



The Critique of the State

Jens Bartelson

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Bartelson's book begins with a paradox that has become familiar in recent years: on the one hand, many of us see the state as somehow in a period of transformation, if not crisis, and even query whether we are on the verge of its passing; on the other, we also remain frustrated by our apparent inability to think beyond the state, by the extent to which the idea of the state frames our core conceptual possibilities. Some of us respond to this apparent paradox by redoubling our critical efforts, seeking to loosen the hold of the state through the practice of critique. It is this practice that Bartelson explores in *The Critique of the State*. The emphasis of the book, in other words, is as much or more on *critique* as on the state, and it is most centrally focused on the role of critique in inscribing, as well as circumscribing, the authority of the state. It is intended as a 'diagnosis' (p. 3) of how we have arrived in the paradoxical predicament described above, and as an exploration of 'the possibilities of conceptualizing political order beyond or without the state' (p. 2). This is a tall task, and it is not undertaken lightly. The result is a serious and challenging book, one that provides a necessary focus for debates about critique, the state, and the possibilities for political order in contemporary times.

After an initial introduction setting out the approach of the book, and negotiating the complex conceptual terrain it requires, the second chapter explores how the concept of the state became constitutive of political science through the 19th century, providing the discipline with its identity, autonomy and authority. This was enabled in part by the array of analytical tensions the concept was able to contain and mediate. Equally important, however, is how the concept itself was modified in this process, becoming more transhistorical and indeed transcendent, and thus less open to some forms of critique, and becoming more subject to the authority of the emerging discipline of political science. Both changes, Bartelson argues, curtailed the rhetorical potential contained in the concept of the state.

The third chapter continues this analytical trajectory by exploring the paradoxical fate of the concept of the state in the discipline of political science in the 20th century, when it was simultaneously marginalized as an object of critical inquiry and assumed as the foundation of political order. This taking for granted of the state as the source of political order, through various strategies and assumptions, effectively 'ontologized' the state as the foundation



of political analysis, thus setting the stage for the next round of critical engagements.

The subsequent chapter traces how the state was brought back into political discourse through the work of the neo-marxists in the 1970s, and again how the state concept changed through this process. Here, Bartelson traces the limits imposed on the critical potential of the concept of the state by the assumption of its transhistorical or transcendent character, as expressed in the assumption of its fundamental distinctiveness from society on the one hand, and the international on the other. As a consequence of this assumption, the critical effect of 'bringing the state back in' effected less a reopening of the concept of the state to critical inquiry, and more a recycling of the state as an assumed ground of analysis.

The final substantive chapter focuses on the efforts of those critics who have sought to gain purchase on the concept by, as Bartelson puts it, 'dissolving the state': by critically engaging the assumption of the divide between the state and the international. It is here the argument emerges that the problem we face is less that of the limits of the state and more that of the limits of criticism, in the context of the acknowledged limits of immanent critique. While the effect of these forms of critique has been to render the boundaries between state and society, or state and international, so transparent as to be almost 'ghostly,' the method of critique is unable to articulate an escape from this situation, precisely because it begins from the assumption it sets out to critique: the self-identity of the state. This leaves us, according to Bartelson, trapped in the limits of critique: to effect a double dissolution of our ideas of identity and authority from the state would be 'tantamount to rephrasing the entire problem of political order,' but this would hardly be possible in the present theoretical context because 'it would violate the initial conditions of the self-identity to be subject to criticism' (p. 181). The subject, the problem, and its politicity, would all vanish before the critic's eyes. Thus, he concludes, perhaps the problem is criticism itself, rather than the state.

This conclusion is restated, and the book nicely summarized, in a brief final chapter. We are left here with a variation on the paradox with which we began. As our practices of critique tend to reinforce, rather than undermine, our statist assumptions, we are left with the situation that 'the possible outcomes of ongoing transformation of world politics will remain effectively hidden to us only as long as we remain critical of the state' (p. 187). Only when political theory is no longer afraid of the state will a new imaginary for political order be possible.

It is a book that leaves one very well fed, but a conclusion that leaves one somehow unsatisfied. The inherited problematic is so carefully rendered, and yet the problem appears to be dismissed with a — considered — shrug. The dissatisfaction lingers not because the conclusion is implausible, or wrong, but



perhaps because it is insufficient, at least as a commentary on the possibilities, and not only limits, of critique. While not inconsistent with the rendering of critique in the book, it reveals a certain conscious narrowing of the role of critique, insofar as it focuses on the capacity of the critic to effect an ‘escape’ from an inherited problematic. That critique today will not show us the way forward does not mean, of course, that it doesn’t express and effect crucial political work. The stakes of critique remain significant: the critic may be unable (or inappropriate) to lead the way to a new imaginary, but may be able to reveal conceptual closures, ghosts, erasures and violences, and so loosen their hold and open possibilities for other articulations, practices, legitimations and responses. This, of course, is work to which Bartelson’s book contributes. However, it would be well complemented by a reading of the critical practices it discusses that historicized them in the broader practices of politics in their days. While the conclusion about the limits of critique might not differ from Bartelson’s, such an approach would enable a consideration of a politics of critique as necessarily engaged by, but not confined to, the concept of the state, and thus perhaps a richer understanding of critique, and indeed of politics.

Although its conclusion will discourage those who turn to political theory to predict or create the future, Bartelson’s book offers much to other political theorists: it poses an important challenge to those for whom the politics of critique are expressed otherwise than in a desire to create the future, and it provides invaluable resources to those who seek to affect critical work today without reproducing the inherited closures and dead ends embedded in the critique of the state.

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Scanlon and Contractualism

Matt Matravers (ed.)

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As Matt Matravers avers in his helpful introduction, ‘[t]he publication of Scanlon’s *What We Owe to Each Other* in 1998 was a philosophical event.’ (p. 1). Such an ambitious and accomplished work should leave a considerable mark on the landscape of moral and political philosophy and is richly deserving of the diligent, close reading and critical engagement brought to it in