

## CHAPTER 2

### THE CONCEPT OF THE STATE: DIFFERENT APPROACHES

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#### INTRODUCTION

In the following, I elaborate on the question of how to conceptualize the modern state through a critical overview of the selected scholarly literature, including theoretical and historical/theoretical works that offer contrasting views on the concept of the state. Notably, this discussion does not focus on a particular geographical setting and its historical context. However, I find this general and considerably abstract discussion as potentially insightful, especially when one considers the general processes of historical change, which are more or less visible in every historical context. Most notable among them are the development of capitalism and the concurrent emergence of new governmental mechanisms.

I discuss the concept of the state through two particular and entwined questions. The first regards the boundaries between the state and civil society. In addition to discussing whether such boundaries exist, I also critically engage with different conceptions of them. The question of the state-society boundaries brings about yet another question, this time on the existence of the state as a separate, coherent and independent entity. A discussion on both together naturally involves critical thinking on the nature of the state's agency in historical and social transformations.

#### THE STATE AS AN INDEPENDENT HISTORICAL AGENT

Among the scholars engaging with the concept of the state, Theda Skocpol (1979) is arguably the one who most openly claims the state to be an independent and coherent structure separated from the society with clear external boundaries and conceives it as an independent historical agent. She suggests two factors that have played a vital role in the independent existence of the state, namely, starting from the era of absolutism, an international competition among the states and the lack of coherence between the state and powerful social classes with regard

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Mitchell offers the third approach, which puts forward a unique methodology to study the state. Instead of pursuing to explore the nature of the state by relying on the dichotomy of idea versus reality, he suggests concentrating on the historical processes that have produced such a dichotomous understanding. He identifies the state in certain mechanisms that generate “disciplinary power” and also produce the dichotomy of idea versus reality. The disciplinary mechanisms or the “techniques of power” include the “organized partitioning of space” and time, the “distribution” of individuals over space and constant hierarchical supervision. The constant repetition, “order and precision” of them in various domains, such as armies, schools, factories, agricultural production and hospitals, in which they originated and operate, produce the “effect of a structure.” The structure appears to be more than the sum of the people, their activities, and the things involved in the operation of disciplinary mechanisms. For Mitchell, the term the state refers to “a set of such structural effects.” The state thus appears as an orderly structure that includes but at the same time goes beyond the sum and/or combination of the disciplinary mechanisms as well as of the people and things involved in their operations. As these mechanisms do not operate in coordination with each other, the concept of the state does not connote an internal coherency. Nor does it connote an overall agency. The state effect is nonetheless actively present in the constitution of power relations.

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