



POLITICAL
THEORY
AND THE
MODERN
STATE

D A V I D H E L D

POLITICAL THEORY AND THE
MODERN STATE

Political Theory and the Modern State

Essays on State, Power, and Democracy

David Held

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Preface

The essays in this volume, written in the main over the last five years, are concerned to map out the terms of discourse about the modern state and to offer an initial assessment of them. They examine, among other topics, the notion of the modern state, the efficacy of the concept of sovereignty, problems of power and legitimation, sources of political stability and crisis, and the future of democracy. In so doing, they provide an introduction to many of the central issues of modern politics and political thought.

Although the majority of the essays have been published before, they have all been edited and revised for this volume. Essays 6, 7 and 8 appear here for the first time and develop arguments which are central both to the earlier essays and to my most current concerns. Together, the articles continue and develop themes I approached in earlier books, especially *Introduction to Critical Theory* and *Models of Democracy*, and lay a basis for a set of arguments I will amplify further in a forthcoming work, *The Foundations of Democracy*.

Over the years in which I wrote these pieces, many friends and colleagues have provided invaluable encouragement and assistance. I should like to thank in particular David Beetham, John Dunn, John Keane, Joel Krieger, Adrian Leftwich, Greg McLennan and Christopher Pollitt. Joel Krieger and Adrian Leftwich co-authored essays 2 and 9, respectively; I am extremely grateful to them for allowing me to reproduce these essays and for the free hand they gave me in making amendments. Anthony Giddens, Stuart Hall, John Thompson and Michelle Stanworth not only provided indispensable intellectual guidance but also offered routine forms of support without which, even if I could have survived, it would have been radically less pleasurable to do so.

And thanks, finally, to Rosa and Joshua – whose adeptness at strategic manoeuvring reminds me daily that politics is an irreducible part of everyday life!

Introduction

The essays in this volume have three broad objectives: first, to provide an introduction to the main theoretical perspectives on the modern state, the type of state which emerged with the early development of the European state system from the sixteenth century; second, to examine competing interpretations of the shifting balance between order and crisis that confronts and shapes the modern state; and third, to assess how adequate our leading political theories are as a basis for understanding and acting upon the political stage today.

The essays are informed by a number of assumptions about the nature of politics as a practical activity, about politics as a discipline, and about political theory which it is as well to clarify from the outset. Politics – as a practical activity – is, in my view, the discourse and the struggle over the organization of human possibilities. As such, it is about power; that is to say, it is about the *capacity* of social agents, agencies and institutions to maintain or transform their environment, social or physical. It is about the resources which underpin this capacity and about the forces that shape and influence its exercise (see essay 9 of this volume, p. 247). Accordingly, politics is a phenomenon found in and between all groups, institutions and societies, cutting across public and private life. It is expressed in all the relations, institutions and structures that are implicated in the production and reproduction of the life of societies. Politics creates and conditions all aspects of our lives and it is at the core of the development of collective problems, and the modes of their resolution. While ‘politics’, thus understood, raises a number of complicated issues, it usefully highlights the nature of politics as a universal dimension of human life, independent of any specific ‘site’ or set of institutions.

The study of politics involves much more than the study of the state. It involves, at the very least, examining the way the state is enmeshed in the political structures of ‘society’ – of groups, classes and institutions (formal and informal) – and the way the latter in turn are shaped by the state. Therefore, while the focus of this book is squarely on ‘the modern state’, it is also,

inescapably, on 'society'. To link two such ambiguous concepts together risks making the focus of the volume highly diffuse. But the fact that 'state' and 'society' are inextricably bound together does not mean that for analytic purposes one cannot distinguish particular issues or problems for attention. Nor does it mean, of course, that one cannot single out aspects of state politics alone for detailed consideration.¹

While at a very abstract level we can talk about something called 'the state' and juxtapose it with other forms of social and economic order, this should not lead one to the view that the state itself is simply a unified entity: the state forms a set of highly complicated relations and processes. To begin with, any attempt to understand the state must consider its spatial and temporal dimensions – the horizontal stretch of the state across territory, the depth of state intervention in social and economic life and the changing form of all these things over time. Furthermore, it is important to consider the state as a cluster of agencies, departments, tiers and levels, each with their own rules and resources and often with varying purposes and objectives. Abstract statements about the state are always a shorthand for this 'cluster' and must be consistent with an exploration of its dynamics. In order to understand the relations and processes of the state and their place in shaping society, it is important to grasp the way the state is embedded in particular socio-economic systems, with distinctive structures and sets of institutions, together with its nature as a site of political negotiation and conflict.

