

Agenda

What is “the state”?

Variation in state strength

- Life without (much of) a state
- Across time
- Across space

What do states do?

- Public goods provision

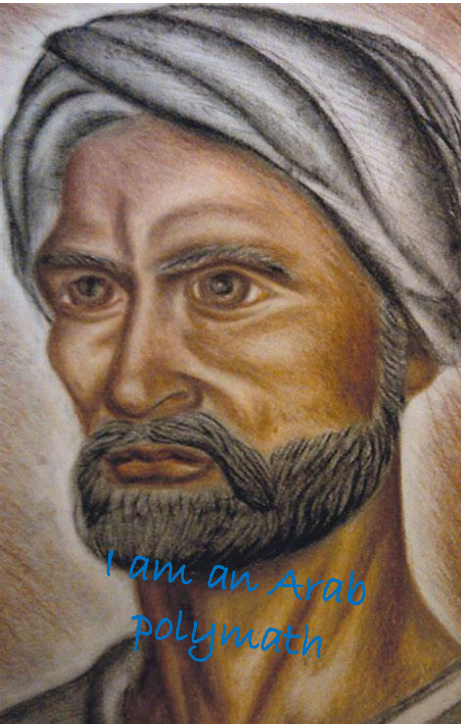
Why do states come into being? Get stronger?

- In theory
- In reality

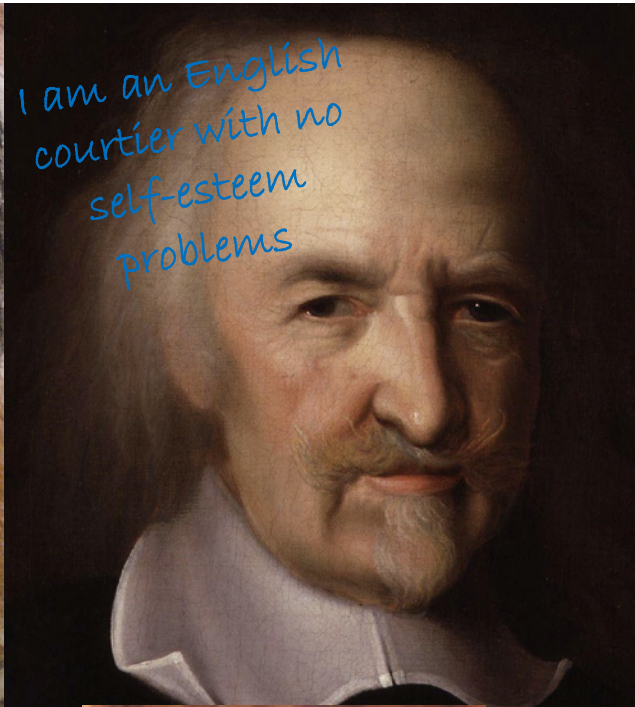
Are there alternatives to the state?

What is the state? Why have one?

