



Covenant University Journals



# Is the State still in International Relations Theorising?

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## Abstract:

From 1945 to date, the state has been at the centre of debates in IR theorizing. While the anti-statist theorists had contested and are still contesting its centrality in IR theorizing, the unrepentant state-centric theorists even in the era of technological globalization still consider it, the fulcrum of IR. This paper in a discursive cum historical fashion, drawn mainly from secondary source, examined the nature of the debates in order to decipher its limit or limitlessness in contemporary IR theorising. The paper, after a careful diagnosis of the concept of the state as well as undergoing the genealogical survey of state centrism in IR theorising, concludes that the state though is still the primary actor in IR but the empirical realities of the post WWII World have confirmed that it is no longer, what it used to be. Hence, it has limits in contemporary IR theorizing.

**Keywords:** The State, Weberism, Globalization, Realism, Cold War.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since its nurture in the classical Greek city state system, through its revamping in the Renaissance Italian city state system and its eventual formalization courtesy of the Westphalia arrangement of 1648, the state has been accepted as *fait accompli*, by statesmen, diplomats and scholars of international relations particular those with realist bent. Since then, it has been glorified to the extent that when statesmen and diplomats think, they think about the state (Palmer and Perkins 2000). Aside from its engrainment in the hearts of statesmen and diplomats, the theoretical postulates of Jean Bodin, Hugo Grotius and Thomas Hobbes further strengthened the belief that with the state everything is possible. Although, the idea of omnipotency and absoluteness of the state as conceived by European statesmen at Westphalia and promoted theoretically by Bodin, Grotius and Hobbes was traditionally European, the idea of statehood soon spread outside the Western hemisphere (Tilly, 1975, Hansen, 2002).

Although, literature suggests that there was no consensus among the theorists of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries on the institutional make-up of the state but by early 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars and diplomats of all shades have

agreed that irrespective of the character of the modern state, it is a coercive and territorial entity. Max Weber quoted in Gerth and Mills (1972:78) developed one of the most significant definitions of the modern state, by placing emphasis upon three distinctive elements in history: *territoriality, violence and legitimacy*. Of course, Weber emphasized: 'A state is that human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory'.

The Weberian conception of the state became entrenched in academic and policy circles. In fact, not only did realists and liberals accept it, the notion of the *territorial state* became the focal point of analysis in international relations theorizing. However, due to the turbulence in the global system (Rosenau, 1990), the state paradigm came under challenges from other paradigms. First, by the communist internationalists, during the first world war (Hollis and Smith, 1990:33) and subsequently by various strands of thought.

During the 1950s, it became fashionable to speak of the demise of the state because of the development of nuclear technology. These, it was argued had exploded the

state's claim to protect its population. According to the leading exponent of this view, John Herz (1959) the nation-state was being undermined, by four factors: its susceptibility to economic warfare, the rise of international communications and the consequent permeability of national frontiers, the development of air warfare, which could take war directly to state's population; and nuclear weapons, which threatened the very survival of states and their population. The state was therefore, according to Herz, unlikely to remain the dominant unit of international relations for the future. Such view expressed by Herz re-echoed in the positions of two leading realists (Carr 1946) and Morgenthau (1966). Morgenthau specifically argues that the state is a product of history and therefore bound to disappear in the course of history. He further emphasizes:

*Modern technology and in particular, the nuclear bomb, invalidated, the state as a means of social organization as the state was incapable of providing a means of protecting its citizen –its raison d'etre.*

If the state was becoming supplanted by supranational organizations as claimed by functionalists and neofunctionalists of the 1950s and 1960s (Haas, 1958), what was the place of the state in IR theory in subsequent decades? In the 1970s, state – centric paradigm continued to be object of theoretical onslaught. First, by pluralists like Keohane and Nye (1972) who claimed that, there are actors other than states, which play a central role in international relations. Included in this category were multinational corporations and revolutionary groups. Second, the complex interdependence theorists notably Morse (1976) also contended that the increasing linkages among national economies have made them more than ever sensitive and vulnerable to events in other countries.