If the first assumption underpinning these essays specifies the breadth of politics as a practical activity, the second emphasizes that if politics as a discipline is to be taken seriously, then it must seek to grasp the complex *relations* between aspects of social life – such as the polity, the economy and social structure – which are conventionally thought of and studied as distinct (see essay 9). The tendency of the social sciences to generate sound but discrete pieces of knowledge about different aspects of society has, unfortunately, done little to generate a larger picture of the modern political world. The division of labour in the social sciences is highly advanced and the resulting output highly fragmented. Whilst specialization need not always lead to the fragmentation of knowledge, this seems to have happened in the case of the social sciences (Held, 1987b). And while there have certainly been advances made in the specialist study of parts of the contemporary world and its problems, they have not been matched by comparable advances in attempts to integrate these into wider frameworks of understanding about societies and their politics. Within the social sciences it is clear that, broadly speaking, 'the political system', 'the economy' and 'the social system' (though not always called that) have been thought of and studied as if they were more or less autonomous spheres of activity in human societies. And the study of, for example, governmental decision-making, pressure group politics, inequality,

conflict in the Third World, unemployment and inflation, have been confined to particular disciplinary corners with consistently disappointing results. Such is the almost inevitable outcome, I believe, of a failure to try to think through the relation between political processes and events, social structures and events and economic life. It is the interaction of all these phenomena which should be regarded as politics: what is referred to in essay 9 as 'the "lived interdisciplinarity" of all collective social life' (pp. 246-7). Hence, if politics as a discipline is to be developed systematically, it must, paradoxically, be interdisciplinary, so that it can generate frameworks of understanding and explanation which are able to illuminate successfully the interlocking structures and processes of modern politics.

A related and third underpinning assumption of the volume concerns the nature of political theory. Political theory, I believe, must concern itself both with theoretical and practical issues, with philosophical as well as organizational and institutional questions. The fundamental reason for this is that the project of political theory can be based neither purely on political *philosophy* nor purely on political *science*. All political philosophy, implicitly if not explicitly, makes complex claims about the operation of the political world, past, present and future, which require examination within modes of inquiry which go beyond those available to philosophy *per se*. The rise of the social sciences (in particular, the disciplines of 'government' and sociology) in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries added momentum to the view that the study of politics must be based on the pursuit of science. There has been a marked shift in the weight granted to 'scientific method' in the explication of the meaning of politics. But 'science' has by no means triumphed everywhere over 'philosophy'; and a purely empirical approach to political theory has been extensively criticized (see, for example MacIntyre, 1971; Habermas, 1973). Political science inevitably raises normative questions which a dedication to the 'descriptive-explanatory' does not eradicate. The meaning, for example, of sovereignty, democracy or the state, cannot be fully explicated by science alone. Neither philosophy nor science can replace each other in the project of political theory. Successful political theory requires the philosophical analysis of principles and the empirical understanding of political processes and structures.

If political theory is concerned with the nature and structure of political practices, processes and institutions and, thereby, with 'what is going on' in the political world, then I take it to be an inextricably *hermeneutic* and *critical* enterprise (cf. MacIntyre, 1983; Taylor, 1983). It is hermeneutic because the problems of 'interpretation' are fundamental to the social sciences in general, and to politics in particular. All theoretical endeavour, whether it be that of lay people or professional political theorists, involves interpretation - interpretation which embodies a particular framework of concepts, beliefs and

standards. Such a framework is not a barrier to understanding; on the contrary, it is integral to it (Gadamer, 1975). For the interpretative framework we employ determines what we apprehend, what we notice and register as significant. Furthermore, such a framework shapes our attempts to understand and assess political actions, events and processes; for it carries with it general views about human capacities, needs and motives and about the mutability or otherwise of human institutions, which are charged with normative implications (see Taylor, 1967). Accordingly, particular theories cannot be treated as *the* correct or final understanding of a phenomenon; the meaning of a phenomenon is always open to future interpretations from new perspectives, each with its own particular practical stance or interest in political life.

Having said this, it is important to stress that political theory is also a critical endeavour; that is to say, it seeks an account of politics which transcends those of lay agents. The routine monitoring of political life by ordinary men and women provides interpretations of politics which are indisputably knowledgeable and frequently illuminating. These 'interpretive schemes' are, implicitly or explicitly, political theories in germ (MacIntyre, 1983, p. 23). But they often contain elements which, for a number of diverse reasons, fall short of a satisfactory account of the conditions and possibilities of politics (see essays 3-5). Political theory aims to offer a systematic analysis of politics and of the ways in which it is always 'bounded' by, among other things, unacknowledged conditions of action (cf. Giddens, 1979, pp. 49-95 and 1984, pp. 348ff.). It can, thereby, fracture existing forms of understanding and re-form the practically generated accounts of the political in everyday life. It has an irreducible critical dimension.

The process of analysing aspects of the political world contributes to our self-understanding and self-formation. It is a means of enlightenment and, more fundamentally, a means available to be reflexively applied to the transformation of the conditions of our own lives. Political theory has had this type of critical impact since its inception in the early modern era (cf. Skinner, 1978). The discourse of and over politics can readily become a part of the concepts and theories which are utilized and applied in settings beyond those in which they were originally generated.

