

John Locke Institute

2018 Essay Competition

Question 2: Is the state a universal category or a historically contingent and transient form of human organisation?

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Authors Note:

A 2000 word essay will never be able to fully analyse every argument presented from the question. Instead, I like to think of this essay as a VIP tour, an exploration of the best parts.

In addition, much of the essay considers the state in a practical sense, as governments, to illustrate a point and provide empirical evidence for claims. Given the theoretical nature of the question, we must assume *ceteris paribus* for each of the examples. Hence most of the essay considers the state as if it is not affected by external conditions; such as the influence of other states, natural disasters, geopolitical factors, and even individuals in these states who would induce the state to act in a manner it would not normally. Otherwise it would not do justice to the abstract slant of the question.

An exploration of the state

For the purpose of this essay, the state is defined as an organisation which holds a “monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force” (Weber, 1919), and a universal category is taken to mean that the state must have the same role in every country. Historical contingency is obvious and a ‘human organisation’ is taken to mean one which is of and created by the people.

Political ideas are inherently subjective, and hence there is no definitive way of proving whether the state is a universal category or historically contingent and transient. Looking at the state throughout history provides a good starting point through which we can investigate its nature.

There is debate about how loosely structured, decentralised communities formed the state, but one of the main ideas is the 'Circumscription Theory' a refined version of the Conflict Theory of State Formation (Carneiro, 1970), which suggests that a centralised government only forms in certain conditions. Carneiro emphasises the role of external threats; war means that the victors take control and gives rise to chiefdoms. However, a crucial condition must be met; the groups of people must be bounded by infertile land. This prevents the losers from simply moving away, and hence causes the formation of two classes, the rulers and the ruled. This model is supported by evidence from the six primary states (first generation states that evolved without contact with any pre-existing states) that are known to have existed (Policy Tensor, 2017). In particular, the Nile Valley, the Indus Valley region and Mesopotamia are surrounded by a hostile environment; deserts, mountains, rough seas.

The fact that these six primary states developed independently of each other, and yet were structured in a similar manner: for example a rigid social hierarchy, authoritative religious structure and a dependence on slavery, is remarkable (Trigger, 2003), (Adams, 2017). It seems to suggest that a state is a universal category; linked to the view that humans living in different but similar conditions will respond in a similar manner to one another on account of our biology (Malinowski, 1939). This provides further evidence that the state is a universal category- universal because the state is primarily a human creation (as the state is borne from human conflict), and if our biology determines our actions and hence our creation, then the state must be similar whichever society it is in.

In my opinion, a more convincing argument is that the first states were so similar by chance. This seems incredibly improbable, but less so when our definition of the state is taken into account. Such a narrow definition of the state (though necessary for simplicity's sake) also means that we pick up on the states which are structured in this manner, i.e. an organisation which holds a monopoly on legitimate violence may need to be structured in the way that the primary states were to survive, and hence be known. Ergo, we may be engaging in a form of selection bias.

However, this is grossly oversimplified. The state created in Mesopotamia was similar to the one in Mesoamerica, but this does not mean that the state is a universal category. If the state were a universal category, then two versions of this state would undoubtedly be similar. But assuming the inverse is a logical fallacy. Furthermore, if the state was a universal category, what could explain the different roles that the state has today? In many countries, the state has an important role in providing information through state media. In others, the state provides free healthcare, or unemployment allowance and other welfare provision. It is clear that the overall role of the state is not universal.

Perhaps this could be solved through considering whether some aspects of the state fit into a universal category, and yet others have been shaped by the history of the country.

Evolution of the state

One argument that has been put forward about the development of the state is that of evolution (Fukuyama, 2011). Fukuyama asserts that the history of a country determines the nature of its governance, seen through the example of China. China grew a powerful state much earlier than European nations, a factor which is suggested to have caused the authoritarian regime today. This would classify states as historically contingent, yet Fukuyama also acknowledges that societies pass

through 'stages' and develop certain characteristics at particular points in history. These characteristics: the development of a modern bureaucracy, the rule of law and political accountability, form the foundation of the modern state. However, these striking similarities emphasise the nature of the state as universal, since all states pass through these periods in order to become effective in the long term and hence survive.

It is also worth mentioning that a state that does not develop a semblance of these characteristics will not be effective in the long term. Throughout history, it is easy to see that countries with a good balance of these characteristics were those that became most powerful: Britain, France, Spain. Similarly, those that were unable to develop a strong state either collapsed or were subsumed by a stronger state, such as the Soviet Union or pre-colonial America. This means that in discussing characteristics of successful states, and hence classifying the state as a universal category, we engage in selection bias (like the point above) because these characteristics are not found in all states- only the ones which we still know about. Can we then say that a successful state is a universal category? Perhaps, but this is a very shaky conclusion to make, least of all because it remains to be seen whether states that do not show all of these characteristics can still be successful- the current Chinese state does not exhibit the 'rule of law' characteristic, for example (Economy, 2014). Hence, the more convincing conclusion is that only the successful states we know about today developed those characteristics, and the ones which didn't, collapsed.