Together, the above points suggest that the state in the 1970s lost its control over events as new forces came to play important role in

global affairs (Brown, 1974). With the winding up of the cold war in the 1990s, the optimists who had thought that the unipolar order would create a semblance of unity among theorists were proven wrong. Indeed, the end of the cold war led to resurgence of new debates about the state, its centrality its utility and meaning.

In relations to its meaning, contemporary scholars contend that the state concept is imprecise. As Ferguson and Mansbach (1989) put it “*the definition of the word state are so numerous that they obscure all meaning*”. In the post – cold war global system driven by the logic of neoliberalism, as a concept and empirical substance, it continues to be challenged by a myriad of perspectives and approaches.

It is against this background that this paper seeks to examine the nature of this debate. In order to set about its tasks, the paper proceeds in six stages. Part one, the introduction, attempts to lay the background of the study and to present the main thesis of the paper. Part two that follows aims at clarifying the concept of the state. Part three examines the genealogy of the state-centric paradigm in IR theorising. Part four focuses on theoretical challenges to state-centric paradigm. Part five discusses and Part six concludes the paper.

## 2. DEFINING THE STATE

*As Hosper (1967:3) once observed “things, events, objects are defined in order to identify them”.* The Hosperian view suggests that there is a classificatory dimension to definitions. Although, the above fact may appear irrelevant to a discussion of such value-laden concept like the state but it is mentioned to illustrate the confusion that is raised by such concepts like the *nation, society, community* etc. that are often used erroneously with the concept of the state. The essence here is to delineate the concept of the state in Political Science and IR from other similar concepts that are often associated with it.

Another issue that relates to the above point is how to make a distinction between the defining and accompanying characteristics

of the state because in most cases, semantic analysts often raise the accompanying characteristics to the level of defining characteristics so when such characteristics are discovered elsewhere, there is little to distinguish. The foregoing suggests that the state as a concept in IR is riddled in semantic imbroglio. How then do we define the state?

The state like other key concepts in IR is in all indications, essentially contested concepts (Gallie, 1962). As a result, the concept of the state remains one of the most problematic in the field of Political Science and IR. Political theorists have not agreed on the meaning of the state and this has created semantic chaos (Neumann, 1964; Skinner, 1978).. Ferguson and Mansbach (op cit) put the situation thus:

*As a result of conceptual and semantic confusion, the state is said to have little substance as an empirical concept and virtual utility as an analytical concept, it obscures far more that it clarifies.*

Added to the definitional dilemma is the fact that theorists often confuse the state as an institution with the state as a concept (Fried, 1972:143). However, despite its imprecise nature (Palmer and Perkins, op cit), attempts have been made in scholarly literature to define it but as Held et al (1983) averred “four traditions have emerged in answering the philosophical questions: “what is the state?” But none according to them forms a unity. However, for the purpose of this paper, the functionalists and Marxists perspectives are added to the legalist perspectives. The first perspective drawing from functional sociology defines the state in functional terms. According to his perspective, the state is a neutral institution that balances competing interests among groups in the community (Goode, 1972; Dahl, 1975).

However, despite the plausibility of the functionalists’ position, it has been criticized by the Marxists who contend that the state is not an objective force but a

machine not only for maintaining the rule of a class but for the domination of one class by the other (Lenin, 1977; Miliband, 1969). Lenin quoted in Harding (1977) averred thus: ‘*The modern representative state is the instrument for the exploitation of wages labour by capital – ‘a special repressive force’*

Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, it may not serve any useful purpose resolving the controversies but to extract a definition that will be analytically useful for our purpose. Hence, the Weberian definition because of it, analytical clarity offers a recipe. Weber (1978) claimed thus:

*The modern state unlike its predecessors which were troubled by constantly warring factions has a capacity of monopolizing the legitimate use of violence within a given territory. (emphasis added)*

The Weberian definitional framework formed the cornerstone of the post-W W II realist thought (Carr, 1939; Wight, 1946; Morgenthau, 1948). In addition, in the realm of international law, the basic component of Weberianism has been embedded. Article 1 of the Montevideo Convention of 1933 on the Rights and Duties of States summarized the major components of statehood: A state must possess a permanent population; a well-defined territory and a government capable of ruling its citizens and managing formal diplomatic relations with other states (Kegley, 2007: 539).