A fourth, additional, assumption I make in this book is that political theory can be developed as the critique of political ideology. While it is possible to interpret the work of most, if not all, modern political theorists as hermeneutic and critical in the senses set out immediately above, it cannot be said that their work in general embraces the tasks of the critique of ideology. By ideology I mean systems of signification or meaning which are mobilized to sustain asymmetrical power relations in the interests of dominant or hegemonic groups (Thompson, 1984, pp. 126-32). And by the critique of ideology I mean

a programme of examining the way such systems of signification are produced and reproduced, and how they shape and mis-shape the politico-social world.

The aim of political theory as the critique of ideology is to enlighten those to whom it is addressed about the political system in which they live and, in so doing, to open up and elaborate alternative possible political worlds (Habermas, 1974, p. 32; Held, 1980, parts 2 and 3; essay 3 of this volume). The critique of political ideology is concerned both with how and why the political world is as it is and with how it might be otherwise. For what distinguishes it as a theoretical enterprise is the attempt to elaborate and project a conception of politics based on a 'thought experiment' - an experiment into how people would interpret their needs and abilities, and which rules, laws and institutions they would consider justified, if they had access to a fuller account of their position in the political system (see essay 4). This 'thought experiment' is guided by an interest in examining the ways in which politics - above all, democratic politics - might be transformed to enable citizens more effectively to understand, shape and organize their own lives (see essays 3-6).²

There are those who have denied the legitimacy of the project of the critique of ideology on the grounds that there is no 'Archimedean point' - no, for instance, other-worldly doctrine, natural law, proletarian interest or ideal speech situation - from which to evaluate confidently political relations and institutions. While this rejection of an Archimedean point is, in my judgement, quite correct in general terms (Held, 1980, part 3), it by no means invalidates the project of political theory as the critique of ideology. For differences of evaluative or moral appraisal are never merely a clash of discrepant 'ultimate values' which one must either simply accept or reject. The meaning of evaluative standpoints always depends, as noted previously, on a framework or web of concepts and theories in which the factual and normative inform one another, and which are open to appraisal in philosophical and empirical terms (Hesse, 1974 and 1978; Giddens, 1977, pp. 89-95). As I have argued elsewhere in relation to democratic theory, a consideration of, for instance, political principles, without an examination of the conditions of their realization, may preserve a sense of virtue, but it will leave the actual meaning of such principles barely articulated. By contrast, a consideration of social institutions and political arrangements, without reflecting upon the proper principles of their ordering, might lead to an understanding of their functioning, but it will barely help us to a judgement as to their adequacy, appropriateness and desirability (Held, 1987a, part 3).

Political theories are complex 'networks' of concepts and generalizations about political life involving ideas, assumptions and statements about the nature, purposes and key features of government, state and society and about the political capabilities of human beings. And in assessing them one must

attend to the nature and coherence of their theoretical claims, to the adequacy of empirical statements, to the desirability of prescriptions, and to the practicality of political goals.

This is a very tall order! And one which makes successful political theory extremely difficult to achieve (cf. Miller, 1983; 1987). Recognizing this, it is all the more important to emphasize that the essays in this volume are only a set of tentative contributions, which aim to introduce a number of key political ideas, clarify certain central political processes and raise some questions about possible political worlds.

The essays cluster around one major preoccupation: the relationship between state and society, or, rather, that segment of society I shall generally refer to as 'civil society'. Civil society connotes those areas of social life – the domestic world, the economic sphere, cultural activities and political interaction – which are organized by private or voluntary arrangements between individuals and groups outside the *direct* control of the state (cf. Bobbio, 1985; Pelczynski, 1985; Keane, 1988). The essays in the volume seek to explore how classical and contemporary political theorists have understood the relationship between state and civil society, and they seek to assess the adequacy of the various views available to us. In addition, they seek to propose an alternative way of thinking about this relationship while at the same time being attentive to theoretical and practical problems entailed by this alternative view. The following questions are central: What is the state? How should we define it? What is its relationship to civil society? How do the structures, processes and institutions of state and civil society interrelate? Under what conditions, if any, do modern political orders face crisis or breakdown? What should be the proper form and limits of state action? What should be the proper form and limits of civil society? What does and should democracy mean today – within the state apparatus, and within civil society? Is the idea of democracy progressively compromised by the growth and progressive intersection of national and international forces and processes – the erosion of sovereignty in the global system? What new political challenges, if any, do these forces and processes create?

Each of the essays in this volume explores aspects of these and related questions. The first essay sets out four central perspectives on the relationship between state and society – those of liberalism, liberal democracy, Marxism and, for want of a better label, 'political sociology'. From Hobbes to Weber, Marx to Dahl, this essay lays out the background and the intellectual landscape to many of the crucial arguments and debates about the modern state today. The second essay focuses on contemporary theories of the state, examining, in particular, the contributions of pluralists, corporatists and Marxists to the analysis of the interrelation between class structure, power and

the state. The essay offers, in conclusion, a set of propositions about the relations between state and society in Western capitalist countries, propositions explored at greater length later in the volume.