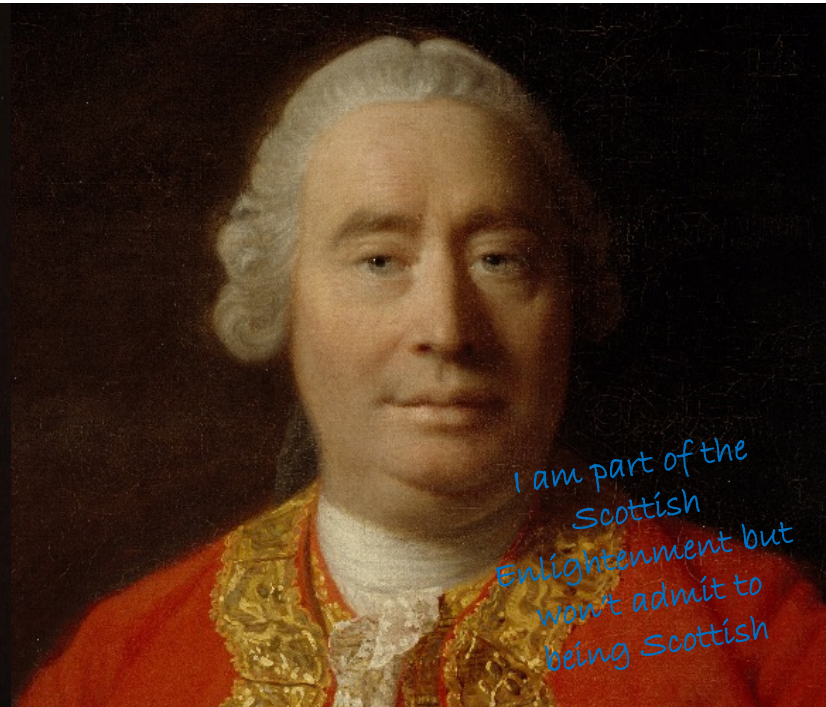
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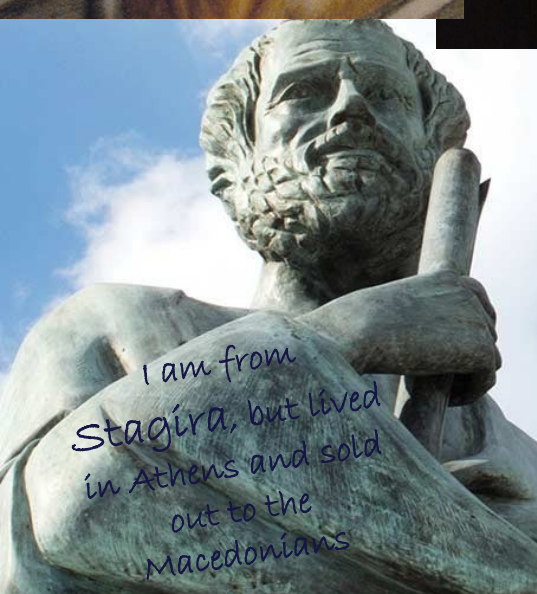
I am an Arab polymath



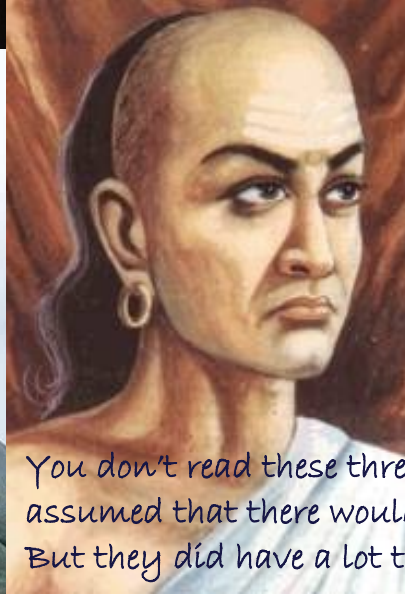
I am an English courtier with no self-esteem problems



I am part of the Scottish Enlightenment but won't admit to being Scottish



I am from Stagira, but lived in Athens and sold out to the Macedonians



You don't read these three guys - Kautilya, Lord Shang, and Han Fei - because they assumed that there would be a state (and a single ruler, whom they would advise).² But they did have a lot to say about what made states stronger or weaker.

What is the state? (2)

Some common definitions

- “A human community that successfully claims a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence in a given territory” (Max Weber)
- An institution that prevents injustice “other than such as it commits itself” (Ibn Khaldun)
- The standing institutions of government, such as the bureaucracy, that endure beyond changes in the individuals in power (Prof. Terry Karl)

The basic idea:

- *Standing institutions*
 - *of impersonal political authority that*
 - *make and implement binding decisions*
- Manifestations of a state: bureaucracies, militaries, police, courts, tax collection bureaus, regulatory agencies, public health agencies, etc.
- A continuum, not a dichotomy, of stateness. Some states only fulfill minimalist functions

What sorts of things do states do?

External defense (military, spies, etc.)

Public safety / order (e.g., police)

Dispute resolution (e.g., courts)

Public services

- Critical infrastructure (water systems, bridges, roads, etc.)
- Disaster relief
- Public health (e.g., epidemics)
- Education

Revenue collection

Economic regulation

- Currency
- Property rights (physical capital, enforcement of contracts, IP)
- Consumer protection, standards, etc.

Legitimation (“official” religion, propaganda, etc.)

