

The Article

The State: ever bigger, ever weaker

By David Howell 30th May 2024



The State is under assault. So comes the cry from all political viewpoints. They range from those who want to see a much firmer state stand against markets, monopolies, the tech giants and overmighty subjects generally, to those with the 180 degree opposite stance, who see the modern state machinery as having already interfered much too far into the private sector and personal liberties. The former think the State should be bigger, the latter that it should be firmly cut back.

Nothing very new, it might be thought, about that. Has not the struggle between state power and the individual been the stuff of every school textbook, every volume of history and philosophy and every great political debate since the Enlightenment, the rise of the modern nation state and the dawn of the liberal order?

And does this dispute not persist, in more or less violent forms, in the unending conflict between the democracies and the autocracies? This contest carries on not only between the great powers, but within countless nations, leading to constant political and social tensions, making political stability and harmony rare in modern conditions. Is there anything new to say about the State?

Well, yes, there is — and a new book, *The Assault on the State*^[1], is one of the best in the field to explain why this may be so. The reasoning comes down to two words: communications technology.

The twin offensives against the modern State, broadly from Left and Right, may be nothing new. In fact, since the emergence of empires and nations there have always been pools of resentment, bitter grievances and injustices, the rebellions, the uprisings, the tensions, the power struggles spiralling down into civil wars and decades of bloodshed. At this moment there are over a hundred situations listed at the UN of on-going state or interstate or secessionist strife, armed or heading that way, around the world.

Yet there is a difference between all that was and all that is, and it has become a very big one. The tiny microchip, now with its millions of transistors embedded in every one (and still growing fast in quantity), amplifies and magnifies every grievance and tension, every centrifugal impulse and attraction, every hostility to established hierarchies and laws, on a planetary scale and with a range and intensity simply unparalleled in human history.

Views, argumentation, conspiracy theories and deliberate incitements, baked, half-baked or nonsensical, can be despatched globally and injected into every media stream with the press of a finger. AI can twist every picture or sound away from reality. Seeing is no longer believing — on any screen, anywhere.

We thus come to the third assault on the State which fits nowhere into the old arguments. Technology, which has no inherent Left or Right bias, becomes the nemesis of deliberative discussion. Technology is the fragmenter of power into multipolar mosaics. Technology is the slaughterer of the trust and trustworthiness by which nation states cohere and upon which the machinery of the modern ordered state depends in order for democratic processes to operate.

This picture of the modern State as larger and seemingly ever more pervasive, yet simultaneously weaker and less capable, is so counterintuitive to the usual critiques that what is really happening in the digital age of hyper-connectivity needs spelling out.

To maintain a workable and ordered democracy, nations have all along needed a degree of constitutional reverence and respect for governing institutions, and also of course for the law and its implementation. That respect, that trust, used to rest, at least in free societies, on acceptance of superior knowledge in trustworthy

governing institutions. This made possible the “bargain” between the state authorities — who delivered protection, stability and order, reliable public services — and the citizenry, who in return paid the taxes and conformed with constitutional principles.

The oceans of online information now available, virtually without cost, on every smartphone, every iPad, every screen, about every conceivable subject, in endless depth and breadth, torpedo all that. Everything that can be challenged by opponents of any decision, be they large entities or minorities of one: whether it is the decisions themselves, the statutes or regulations enshrining them, or the policies and programmes underlying them. The nation state bargain — pay your taxes and the State will look after you — which was always fragile in democracies, starts to dissolve.

Instead of consent, the State now faces a cacophony, an unceasing bombardment, of contradictory demands for “more funding” from every direction, every cause and every special interest. No amount of explanation about the non-existence of magic money trees or the limits of taxation, or the dangers of messing with international bond markets, ever shuts these demands down.