The distinctive contribution of Jürgen Habermas to political and social theory is then assessed in the third essay. The essay examines Habermas's claim that there are good grounds to suppose that contemporary capitalist societies are facing imminent crises of legitimation; and it argues that while this view is illuminating in a number of respects, it fails to take account of, among other things, the fragmentation of modern culture and the atomization of people's experiences of the social world, which often means that societies can cohere without a high degree of positive endorsement or legitimation. Further, it is argued, despite deeply felt misgivings and antagonisms to existing institutions among certain middle-class and working-class groups, the absence of a clear conception of a plausible alternative to current political arrangements is a crucial factor inhibiting the development of protest and opposition movements.

'Power and Legitimacy', the fourth essay, provides an extended analysis of problems of order and conflict in the modern state and pursues in detail the question of how political societies are reproduced over time. Taking a broad post-war canvas, the adequacy of a variety of theoretical notions – from 'civic culture' to 'overload crisis' – is critically assessed. Drawing empirical material from the British political system, it is contended that, while this system enjoys a degree of popular support, dissensus is more striking than consensus, and administrative and coercive means are ever more important to ensure political stability.

'Liberalism, Marxism and the Future Direction of Public Policy', essay 5, explores some of the theoretical implications of the above argument in the context of a consideration of the recent successes of governments of the 'New Right'. Assessing current theoretical and political disputes about the proper form and role of the state, it argues that there are fundamental flaws in both the perspectives of the New Right and of its main, New Left, critics. For the New Right's brand of liberalism ignores the fact that markets comprise power relations while Marxism neglects the threat to individual autonomy arising from the power of the state. An argument is presented that enhanced autonomy for individuals and groups can only be properly achieved – or, the 'autonomy principle', as I call it, realized – if it is linked to a twin project of enhancing the independence of the multitude of groups that compose 'civil society' and democratizing the state in a wide-ranging manner.

Essay 6 takes these arguments further by examining in greater detail the political philosophies of the New Right and New Left. Focusing on democracy, it argues that neither the perspective of the New Right nor that of the New Left can provide an adequate account of democracy as it is and as it ought to

be. The case is made for a third way – for a model of ‘democratic autonomy’ or ‘liberal socialism’ – which might help create and restore the opportunities for people to establish themselves ‘in their capacity of being citizens’.

Citizenship is the subject of the seventh essay, which places at its centre an appraisal of contributions of T. H. Marshall and Anthony Giddens to the study of the nature and practices of contemporary democracies. Both these writers have helped illuminate the history and development of citizenship rights and their relation to wider social and economic structures. The essay discusses at length Giddens’s recent contributions to the study of class, citizenship and the modern state, and appraises the strengths and weaknesses of his approach. The essay concludes by stressing how the idea of citizenship and the theory of democracy has to be rethought in relation to substantial changes in political, social and economic life which derive from, among other things, the dynamics of the world economy, the rapid growth of transnational links and major changes to the nature of international law – a project scarcely begun today.

‘Sovereignty, National Politics and the Global System’, essay 8, underlines the urgency of this project through an examination of the concept of sovereignty. Sovereignty is important because it highlights both a critical ‘internal’ element of the modern state and the necessity to understand the ‘external’ framework within which the state exists, if the state’s claim to supreme power is to be properly understood. The essay explores the meaning of sovereignty – as set out in the writings of figures such as Bodin, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau – and the way the notion of national sovereignty faces a number of challenges from the nature and structure of the global system. It establishes the necessity of thinking systematically beyond the terms of reference of the nation-state if a satisfactory account of state, power and politics is to be achieved.

The last article in the volume, essay 9, focuses on the failure of politics as a discipline to examine and address central political problems – those deep-rooted problems that actually face us daily as citizens, for example, issues of war and peace, unemployment and technical change, inequality and conflict. It sets out a view of what the discipline of politics should be like in theory and in practice. In so doing, it creates a challenge to the teaching and practice of politics as a discipline and as an everyday practical activity.

In sum, essays 1 and 2 explore how the relationship between ‘state’ and ‘civil society’ has been understood; essays 3 and 4 examine how this relationship has operated in advanced capitalist countries; essays 5–7 set out how one might rethink the form and limits of the modern state and civil society; essay 8 focuses on some of the profound difficulties that face the ideas of a national politics and a democratic polity; and essay 9 explores how one might begin to think further about these pressing problems.