State can be strong or weak, kind or cruel

Existence of the state does not mean that:

- the state behaves well,
- is accountable,
- uses meritocratic procedures,
- is efficient,
- Is uncorrupt,
- Etc.

State is not necessarily particularly strong or effective or without competitors

In the absence of a state, there are always mechanisms of making and enforcing binding decisions on behalf of the community

- These groups historically contest state control

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Life without (much of) a state



until recently
stateless but settled
(agricultural)
peoples)

Papua New Guinea
(as you know from
the map test)

Image courtesy of Demis. This image is in the public domain. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Topographic_Map_of_Papua_New_Guinea).



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Yali people

Gebushi people

Life without (much of) a state, per Hobbes



Credit: "A landscape with travellers ambushed outside a small town". Workshop of [Sebastian Vrancx](#).

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We are accustomed to there being a state, but...

We often assume it is dominant

Leopold Pospisil (1974): “[W]e are accustomed to regard the law of the state as the primary, almost omnipotent standard to which the individual looks for protection and with which he tries to conform his behavior. Only within the framework of this basic conformity, we tend to think, may there exist additional controls of the family, clique, association, and so on. In other words, in the West it is assumed that the center of power controlling most behavior of the citizens of a modern nation lies on the level of the society as a whole”

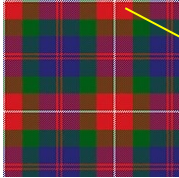
rather than contested

Migdal (1986): “It is far from inevitable that state leaders achieve predominance for the state. In cases where it [predominance] has been unattainable, the state has neither disappeared nor has it continually incurred high costs of battling those who effectively made the rules in this realm or that, in one locality or another...The struggles over the state’s desire for predominance, the accommodation between the state and others, and the maneuvers to gain the best deal possible...have been the *real* politics of many... societies.”

The state's victory over its competitors has been protracted and rarely complete

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Family / clan / tribe



Local potentates (*caciques*, *coroneis*, "Big Men", etc.)



At the mercy of Afghanistan's warlords - BBC News

Warlords in Afghanistan & Its State-building Process - Paradigm Shift



Communal villages where peasants resist central authority

Property holders (landed aristocracy, merchant guilds, etc.)



Religious organizations (e.g., the Church in Europe or Latin America)



States still vary tremendously in capacity: an example of controlling violence

Japan today

~1 homicide per 100,000
people per year

96% of homicides are solved

Honduras today

~96 homicides per 100,000
people per year

~1% result in a successful
prosecution

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The typical economist's view of state formation

Imagine we want to build a well...



$t > c > d > s$

		$t > c > d > s$	
Player 1	Cooperate	s, t	c, c
	Defect	d, d	t, s
		Defect	Cooperate

Vladimir	Contribute	-5, 10	5, 5
	Sleep in	0, 0	10, -5
		Sleep in	Contribute
			Yuri

...but there is a collective action problem

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Two views of the origins of the state: The American view