Failure to master these dilemmas brings the inevitable result that popular consent is withdrawn, power dribbles away to smaller entities, unifying forces wither away or, through outright dismemberment, break up altogether. Under the pervasive spread of the big State, the weak State is revealed. A sort of entropy of governance, fragmenting ruling power, often chaotically, through the global system, takes over instead^[2]. The laws, regulations, guidance and “commitments” continue to mount up in response, indeed are demanded from every side. But they lack either the funds or the competences to deliver or match the atomised complexity of needs and circumstances in a digital world.

It is this which explains the contradiction – a bigger State, hastening to solve every problem, or promising to do so, and yet a much weaker State, physically unable to meet these demands, or even its core commitments and duties. Hopelessly overcommitted, hopelessly under-resourced and hopelessly reluctant to spell out frankly the real dangers ahead.

The mournful realism of Jean-Claude Juncker, Luxembourg’s Prime Minister a decade and a half ago, encapsulated the dilemma: “We all know what to do, but

we don't know how to get re-elected once we have done it." Look at the "too difficult" list today, no doubt not very different from the one confronting Mr. Juncker 15 years ago, but growing longer all the time, and one which confronts any government of any colour in any nation state.

Today's State administration, whatever its positioning in the old spectrum of Left or Right, cannot deliver by itself, on growth, housing, education, prisons, health, defence, traffic, railways, responsible capitalism, minorities, its own parliamentary party supporters, control of the giant tech platforms, violent protest, immigration, the judicial system, energy security, sewage, flooding or crime. And this list is by no means complete.

In short, the modern State is completely overwhelmed with demands that alone it has neither the competences nor the finances to meet. Yet somehow they must be met, because without them social systems and economies will not only stagnate, but slither backwards into anarchy. In the public lexicon the word "progress", brought to us so hopefully by the Enlightenment and the industrial age, begins to be replaced by the word "survival".

It is the enterprise and innovation sector of the modern world which will have to come to the rescue. New ways of cooperation, between the State with the powers and the private sector with the money, must urgently be found, or relearnt from the past. There are one or two small signs of recognition of this apolitical fact of life in the digital age, but against these, the older fears and beliefs continue to grow as well.

Thus, even in the world's more politically- mature states, notably the USA but increasingly in Europe, the normal and not unhealthy scepticism towards the State and the Establishment that a free society allows has metamorphosed into something far bigger. From the populist Right, anti-state criticism, dismissive and hostile sentiment has mushroomed – especially in the Trump camp — into attacks on "the deep state" and all its works. This becomes, as in Trump's would-be America, not just an argument about who holds power but whether the necessary structures enabling the State to operate at all should continue. These structures include the legal system and the basic provision of public services, enabling the economy and society to function.

Despite the utter failures of communist economics, or over-socialised systems, have been vividly demonstrated, and although the last big adherents of socialist

economic theories, China and Russia, have both adopted warped versions of state capitalism, the Left has also become hostile to the State. Anti-state sentiment in the West has swollen into outright rejection of Parliamentary democracy and of western capitalist systems as well. These were supposed to work for everyone but have ceased, in the view of many, to do so. Polls show soaring support amongst younger generations for “strong leaders”, or the “Chinese model”, in place of weak Westminster-style democracy.

The authors of *The Assault on the State*, while focusing mostly on the old and familiar ideological bogies looming from political Left and particularly the Right, do, to some extent, see beyond these long-standing threats. Hanson and Kopstein recognise the really big and central one which overshadows them and could be the biggest destroyer of all, both to stable governance and to the international rules-based order, unless identified, understood and countered.

In their summarising words, they write: “What is often called the global liberal order is essentially the product of long international cooperation among modern states sharing a basic commitment to the domestic rule of law. If too many of its constituent powers abandon that commitment, and embrace the patrimonial politics of pre-modern times, the global order will surely crumble.”

To which one can only say Amen, adding the warning that it is happening already, before our eyes. Anyone who tries to run a government in a democracy nowadays without fully understanding that is in for some very heavy disappointments.
