
On the State:

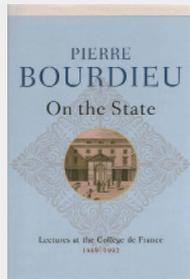
Lectures at the Collège de France, 1989-1992

Edited by Patrick Champagne et al., Translated by David Fernbach
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This book features Bourdieu's examination of the 'state,' both as a concept and a polity. It touches upon the mechanism, theories and functionality of the state, the rhetoric of the 'official,' the plausibility of an autonomous economic space, issues concerning the concentration and dispossession of capital, which, among other things, offers us a nuanced understanding not only of the modern state and statecraft, but also Bourdieu's purported Marxist affiliation. The book is a compilation of lectures Bourdieu delivered at the Collège de France between the years 1989 and 1992. Running the risk of missing out on the aural attributes of the lectures, the editors, instead of merely transcribing them, have revised, with complete fidelity to the author, the spoken discourse toward producing a 'complete readable text' for the readers. Besides Bourdieu's erudition, this book, as it stands now –with a profusion of very relevant cross-references and annotations– reflects an exemplary work of editorship.

Before plunging into the book, one has to remember that Bourdieu's oeuvre, during the course of which he produced some 40 books and more than 200 articles, is not linear. That being said, the thematic trope of the state and power pervades Bourdieu's thought –recall Bourdieu's take on the Algerian question here– right from the very onset. Therefore, in order to make sense of the ideologi-



cal implications of this book, one has to conceptually map this set of lectures with respect to the overlapping concepts previously implicit in Bourdieu's thought. Thinking in these terms, this book, in my opinion, is more about the recurrent theme of power, wherein Bourdieu uses the state as a case study to drive home his persistent critique of neo-liberalism and the modern techniques of statist control. Accordingly, the blurb emphasizes the central problematic Bourdieu addresses in the book: "How did [the state] come into being and what are the characteristics of this distinctive field of power that has come to play such a central role in the shaping of all spheres of social, political and economic life?" In his theorization of the state, Bourdieu acknowledgedly appropriates Max Weber's formulation of the state as the "monopoly of legitimate violence" (p. 4). However, the way in which he embarks on critiquing the 'impersonal' operational space of the 'modern' state characterized by an official 'disinterestedness'¹ –that, Bourdieu writes elsewhere, legitimizes the 'use of physical and symbolic violence over a definite territory and over the totality of the corresponding population' – is, in fact, very Bourdieuan.

Bourdieu's idea of the state marks a shift away from Durkheimian binary thinking (between logical conformity and moral conformity), on the one hand, and perceiving the State, as the social contract theorists like Hobbes and Locke

would often insist, as the facilitator of the common good, on the other. Instead, it invokes the tradition of Marxist thought, wherein the state, generally speaking, functions as an apparatus for a dominant mode of control. Though reminiscent of Althusser, Bourdieu seems to move beyond the Marxist political philosophers such as Gramsci and Althusser insofar as saying that the Marxist tradition did not question the genesis and the nature of the existence of the state; rather they indulged in examining and defining its functionality. Bourdieu's claim here is not entirely unproblematic, for there is a rich, but oft-undermined tradition of anarcho-Marxist thought within the Marxist school itself, which he seems to have overlooked. Gramsci's notion of hegemony or Althusser's concept of the ideological state apparatuses, Bourdieu accuses, tends to substitute the prevalent notion of the 'divine state' for that of a 'diabolical state,' which amounts to substituting 'optimistic functionalism' for the *dialobus in machina*, what he calls "pessimistic functionalism" (p. 6).

However, Bourdieu's engagement with the Neo-Marxist theoretic trope of 'hegemony' –which the Subaltern school, inspired by Ranajit Guha, has so eloquently revisited²– leaves room for explication, precisely because it has curious overlaps with one of his oft-cited keywords: 'symbolic power.' For Bourdieu, the state solemnizes the rhetoric of the 'official-universal' (as opposed to the private) –illustrated by the officialized calendar, its inscription of public holidays etc. –and achieved through certain 'agents,' say for example, the 'public speaker' deemed to have been conferred a symbolic value in the society. These agents, he contends:

gradually built up this thing that we call the state, that is a set of specific resources that authorizes its possessor to say what is good

for the social world as a whole, to proclaim the official and to pronounce words that are in fact orders, because they are backed by the force of the official (p. 32).

Taking off from here, Bourdieu elaborates on the performative aspect of legal constructs like 'statutes,' 'statements,' 'judgements,' etc., while problematizing what he calls 'legal fiction': the systems of values and beliefs adopted by legal practitioners, their interpretive frameworks, prejudices and dispositions, premised upon which the law chooses to see 'truths' and 'facts,' which are but *ex post facto* (re)constructions of 'reality' achieved through narratorial reifications vis-a-vis performative articulation of relevant events and selectively chosen facts.

This interstitial space where legality and the state meet has been one of Bourdieu's key concerns, and it is prominent in the lectures included in this book. It demands abidance from the actors in the (legal) 'field' and the 'agents' of the state. "[T]he act of obedience," Bourdieu reminds us, "presupposes an act of knowledge, which is at the same time an act of acknowledgement [...] the person who submits, who obeys, bends to an order or discipline, performs a cognitive action" (p. 164) –which forecloses the possibility of questioning the 'constructivism' embedded in the dominant legal-statist order thus deemed 'official.' According to him, the 'modern' idea of the state relies more on the reorientation of concentrations of capital, both economic and cultural, in the form of furnishing an autonomous economic space, the (de)mobilization of violence, and the unification of the juridical 'field' (pp. 200-09), while "the notion of an autonomous entity, independent of the king as individual, takes shape little by little through a reinterpretation of the idea of the house transcending its own members."³

In the later section on the genesis of the 'meta-field' of power, Bourdieu questions the very model of logic that shrouds the universal totalizing effect of the state on the collective consciousness. Here, he deals with the differentiation and dissociation of dynastic and bureaucratic authorities.

Bourdieu's insights break fresh ground in the critical understanding of the state and its perpetration of power. His erudition is colossal and his range of references –starting from Tacitus and Machiavelli to Perry Anderson– is equally diverse. However, the omission of any non-Western strands of theorizing at

times appears glaring. Nevertheless, this book impels us to consider the state in its all nuances, while unworking the constructivism immanent in its normativization, and should be of interest to social and political scientists.

Endnotes

1. See: Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p. 3.
2. See: Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).
3. See: Pierre Bourdieu, "From the King's House to the Reason of State: A Model of the Genesis of the Bureaucratic Field," *Constellations*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2004), p. 21.