### **3. THE GENEALOGY OF THE STATE-CENTRIC PARADIGM**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, much of the thinking about realism in IR , had centered on the state. To the realist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the state was the primary actor in international affairs. Although state-centrism has generated much debates but a less noticed trend in the debates has been the debate about its genealogy. In this section of the paper, we intend to trace the genealogy of the state-centric paradigm in IR in order to reconfigure the debates about state –

centrism and the wider question of its place in IR theory.

State centric theory has intellectual roots that could be traced to the ancient world. In his celebrated history of the Peloponnesian war, Thucydides quoted in Finley (1972:49) stated that “*what made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear that which this caused in Sparta*”. Two issues arise from the Thucydides perspective above: First, power struggles in an anarchical setting. Second, two political entities engaged in war-like relationships. Thucydides focused his analysis not only on individual statesmen or the entire Greek city state system but rather on two identifiable political units: Athens and Sparta. In the late medieval period, the Renaissance Italian city states provided a laboratory for developing realist theory. During this period, Niccollo Machiavelli, drawing from the classical works of Thucydides, analysed inter- state relations in the Italian city state of the 16<sup>th</sup> countries. Machiavelli in his *raison d’etre* clearly demarcated state morality from individual morality.

In fact, Sabine quoted in Fried (op cit; 144) has argued that “the word *state* was fixed as a generic term for a body politic by Machiavelli early in the sixteenth century at which time it seems to have been current *stato* “Thomas Hobbes, having witness the 30years war came to the conclusion that a strong entity or a common power was mandatory for maintaining order within political system. The common power or the sovereign has to have sufficient power to make agreement stick, to enforce contracts and to ensure that the laws governing political and economic life were upheld. Since in Hobbes’s view men’s ambition: avarice, anger and other passion are strong, the bonds of words are too weak to bridle them ... without some fear of coercive power. As Hobbes quoted in Held etal (opcit) put

*“conv enant without the sword are but words and of no strength to secure a man at all. Beyond the sovereign state’s*

*sphere of influence there will always be chaos of constant warfare but within the territory controlled by the state, with fear of some coercive power, social order can be sustained”.*

Here, it is important to stress that Hobbes conceptualized sovereignty in a self-perpetuating, undivided and absolute term. In essence, a strong secular state was offered by Hobbes as the most effective, appropriate and legitimate political form.

The foregoing indicates that Hobbes saw the state as an institution that protects the people from both internal and external predators. George Hegel, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century drawing from the experience of a strong Prussian state, elevated the position of the state. Although, an idealist <sup>7</sup>, he believed that the state’s highest duty should lie in its preservation. In fact, Hegel quoted in Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff (1996:64) reasoned that:

*Since states are related to one another as autonomous entities and so as particular wills on which the validity of treaties depends and since the particular wills of the whole is content a will for its own welfare, it follows that welfare is the highest aim governing the relation of one state to another (emphasis added.)*

Moreover, Hegel by reechoing Machievelli contended that the state has a moral standards different from and superior to those of individual.

Among the antecedents of modern state-centre theory is the work of Max Weber whose writings dealt extensively on, the centrality of the state in IR. Weber drawing from the works of Hegel constructed a model of a unified bureaucratic state where the use of force is the prerogative of the state. The state maintains compliance or order within a given territory. The state’s web of agencies and institutions, finds its ultimate sanction in the claim to the monopoly of coercion and a political order



is only vulnerable to crises when this monopoly erodes.