Notes

- 1 By 'state politics' I mean what has generally been regarded by contemporary political theorists and political scientists as 'the political': the form, organization and operations of a state and its relations with other states. While I will use the concept of politics throughout the volume in the broad sense I have set out (pp. 1-2), this does not mean that one cannot use it in a more restricted sense to refer to particular domains of political activity, e.g. state politics, community politics, sexual politics. The context in which various conceptions of politics are used will, I hope, leave no ambiguity as to their meaning.
- 2 Some political theorists have understood their activities in a comparable manner; that is to say, they have explicitly embraced an interest in political change or transformation as the guiding thread to their work, for instance, Marx and Habermas (see essays 1 and 3). Others have, by the very nature of the way they have understood the methodological status of their work, denied that a practical stance shapes their endeavours, even when these endeavours have often been explicitly directed to reshaping the political understanding and institutions of the modern world, for instance, Hobbes (see essays 1 and 8). Still others have rejected all links between theory and practice in the study of politics and resisted any claims that the latter can legitimately guide practical change even though implicitly their work has been 'rich' in normative implications, for instance, empirical democratic theorists (see essays 1 and 2 of this volume; Held, 1987a, ch. 6).

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Central Perspectives on the Modern State

The state - or apparatus of 'government' - appears to be everywhere, regulating the conditions of our lives from birth registration to death certification.* Yet the nature of the state is hard to grasp. This may seem peculiar for something so pervasive in public and private life, but it is precisely this pervasiveness which makes it difficult to understand. There is nothing more central to political and social theory than the nature of the state, and nothing more contested. It is the objective of this essay to set out some of the key elements of the conflict of interpretation.

In modern Western political thought, the idea of the state is often linked to the notion of an impersonal and privileged legal or constitutional order with the capability of administering and controlling a given territory (see Skinner, 1978; cf. Neumann, 1964). This notion found its earliest expression in the ancient world (especially in Rome) but it did not become a major object of concern until the early development of the European state system from the sixteenth century onwards. It was not an element of medieval political thinking. The idea of an impersonal and sovereign political order, that is, a legally circumscribed structure of power with supreme jurisdiction over a territory, could not predominate while political rights, obligations and duties were closely tied to property rights and religious tradition. Similarly, the idea that human beings as 'individuals' or as 'a people' could be active citizens of this order - citizens of their state - and not merely dutiful subjects of a monarch or emperor could not develop under such conditions.

The historical changes that contributed to the transformation of medieval notions of political life were immensely complicated. Struggles between

* This essay first appeared in David Held et al. (eds), *States and Societies* (Oxford: Martin-Robertson, 1983), pp. 1-55. © The Open University, 1984, D209: *State and Society*.

monarchs and barons over the domain of rightful authority; peasant rebellions against the weight of excess taxation and social obligation; the spread of trade, commerce and market relations; the flourishing of Renaissance culture with its renewed interest in classical political ideas (including the Greek city-state and Roman law); the consolidation of national monarchies in central parts of Europe (England, France and Spain); religious strife and the challenge to the universal claims of Catholicism; the struggle between church and state – all played a part.¹ As the grip of feudal traditions and customs was loosened, the nature and limits of political authority, law, rights and obedience emerged as a preoccupation of European political thought. Not until the end of the sixteenth century did the concept of the state become a central object of political analysis.

While the works of Niccolo Machiavelli (1469–1527) and Jean Bodin (1530–96) are of great importance in these developments, Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) directly expressed the new concerns when he stated in *De Cive* (1642) that it was his aim ‘to make a more curious search into the rights of states and duties of subjects’ (quoted in Skinner, 1978, vol. 2, p. 349). Until challenged by, among others, Karl Marx in the nineteenth century, the idea of the modern state came to be associated with a ‘form of public power separate from both the ruler and ruled, and constituting the supreme political authority within a certain defined boundary’ (Skinner, 1978, vol. 2, p. 353). But the nature of that public power and its relationship to ruler and ruled were the subject of controversy and uncertainty. The following questions arose: What is the state? What should it be? What are its origins and foundations? What is the relationship between state and society? What is the most desirable form this relationship might take? What does and should the state do? Whose interest does and should the state represent? How might one characterize the relations among states?

This essay focuses on four strands or traditions of political analysis which sought to grapple with such questions: (1) *liberalism*, which became absorbed with the question of sovereignty and citizenship; (2) *liberal democracy*, which developed liberalism’s concerns while focusing on the problem of establishing political accountability; (3) *Marxism*, which rejected the terms of reference of both liberalism and liberal democracy and concentrated upon class structure and the forces of political coercion; and (4), for want of a more satisfactory term, *political sociology*, which has, from Max Weber to Anglo-American pluralism and ‘geopolitical’ conceptions of the state, elaborated concerns with both the institutional mechanisms of the state and the system of nation-states more generally. None of these traditions of analysis, it should be stressed, forms a unity; that is to say, each is a heterogeneous body of thought encompassing interesting points of divergence. There is also some common ground, more noticeable in the work of contemporary figures, across these separate traditions. I shall attempt to indicate this briefly throughout the essay

and in my concluding remarks. It is important to appreciate that, in a field in which there is as vast a range of literature as this, any selection has an arbitrary element to it. But I hope to introduce, and assess in a preliminary way, some of the central perspectives on the modern state.