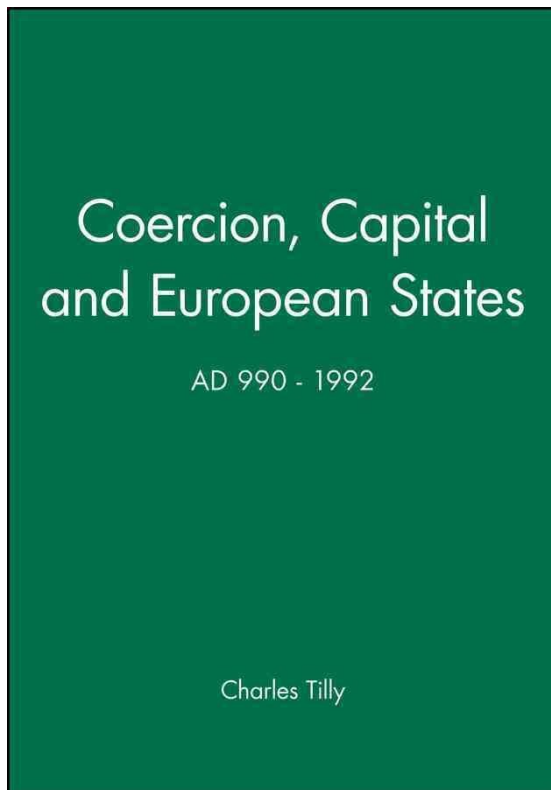
In y^e name of god Amen. We whose names are underwritten,
the loyal subjects of our dread soueraigne Lord King James
by y^e graco of god, of great Britaine, franc, & yreland king,
defondor of y^e faith, &
Hauing undertaken, for y^e glorio of god, and aduancements
of y^e christian^{faith}, and honour of our king & countrie, a voyagd to
plant y^e first Colonie in y^e Northern parts of Virginia. Doe
by these presents solemnly & mutually in y^e presence of god, and
one of another, Couenant, & combine our selues together into a
Ciuill body politick; for ~~the~~^{our} better ordering, & preservation & fur-
therance of y^e ends aforesaid; and by vertue hereof. to enacte,
constitute, and frame such just & equall Lawes, ordinances,
Acts, constitutions, & offices, from time to time, as shall be thought
most meete & conuenient for y^e generall good of y^e Colonie: vnto
which we promise all due submission and obedienco. In witness
whereof we haue hereunder subscribed our names at Cap=
Codd y^e 11. of Nouember, in y^e year of y^e raigne of our soueraigne
Lord King James of England, franc, & yreland y^e eighteenth
and of scotland y^e fifth. fourth. An: Dom. 1620.]

In other words, states
come from a bunch
of free and equal
individuals
agreeing to submit
to laws they craft

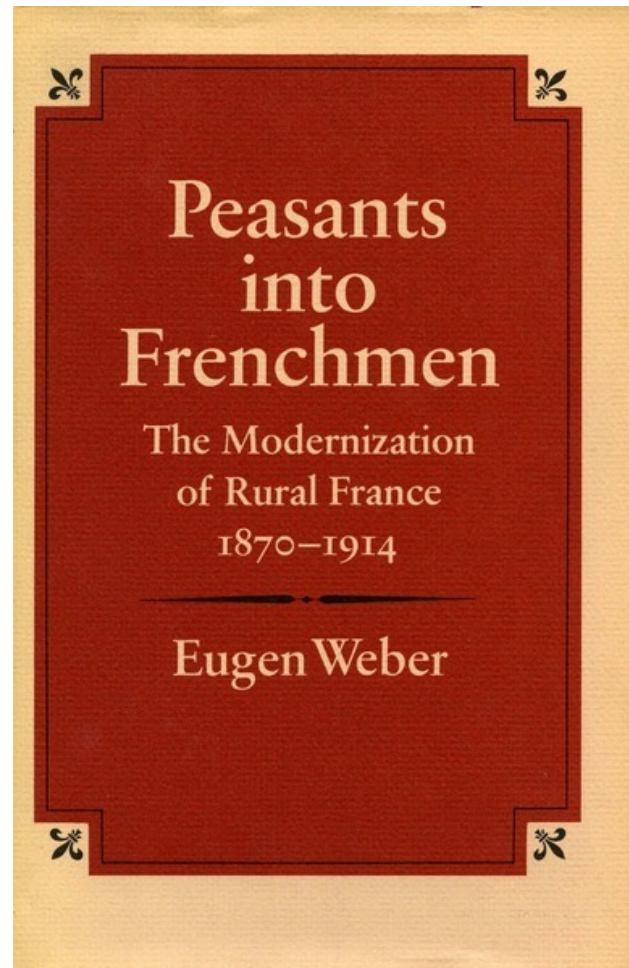
Bradford, William. From *Of Plimoth Plantation*. This image is in the public domain. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#).

“We...solemnly and mutually in the Presence of God and one of another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil Body Politick...And by Virtue hereof to enact, constitute, and frame, such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions and Offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the General good of the Colony; unto which we promise all due submission and obedience...”