Hence, argued Weber, the state is based on a monopoly of physical coercion which is legitimized (that is sustained) by a believer in the justifiability and or legality of this monopoly and since people no longer complied with the authority claimed by the powers that be merely on grounds (habit or charisma) rather there is general obedience by virtue of legality; by virtue of the belief in the validity of legal statutes and functional 'competence' based on rationally created rules. As legal entity, it has the capacity to enforce its power within its territory and to project the same into the international society.

One issue emerges from the Weberian conception: the state is seen as unitary, self-containing entity with the rationality of its own. This thesis has had implication for realist theory, for example; the post-World War II realist by following this proposition developed the rational actor perspective. In this perspective, the state is theorised as an impersonal, rational, self-calculating entity that rationally seeks to maximize gains and minimize losses.

The above theme echoed in the realist account of notable realists after the Second World War and beyond. In the post-cold war world, such thinking is still prevalent in IR particularly in the United States.

#### 4. STATE CENTRISM AND ITS CRITICS

Despite the seeming plausibility of the state centric framework, it has been decoupled and critics are still decoupling it. This section of the paper attempts to examine the challenges the paradigm has had to contend with. Although, the paper focuses more on the post cold war discourses, but an attempt is made briefly to examine some of the classical critiques of state centrism. In essence, our evaluations of the critiques of the state is organized into four historical waves, namely the classical, the post-world I, post-world war II and the post-cold war.

The first major challenge to state centrism as espoused by Thucydides, during the heyday of the Greek civilization, came after the decline of Greek power. During this period, Cicero and other stoics bequeathed a theory of cosmopolititarism i.e. citizenship in a world state. Cosmopolitan theory as developed by the stoics suggests that global politics of the age was not state driven but global driven.

The second challenge to the state centric paradigm came from the Marxists before and after the first world. According to this view, the working classes in capitalist Europe had more to unite them than divide them and the separateness of state was a piece of mystification which helped to perpetuate capitalism..

The post-world war II challenge to state centric came in three waves. In the 1950s, the hard shell thesis that has characterized the realist thinking was shattered by the views expressed by the exponents of hard shell permeability perspectives, (Herz, opcit). As earlier expressed in the introductory background, the period also witnessed theoretical somersault of notable realists. The second waves also in the 1950s was the challenge posed to state centric paradigm by the integrationist who contended that since Europe was in the era of supranationlity, the era of the nation state would still be over.(Haas, op cit; Mitrany op cit)

The third waves of the 1970s as briefly presented earlier in this paper was characterized by the theoretical activities of transnationalists who claimed that increasing interdependence of the global economy has reduced the power of the Mercantilist state (Mc Michael, 2000). Our examination of the development of the 1970 will be incomplete without looking at the Neorealist moment.

Although, Neorealism was partly a response to the claims of transnationalists, as its name suggests. The key text in literature during the late 1970s was Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of the International Politics*. By rejecting

Morgenthau's state centrism as *being reductionist*, he proposed an uncompromising system account. He contended that Morgenthau and all the systems theorists<sup>9</sup> were not truly basing their account on systems but rather on the capabilities of the units comprising the system. As he put it "*There is no appeal to the intentions or capabilities of states* (Waltz, 1979)

However, despite the logic of realist thinking the cold war did not end in a nuclear Armageddon. Instead, it passed away peacefully. A series of momentous changes in the international landscape saw to that. The Soviet's military withdrawal from Afghanistan, the collapse of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe, the unification of Germany, the demise of the Warsaw pact and the disintegration of the Soviet Union signaled the end of the bi-polar world (Patman, 2006:8). In fact, Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, openly declared in his address to the UN General Assembly in 1988 thus:

*Thanks to the advances in mass media and means of transportation, the world seems to have become more visible and tangible. International communication has become easier than ever before. Today, the preservation of any kind of closed society is hardly possible. This calls for a radically review of approaches to the totality of the problems of international co-operation as a major element of universal security* (Gorbachev, 1988).

The foregoing suggests that the late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed fundamental transformation of the global system. These changes had serious implications not only for the international system but also for unit actors that compose it (Basiru, 2009). The end of cold war may have been celebrated by optimists (Fukuyama, 1989) but the skeptics exercised caution.