A distinction is often made between normative political theory or political philosophy on the one hand, and the descriptive-explanatory theories of the social sciences on the other. The former refers to theories about the proper form of political organization and includes accounts of such notions as liberty and equality. The latter refers to attempts to characterize actual phenomena and events and is marked by a strong empirical element. The distinction, thus, is between theories which focus on what is desirable, what should or ought to be the case, and those that focus on what is the case. The political writings of people like Hobbes, Locke and Mill are generally placed in the first camp, while those of, for instance, Weber are put in the second; Marx occupying sometimes one domain, sometimes the other, depending on the writings one examines. But it will become clear that, while this distinction should be borne in mind, it is hard to use it as a classificatory device for theories of the state. For many political philosophers see what they think the state ought to be like in the state as it is. Social scientists, on the other hand, cannot escape the problem that facts do not simply 'speak for themselves': they are, and they have to be, interpreted; and the framework we bring to the process of interpretation determines what we 'see', what we notice and register as important.

The essay begins with the thought of Hobbes, which marks a point of transition between a commitment to the absolutist state and the struggle of liberalism against tyranny. It is important to be clear about the meaning of 'liberalism' (see Habermas, 1962; Pateman, 1979). While it is a highly controversial concept, and its meaning has shifted historically, I will use it here to signify the attempt to define a private sphere independent of the state and thus to redefine the state itself, that is, the freeing of civil society – personal, family and business life – from political interference and the simultaneous delimitation of the state's authority. With the growing division between the state and civil society, a division which followed the expansion of market economies, the struggle for a range of freedoms and rights which were in principle to be universal became more acute. Gradually, liberalism became associated with the doctrine that freedom of choice should be applied to matters as diverse as marriage, religion, economic and political affairs – in fact, to everything that affected daily life (see Macpherson, 1966, ch. 1; cf. Giddens, 1981, chs 8 and 9). Liberalism upheld the values of reason and toleration in the face of tradition and absolutism (see Dunn, 1979, ch. 2). In this view, the world consists of 'free and equal' individuals with natural rights. Politics should be about the defence of the rights of these individuals – a defence which must leave them in a position to realize their own capacities. The mechanisms for regulating individuals' pursuit of their interests were to be the constitutional

state, private property, the competitive market economy – and the distinctively patriarchal family. While liberalism celebrated the rights of individuals to ‘life, liberty and property’, it should be noted from the outset that it was generally the male property-owning individual who was the focus of so much attention; and the new freedoms were first and foremost for the men of the new middle classes or the bourgeoisie. The Western world was liberal first, and only later, after extensive conflicts, liberal democratic or democratic; that is, only later was a universal franchise won which allowed all mature adults the chance to express their judgement about the performance of those who govern them (Macpherson, 1966, p. 6). But even now, the very meanings of the terms ‘liberalism’ and ‘democracy’ remain unsettled.

Sovereignty, citizenship and the development of liberalism

Hobbes was among the first to try to grasp the nature of public power as a special kind of institution – as he put it, an ‘Artificial Man’, defined by permanence and sovereignty, the authorized representative ‘giving life and motion’ to society and the body politic (*Leviathan*, p. 81). He was preoccupied, above all, with the problem of order, which resolved itself into two questions: Why is ‘a great Leviathan or state’ necessary? and What form should the state take? Through a theory of human nature, sovereign authority and political obligation, he sought to prove that the state must be regarded as ultimately both absolute and legitimate, in order that the worst of evils – civil war – might be permanently averted (see Plamenatz, 1963, pp. 116–54).

In so arguing, Hobbes produced a political philosophy which is a fascinating point of departure for reflection on the modern theory of the state; for it is at once a profoundly liberal and illiberal view (see Dunn, 1979, pp. 23, 42–3, 50; cf. Skinner, 1966). It is liberal because Hobbes derives or explains the existence of society and the state by reference to ‘free and equal’ individuals, the component elements, according to him, of social life – ‘men as if but even now sprung out of the earth and suddenly, like mushrooms, come to full maturity, without all kind of engagement to each other’ (*De Cive*, p. 109). It is liberal because Hobbes is concerned to uncover the best circumstances for human nature – understood as naturally selfish, egoistical and self-interested – to find expression. And it is liberal because it emphasizes the importance of consent in the making of a contract or bargain, not only to regulate human affairs and secure a measure of independence and choice in society, but also to legitimate, that is, justify, such regulation. Yet Hobbes’s position is also, as I shall attempt to show, profoundly illiberal: his political conclusions emphasize the necessity of a practically all-powerful state to create the laws and secure the conditions of social and political life. Hobbes remains of abiding interest today

precisely because of this tension between the claims of individuality on the one hand, and the power requisite for the state to ensure 'peaceful and commodious living', on the other (cf. Macpherson, 1968, p. 81; or for a fuller account Macpherson, 1962).