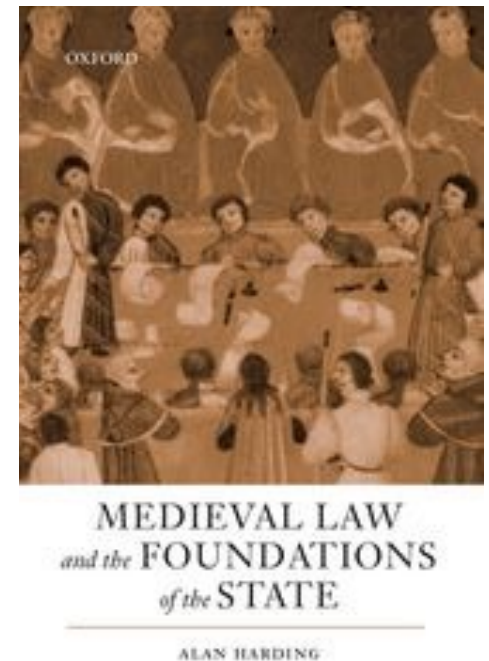
Two views of the origins of the state: The Continental view



Tilly, Charles. *Coercion, Capital, and European States, A.D. 990-1992*. Wiley-Blackwell, 1992. © Wiley-Blackwell. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.



Weber, Eugen. *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914*. Stanford University Press, 1976. © Stanford University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.



Harding, Alan. *Medieval Law and the Foundations of the State*. Oxford University Press, 2002. © Oxford University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

Two views of the origins of the state: The Continental view (2)



The process of state-building has rarely been gentle or pretty

“[W]hat in blithe retrospect we call ‘state formation’ included the setting of ruthless tax farmers against poor peasants and artisans, the forced sale for taxes of animals that would have paid for dowries, the imprisoning of local leaders as hostages to the local community’s payment of overdue taxes, the hanging of others who dared to protest, the losing of brutal soldiers on a hapless civilian population, the conscription of young men who were their parents’ main hope for comfort in old age, the forced purchase of tainted salt, the elevation of already arrogant local property holders into offices of the state, and the imposition of religious conformity in the name of public order and morality.” (Charles Tilly)

Tilly, Charles. From *Coercion, Capital, and European States, A.D. 990-1992*. Wiley-Blackwell, 1992. © Wiley-Blackwell. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

“War made the state, and the state made war” (Charles Tilly)

- States must extract more resources from their populations to fight other states

Conquest plays a salient role in construction of initial institutions

The state creates the society, not the reverse

Example: linguistic homogenization in “France”

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Source: “Speaking atlas of the regional languages of France”. <https://atlas.limsi.fr/index-en.html>.

Problem: States don't always provide public goods, and don't limit themselves to that

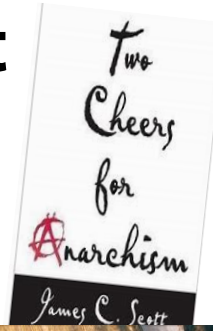
Some -- historically, most -- are just instruments of plunder

- “Stationary bandits” rather than “roving bandits”
- Control and confinement of populations (early states)
- Slavery (e.g., ancient Uruk, Siam/Thailand in 1900)
- Writing created mainly for the purposes of revenue collection
- Revenue extracted for building temples, statues, and tombs for ruler
- To be the citizen of a state is to be ordered about, coerced, counted, measured, taxed, conscripted...

Others have done terrible things

- War and conquest
- Unfree labor (including reproductive labor)
- Ethnic cleansing, mass killing and genocide

Stateless peoples historically may have been better off (no taxes, no forced labor) and freer



See credits for these images on page 26.

James C. Scott

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Do we really need a state? What kind of state?

Public goods (classic definition)

Non-rival	Water from the village well Local road Public education	Pure public goods (clean air, dams and irrigation systems, national defense, currency, legal system, classified information about cyberthreats)
Rival	Candy bar, car, milk from a dairy cow, agricultural land, apartment building, private education	Public beaches Fruit growing by roadside
	Excludable	Non-excludable

[Goods may also look different when how they are financed is taken into account]

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Ibn Khaldun

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Lord Shang

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Han Fei

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Local Potentates

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Articles:

Qobil, Rustam "[At the Mercy of Afghanistan's Warlords](#)." BBC News, November 28, 2012.

Syed, Fahad. "[Warlords in Afghanistan & Its State-building Process](#)." Paradigm Shift, December 24, 2020.

Plan of a Mediaeval Manor

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Marcellin Champagnat

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Property Holders

Almourol Castle

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———. *Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play*. Princeton University Press, 2012. © Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

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