th century conceptualization of the state perceived the distinctive features of public authority reflected the main themes of 19th century reforms: coherent organisations, clear lines of authority, skilled impartial officials, standard procedures, and the precise application of defined sanctions (see, e.g. Mitchell 1991). 20th century practice saw a growth in expertise, but also a greater concern for representation, which was reflected in new practices and organizational forms, and in the tendency to incorporate these concerns in terms like ‘the modern state’, ‘the welfare state’ or ‘the modern capitalist state’. This raised the question of whether these new ways of including non-official voices should be seen as part of the state, but this suggestion was resisted, e.g. in Skocpol’s insistence that ‘the state properly conceived’ consists of a set of administrative, policing and military organizations headed, and more or less well coordinated, by an executive authority’, and that while there might be ‘institutions through which nonstate actors are mobilized to participate in policy implementation’ which could be regarded as part of the ‘overall political system’, they should not be seen as part of the state.

The question is whether we learn much by using ‘state’ and ‘not state’ as a sorting frame, allocating ‘actual organizations’ to one box or the other. As we have seen here, governing commonly involves a wide range of participants from a diversity of organizational bases, official and non-official, drawn together in continuing relationships of mutual dependence. What might be described as ‘state action’ is the outcome of their interaction. As Mitchell (1991) would put it, ‘the state’ is an effect of this activity, not an actor which manufactures it. To speak of ‘the state’ is to give meaning to action, to characterize participant and practices in the complex and interactive process of governing in a particular way, attributing the ordering which emerges from a complex but visible pattern of interaction to a simple but invisible (though universally respected) actor, ‘the state’. In this way, the ordering is ‘enacted’ (Weick 1979) and achieves its ‘official’ character.

In this perspective, our concern is not ‘is this organization (or actor or practice) part of ‘the state’ ?’, but ‘to what extent, and in what way, is it ‘state-like’ ?’ This directs our attention to the characteristics of the phenomenon under examination, and the implied image of ‘the state’. We are asking not about ‘the thing, the state’ but about ‘the stateness of things’. This may sound slightly ethereal, but in fact it helps us to focus on the very specific circumstances when it is the stateness of things that is in question – for instance, whether a charity running a support services for the frail elderly should have to follow government accounting rules, or should people caring for close relatives be paid for doing so, or should a church-run school receiving government funds be allowed to dismiss a teacher solely because she was living with a man to whom she was not married ? It is when people grapple with cases like these that the meaning and significance of ‘the state’ is made clear.

The answer to our original question, then, is that perhaps what we need is not a better concept of the state, but a better understanding of the nature of the concept, and the part it plays in the achievement of governing. This would involve shifting the focus of attention from prior categories to actual practices and participants, and the ways in which participants invoke concepts in order to achieve governing by appropriate sense-making.

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