In *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes set out his argument in a highly systematic manner. Influenced by Galileo, he was concerned to build his 'civil science' upon clear principles and closely reasoned deductions. He started from a set of postulates and observations about human nature. Human beings, Hobbes contended, are moved by desires and aversions which generate a state of perpetual restlessness. Seeking always 'more intense delight', they are profoundly self-interested; a deep-rooted psychological egoism limits the possibilities for human cooperation. In order to fulfil their desires, human beings (though in different ways and degrees) seek power. And because the power gained by one 'resisteth and hindreth the power of another', conflicts of interest are inevitable: they are a fact of nature. The struggle for power, for no other reason than self-preservation and self-interest (however disguised by rationalization) defines the human condition. Hobbes thus emphasizes 'a generall inclination of all mankind, a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth only in Death' (*Leviathan*, p. 161). The idea that human beings might come to respect and trust one another, treat each other as if they could keep promises and honour contracts, seems remote indeed.

Hobbes desired to show, however, that a consistent concern with self-interest does not simply lead to an endless struggle for power (see Peters, 1956, ch. 9; 1967, pp. 41-3). In order to prove this he introduced a 'thought experiment' employing four interrelated concepts: state of nature, right of nature, law of nature and social contract. He imagined a situation in which individuals are in a state of nature - that is, a situation without a 'Common Power' or state to enforce rules and restrain behaviour - enjoying 'natural rights' to use all means to protect their lives and to do whatever they wish, against whoever they like and to 'possess, use, and enjoy all that he would, or could get' (see *Leviathan*, part 1, chs 13-15). The result is a constant struggle for survival: Hobbes's famous 'Warre of every one against every one'. In this state of nature individuals discover that life is 'solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short' and, accordingly, that to avoid harm and the risk of an early death, let alone to ensure the conditions of greater comfort, the observation of certain natural laws or rules is required (*Leviathan*, ch. 13). The latter are things the individual ought to adhere to in dealings with others if there is sufficient ground for believing that others will do likewise (see Plamenatz, 1963, pp. 122-32, for a clear discussion of these ideas). Hobbes says of these laws that 'they have been contracted into one easy sum, intelligible even to the meanest capacity; and that is, *Do not that to another which thou wouldest not have done to thyself*' (see *Leviathan*, chs 14 and 15). There is much in what he says

about laws of nature that is ambiguous (above all, their relation to the 'will of God'), but these difficulties need not concern us here. For the key problem, in Hobbes's view, is: under what conditions will individuals trust each other enough to 'lay down their right to all things' so that their long-term interest in security and peace can be upheld? How can individuals make a bargain with one another when it may be, in certain circumstances, in some people's interest to break it? An agreement between people to ensure the regulation of their lives is necessary, but it seems an impossible goal.

His argument, in short, is as follows: if individuals surrender their rights by transferring them to a powerful authority which can force them to keep their promises and covenants, then an effective and legitimate private and public sphere, society and state, can be formed. Thus the social contract consists in individuals handing over their rights of self-government to a single authority - thereafter authorized to act on their behalf - on the condition that every individual does the same. A unique relation of authority results: the relation of sovereign to subject. A unique political power is created: the exercise of sovereign power or sovereignty - the authorized (hence rightful) use of power by the person or assembly established as sovereign.² The sovereign's subjects have an obligation and duty to obey the sovereign; for the position 'sovereign' is the product of their social contract, and 'sovereignty' is above all a quality of the position rather than of the person who occupies it. The contract is a once-and-for-all affair, creating an authority able to determine the very nature and limits of the law. There can be no conditions placed on such authority because to do so would undermine its very *raison d'être*.

The sovereign has to have sufficient power to make agreements stick, to enforce contracts and to ensure that the laws governing political and economic life are upheld. Power must be effective. Since, in Hobbes's view, 'men's ambitions, avarice, anger and other passions' are strong, the 'bonds of words are too weak to bridle them . . . without some fear of coercive power' (see *Leviathan*, ch. 14). In short: 'covenants, without the sword, are but words, and of no strength to secure a man at all' (*Leviathan*, p. 223). Beyond the sovereign state's sphere of influence there will always be the chaos of constant warfare; but within the territory controlled by the state, with 'fear of some coercive power', social order can be sustained.