The neoliberal agenda under the guise of globalisation became the first major challenge to state centrism after the cold war. As Ohmae (1995) put it "*state had become "dinosaur" waiting to die*". While the hyperglobalists contend that globalisation has eliminated the space for states to manage national affairs (Guehenno, 1995), the skeptics contend that the impact of globalization on sovereign state is much exaggerated. The state according to them is still the sole institution tasked with the responsibility for establishing the precondition for governance and security (Robertson, 1992). Whether globalization undermines the state or not, some pluralists contend that states have been transformed. In fact, Brown (1995: 253) remarked thus:

*The state-centric system is now being transformed into a global Polyarchy in which national-states, subnational groups and transnational interests and communities are lying for the support and loyalty of individuals and (in which) conflicts are prosecuted and resolved on the basis of ad hoc power plays and bargaining among shifting combinations of these groups. The institutions with the greatest coercive capabilities- national governments- are losing a good deal of their legitimate authority.*

In the polyarchic system, foisted on the international system by technological globalization, states according to Rosenau (2006:36) are affected by both localising and globalising forces or "*fraggmegration*". Outer forces are emanating from international organizations (regional and global), a growing awareness of interdependence and calls for integration and co-operation to deal with vital issue that affect nations and the revolution in information technology (Dougherty and Pfatzgraff, Op cit) . Also, various forces are making for the polarization, secession and

balkanization from within existing states (Levine, 1996; Barber, 1992). Rosenau (Op cit), in his own contribution to the debate invented the concept of *complexity* by arguing that the transformation affecting the global system and its units could not be explained by one factor. Hence, by disagreeing with Gamble (1995), he submitted thus:

*Being complex, the new conditions that evolved in recent decades cannot be explained by a single source. Technological dynamics are major stimulants, but is the breakdown of trust, the shrinking of distances, the globalisation of economies, and the explosive proliferation of organizations, the information revolution, the fragmentation of groups and the integration of regions, the surge of democratic practices and the spread of fundamentalism, the cessation of intense enmities and the revival of historic animosities -all of which in turn provide further reactions that add to the complexity.*

He asserts further that information revolution has quickened the interaction of the localising and globalising dynamics. As he put it “*a wide range of technology has quickened the pace at which people and collectivities interact and thereby heightening fragmentation dynamics*”. Hence, he seeks to identify the sources of fragmentation in the global system: the micro parameter, macro-micro parameter and the macro parameter.

All these parameter contended, Rosenau, had implication for the state in the contemporary global system. The micro parameter which could be discerned in skill revolution has shaped and is shaping the contour of world politics. As the publics become more aware of the changes around them, they tend to take active part in shaping politics of their countries. As Rosenau puts it “*is no accident that the*

*squares of the world cities have largely been filled with large crowds demanding change*”. The micro parameter has larger implication as it redefines the authority structure of the state.

In the contemporary times stated Rosenau, the sources of authority have shifted from traditional to performance criteria of legitimacy. The more the performance is considered appropriate-in terms of satisfying people needs-the more they are likely to co-operate and comply. The less they approve the performance record, the more they are likely to withhold their compliance or otherwise complicate the efforts of the state. As a consequence of the pervasive authority crises, states have become less effective in confronting challenges and implementing policies. The relocation of authority precipitated by the structural crises of states occurs in several directions. In many instances, it involves, inward’ relocation towards sub national groups, ethnic minorities, local governments, single- issue organizations, religious and linguistic groupings, political factions, trade unions etc.