Establishing a common denominator

And yet, it seems obvious that the state is a universal category in some aspects. Weber's definition of the state was an organisation that held a 'monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force'. This is a base similarity between the state in the UK and that in China. These characteristics are also common with the primitive governments of Mesopotamia, Egypt and Mesoamerica. Everywhere the state must be able to control its population with violence, should the necessity arise. This in itself makes the state a universal category at a basic level; the fact that there can be a definition of the 'state' means that the 'state' must be a universal category of some sort. It then makes sense to consider specific events which shape the nature of the state through history as separate to the basic universal nature of the state. Ergo, the state is a universal category, and yet historically contingent – because the exact nature of the state in different countries depends on the history of that country and that people.

The modern state is much like a cake. The base, or common layer is a universal category. It satisfies the definition of a monopoly on physical force. This is also, crucially, the only common denominator of all governments. The icing on the cake represents the part that is historically contingent. It depends on how the state has evolved through history, and whether it is democratic or a dictatorship, or something else altogether. It also determines whether the government will survive in the long term by developing Fukuyama's characteristics, or not.

A question of permanence

The reader will notice that the notion of 'transience' is conspicuously absent. Whether or not the state is inherently transient is debatable; though there is strong argument that it is, given that a variety of different types of states have fallen over the course of human history. However, many of these states, such as East Germany, collapsed due to external influences, not inherent issues with

the state. However, there is little evidence that states are impermanent and collapse inherently. A far more convincing argument is that states collapse due to mismanagement or conflict. This is supported by empirical evidence; the majority of cases of state collapse after 1946 were due to armed rebellion, while other popular reasons include decolonisation or a sudden removal of transnational control, and war (Lambach, et al., 2015).

Most states collapse due to specific factors, not the inherent Weberian nature of the state. For this reason, we can classify transience as a possible characteristic of a state's historical contingency. No two states collapse for exactly the same reason, an obvious observation, because all states evolve to become different. Using Leibnitz's Law (Feldman, 1970), two states x and y cannot be the same unless all the characteristics shown by x are the exact same as the characteristics shown by y. Given the inconsequential probability of the history of two states being identical, we can assume that these states cannot evolve the same way. Hence, we can deduce that the states must be different, and therefore that if one state collapses and the other does not, then the reason for the collapse of that state must lie in its evolution. Working backwards, we can see that the reason for the collapse of a state lies in its nature as historically contingent, as this is what led to that specific path of evolution. Note that this is a simplification; I have assumed that the effect of charismatic individuals, geopolitical factors and a myriad other causes of collapse are constant, as these causes are wholly distinct from the history of the state. However, *ceteris paribus*, the point still stands.

This does not necessarily mean that historical contingency causes transience. Crucially however, by establishing that states do not collapse inherently, but rather due to historical contingency, or other factors, we can say that the state is not inherently transient. The primary states were not doomed to impermanence as soon as they were born. Rather the particular way that they evolved meant that they eventually collapsed. Therefore the state is not inherently transient, but the multitude of factors which could cause it to collapse mean that an indefinite period of existence is highly unlikely.

Interestingly, consider what would happen if that state did collapse. Assuming that there was no semblance of authority, governance would revert back to the State of Nature (Wolff, 2016). From this state of anarchy, the state will once again be rebuilt through whichever mechanism it was built from before, restarting the process. This means that it is impossible, in the long term, to not have a state. Hence the state in a given area is not really transient in the long term, since it will exist in one form or another.

Conclusions

Finally, whether or not the state is a human organisation is much easier to determine. Without humans, there would be no state. Would the concept of the state still exist? This is entirely arbitrary, in my opinion, the concept of anything only exists if there are people to conceptualise it- flying cars exist as a concept only because we can imagine them. As long as members of the animal kingdom cannot envisage or create a system of government, the state will remain a human concept (Hamilton, 2012). And so, it must be a human organisation.

The question of the nature of the state, as a universal category or a historically contingent and transient form of human organisation is one which cannot be definitively answered. I think that it is, at its base a universal category, built on and developed by history. It is, however, not transient

because of its roots in human behaviour. As long as one assumes that human behaviour and humanity remains extant, the state will continue to exist in one form or another.

Word count (excl. title page, 'author's note', footnotes and bibliography): 1979

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