It is important to stress that, in Hobbes's opinion, while sovereignty must be self-perpetuating, undivided and ultimately absolute, it is established by the authority conferred by the people (*Leviathan*, pp. 227-8). The sovereign's right of command and the subjects' duty of obedience is the result of consent - the circumstances individuals would have agreed to if there had actually been a social contract. Although there is little about Hobbes's conception of the state which today we would call representative, he argues in fact that the people rule through the sovereign. The sovereign is their representative: 'A

Multitude of men, are made *One Person*, when they are by one man, or one Person, Represented' (*Leviathan*, p. 220). Through the sovereign a plurality of voices and interests can become 'one will', and to speak of a sovereign state assumes, Hobbes held, such a unity. Hence, his position is at one with all those who argue for the importance of government by consent and reject the claims of the 'divine right of Kings' and, more generally, the authority of tradition. Yet, his conclusions run wholly counter to those who often take such an argument to imply the necessity of some kind of popular sovereignty or democratic representative government (cf. Peters, 1956, ch. 9). Hobbes was trying to acknowledge, and persuade his contemporaries to acknowledge, a full obligation to a sovereign state. As one commentator usefully put it:

Hobbes was not asking his contemporaries to make a contract, but only to acknowledge the same obligation they would have had if they had made such a contract. He was speaking not to men in a state of nature, but to men in an imperfect political society, that is to say, in a society which did not guarantee security of life and commodious living (as witness its tendency to lapse into civil war). He was telling them what they must do to establish a more nearly perfect political society, one that would be permanently free from internal disturbance. (Macpherson, 1968, p. 45; cf. *Leviathan*, p. 728)

A strong secular state was offered as the most effective, appropriate and legitimate political form. The right of citizens to change their ruler(s) was, accordingly, regarded as superfluous.

The fundamental purpose of sovereignty is to ensure 'the *safety of the people*'. By 'safety' is meant not merely minimum physical preservation. The sovereign must ensure the protection of all things held in property: 'Those that are dearest to a man are his own life, and limbs; and in the next degree, (in most men) those that concern conjugall affection; and after them riches and means of living' (*Leviathan*, pp. 376, 382-3). Moreover, the sovereign must educate the people to respect all these kinds of property so that men can pursue their trades and callings, and industry and the polity can flourish. At this point Hobbes suggests certain limits to the range of the sovereign's actions: the sovereign should neither injure individuals nor the basis of their material wellbeing, and should recognize that authority can be sustained only so long as protection can be afforded to all subjects (see *Leviathan*, ch. 21).

There are a number of particularly noteworthy things about Hobbes's conception of the state. First, the state is regarded as pre-eminent in political and social life. While individuals exist prior to the formation of civilized society and to the state itself, it is the latter that provides the conditions of existence of the former. The state alters a miserable situation for human beings by changing the conditions under which they pursue their interests. The state constitutes society through the powers of command of the sovereign

(set down in the legal system) and through the capacity of the sovereign to enforce the law (established by the fear of coercive power). The state does not simply record or reflect socio-economic reality, it enters into its very construction by establishing its form and codifying its forces. Second, it is the self-seeking nature of individuals' behaviour and patterns of interaction that makes the indivisible power of the state necessary. The sovereign state must be able to act decisively to counter the threat of anarchy. Hence it must be powerful and capable of acting as a single force. Third, the state, and practically all it does, can and must be considered legitimate. For the 'thought experiment', drawing on the notions of a state of nature and social contract, shows how individuals with their own divergent interests come to commit themselves to the idea that only a great Leviathan or state or 'Mortall God' can articulate and defend the 'general' or 'public' interest. The sovereign state represents 'the public' – the sum of individual interests – and thus can create the conditions for individuals to live their lives and to go about their competitive and acquisitive business peacefully. Hobbes's argument recognizes the importance of public consent (although he was not always consistent about its significance), and concludes that it is conferred by the social contract and its covenants.

Hobbes's arguments are extraordinarily impressive. The image of an all-powerful Leviathan is a remarkably contemporary one; after all, most states in the twentieth century have been run by 'Mortall Gods', people with seemingly unlimited authority backed by the armed forces. (Consider the number of dictatorships that now exist.) Moreover, the idea that individuals are merely self-interested is also a depressingly modern one. Such a conception of human beings is presupposed in the economic and political doctrines of many writers today (see, for example, Friedman, 1962). But the impressiveness of some of Hobbes's views should not, of course, be confused with their acceptability. Hobbes's accounts, for example, of sovereignty, obligation and the duties of citizens are all contestable, as are his general doctrines about human nature. The constitutive role of the state (the degree to which the state forms society), coercive power (the degree to which such power is or must be central to political order), representation (the degree to which a sovereign authority can claim to articulate the public interest without forms of democratic accountability), and legitimacy (the degree to which states are considered just or worthy by their citizens) – all have been and still are subject to debate.

John Locke (1632-1704) raised a fundamental objection to the Hobbesian argument that individuals could only find a 'peaceful and commodious' life with one another if they were governed by the dictates of an indivisible sovereign. He said of this type of argument: 'This is to think that Men are so foolish that they take care to avoid what Mischiefs may be done them by *Pole-Cats*, or *Foxes*, but are content, nay think it Safety, to be devoured by