At another level, claimed Rosenau, it involves relocating authority to collectivities that transcend national boundaries. In deciphering the macro parameter, he argued that unlike before the traditional macro collectivity (the state) is not no longer predominant. Due to skill revolution, the world wide spread of authority crises and the many other dynamics of fragmentation, the state has under gone bifurcation. He puts the situation thus:

*A complex multi- centric world of diverse, relatively autonomous actors has emerged, replete with structures, processes and decision rules of its own. The sovereign- free actors of the of the multi-centric world consist of multinational corporations, ethnic minorities, subnational governments and bureaucracies, professional*

*societies, political parties, transnational organizations and the likes. Individually and sometimes jointly, they compete, conflict, co-operate or otherwise interact with the sovereign-bound actors of the state-centric world.*

The frameworks constructed by Rosenau suggest that the state-centric paradigm has been called to question. In the post-cold war world, the state centric paradigm was also challenge by new thinking in international law and diplomacy. The neoliberal institutionalists argue that new rules of international society have emerged to restrict the power of the state in the contemporary world. International law has recently begun to fundamentally revise its traditional prohibition against military intervention in the wake of recent wave of terrorism by state against their own people.

For humanitarian purposes, the belief that the state has the right even obligation to intervene in the affairs of other states has won advocates (Fennimore, 2003). In the post- cold war world, international law has defined military intervention as a right and duty to alleviate human suffering, stop genocide and ethnic cleaning and prevent the repression by state of basic human rights (Feinstein and Slaughter, 2004). As smith (2000) quoted in Kegley (op cit) put it:

*The last 50 years have seen the rise of universal endorsed principles of conduct defining human right by punishing acts of genocide and by interpreting intervention as a spectrum of possible action ranging from mild diplomatic protest to military invasion, even occupation.*

The result of all this developments according to theorists of this genre has been the collapse of the Westphalia principle that what a state does within its boundaries was its own business.

## 5. DISCUSSIONS

Attempt were made in the preceding sections to present the various theoretical challenges to the state particularly after the cold war but there is no agreement on which is the most powerful theoretically. One question logically flows from the last point: is the state still the state .In turn other questions arise: Is the world still state-centric or multi-centric? Has globalisation not altered the integrity of the state? Has frammegrative dynamics not played out in virtually every state of the world? Has a new international legal regime not constrained the choices available to state? etc.

This part attempts in evidential fashion to offer answers to these questions. In the first place, good insights into the sometimes-conflict-sometimes cooperate interactions of the state- centric and multi-centric world are readily available when the United Nations summit meeting on one or other issues of high on the global agenda and the multi-centric organise simultaneous deliberation on the same issues in or around the same city. Rio de Janeiro meeting on the environment in 1992, the Vienna meeting on human rights in 1993 and the Beijing meeting on the right of women in 1995 are illustrative in this regard. Indeed such parallel conferences have become institutionalized and serve as main channel through which the two worlds interact (Rosenau, opcit )

In another instance, empirical reality suggests that globalization has indeed weakened the integrity of many states in Africa, Asia, Pacific and Latin America. To be more specific, the adoption of globalisation oriented reforms by African states has forced many of them to transfer development responsibilities to the development partner. The NEPAD agenda is illustrative is in this case. To argue that frammegrative dynamics is restricted in scope is to do a disservice to truth. Pervasive authority crises have affected states both in the global north and in south. The issues at stake in Quebec-Canada or



Basque- Spain are not different from those of Darfur-Sudan or Ijaw- Nigeria (Gurr, 2000).

Finally, the myth that states have the right to do whatever they like within their territories have been shattered under new a legal doctrine: the responsibility to protect. This doctrine has seen invoked to justify intervention and invasions in tyrannical states. NATO in Kosovo (1999) and United States led invasion of Iraq (2003) are illustrative of this trend.

## 6. CONCLUSION.

This paper set for itself one goal: to dissect the limit of the state in contemporary IR theory and in order to achieve this goal, the paper traced the main phases in the history of state centric paradigm and at the same

time identifying the various theoretical challenges to state –centrism. Also, various evidential illustrations suggest that sovereignty, territoriality and legitimacy which were considered as the hallmark of the state are fast disappearing.

More so, the global reality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century indicates that the world is now multi-centric rather than state-centric. The state is no longer, what it used to be. The last point suggests that state centric approach cannot be solely deployed when constructing theories in IR because of its limited utility. Hence, theory building in the contemporary period should focus on multi centric approach rather than state centric approach.

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