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1

The concealment of the state

Our contemporary political discourse is dominated by the economic logic of capitalism. This growing monopoly over our political imaginations seems inevitable as the lessons of capitalism are applied to more and more areas of human life. This attempt to expand the use of economic “science” includes popular books that “explore the hidden side of everything,” because “if morality represents how people would like the world to work, then economics shows how it actually does work.”¹ The mechanics of the market are so familiar that many of us assume it is “natural,” and we attempt to study it as we would study physics or chemistry. This iron-clad conception of reality also pushes for the privatization of traditional state services in the name of efficiency.

Thanks to this worldview, the inevitable political question that follows all government activity today is whether the market could provide the service or good more effectively. The story of how corporations have provided human beings with new methods for exploiting natural, financial, and human capital has become more familiar to us than the state’s provision of public goods. Indeed, in the United States, the importance of the corporation has been enshrined by the Supreme Court’s decision to expand the historical (and individual) “freedom of speech” protection to corporations engaged in political lobbying.² As a result of this intellectual trend, the state has been diminished in our political consciousness. Increasingly, the state is characterized as the less nimble, antiquated player in comparison to the dynamic free market.

However, states have not gone away, and, without them, the economic system we know would disappear. Much of the research investment underlying impressive new technologies, medical treatments, and the continued development of the fine arts is dependent upon state financial support. On a deeper level, the legal framework for corporations and the initial guarantee underpinning most transactions and agreements originate with the state’s sovereignty. All of us routinely sign contracts and agreements ranging from consumer purchases to health insurance. In the

most developed countries, we confidently agree to pay for services from faceless entities we know only as a brand. Yet, we feel comfortable engaging in such trust because we know that our legal systems are the ultimate arbiter of any potential disputes. In this sense, the state is the “unmoved mover” of our modern social world; the state’s sovereignty is the first guarantee that anchors all others.

In addition, states are arguably the most important consumer in the market. Among the OECD states, government spending accounts on average for just over 19 percent of all economic activity.³ The privatization of services is at its core, resulting in the transfer of taxpayer monies, collected by the state, to corporations and firms. The contracts for private companies to provide services ranging from garbage collection and education to policing and space travel are awarded by states and paid for by the public. What is the difference from public provision? The garbage collectors, space engineers, security guards, and their managers are technically not government employees, though the public is paying them one step removed. Indeed, the state’s sovereignty underlies much of our daily consumer activity. The state regulates our work environment and may even pay our salary. However, the championing of contemporary economic thinking has slowly displaced our awareness of this fact.

Nonetheless, the state continues to play an enormous role in our lives. This has been a fact of human existence for centuries. States are arguably the most important of all human inventions since they mark a turning point in our evolution. Using the state, we harnessed the physical strength, intellectual creativity, and other talents of our populations for unprecedented economic growth and resource extraction. States provided society with the organization necessary to alleviate poverty, create educational institutions, and promote universal literacy. We have used the governing capacity of states to create a global market, as well as redistribute domestic resources. Of course, states have also exploited the scientific potential of societies to develop increasingly lethal military technologies. States also presided over industrial policies that have left us with permanent ecological damage. States brought a powerful new form of organization to human society, and we have used it for both good and ill, as with any other human invention.

Thinking about the state as a human invention can help us to better understand its overwhelming influence on history. However, the nation state differs from other inventions on one important point: it contains and is dependent on an enormous amount of human agency. It consists of institutions that are staffed by human beings who decide and implement the state’s actions. The power these individuals wield through the state raises profoundly difficult moral questions. Why do they have the authority to act on behalf of others? What are the moral limits of the coercive power they exercise? How can human beings keep the state accountable, rather than falling into subservience to it?

These philosophical questions have accompanied the development of the state from its earliest inception. The results of this line of classical inquiry are various theories of political legitimacy. We can map this intellectual journey from the early, supernatural justifications of monarchical rule in Egypt and Mesopotamia, through the Greek's justifications and rankings of *poleis*, to contemporary theories about improving democracy. The increasing sophistication of these theories parallels the evolution of state structures. Yet, even in those political systems that strive for transparency and democratic accountability, the question of who is doing what, where, and why looms large. As nation states have taken on additional responsibilities, made use of increasingly sophisticated technology, and grown to govern millions of citizens, this thread of human agency becomes difficult to follow.

In contemporary times, another level of complexity further obscures the human agency of the state. The phenomenon labeled by the catchall term "globalization" has pushed accountability ever more toward the horizon. Today, when we attempt to unravel who owns some of our local businesses, we are confronted with chains of capital that are transnational. When we demand accountability or action from our local state authorities, they often patiently explain to us how the free market works. Citizens worried about a local impact, such as the zoning of a new superstore, the environmental consequences of development, or the threat to local employment due to outsourcing, are told that little can be done. Free trade agreements that allow capital to flow across borders and rules of private investment that trump the commons hinder action on local community concerns.

What is the primary motivation for states to participate in this system of global capitalism? Isn't it paradoxical for nation states to jealously assert their sovereignty vis-à-vis other states while allowing global capitalism to whittle away their authority? In the case of democratic political systems, it seems illogical for the state to allow democratic control to wither locally for the sake of foreign capital. Why do contemporary nation states participate in an economic system that undermines their sovereignty?

It is in fact the state's goal of maintaining sovereignty that forces very different political regimes from around the planet to pursue globalization. Power in the international system is intertwined with economic competitiveness. Only states with a highly productive economy can develop the technology that lies behind modern military might. Only states with large economies influence multinational meetings like the G20. Thus, the state's *raison d'être*, its sovereignty, compels it to participate in the global economy, even though that participation is at odds with the immediate interests of much of the population.

For example, political groups advocating increased taxes to fund community assistance, education, or health care provisions are warned that this is either impossible or unrealistic since it would undermine the national economy's competitiveness. How can the state take the risk of investing in

such concerns if other states ignore them? Instead, the state must channel its efforts into fostering immediate economic growth or risk falling behind those powers that do. This competition leads the state to demand many sacrifices from its population. The power of the state could be harnessed to provide additional social benefits, but it would be at a cost to economic performance. This stark choice creates a political dilemma for contemporary nation states.

Globalization rewards states that integrate into the international economic regime. However, the citizenry of these states demand a set of conflicting responses. Some economic elites support this vision of autonomous markets. For this interest group, the continued existence of sovereign states is an ongoing interference into the “natural” activity of global markets; the state is too sovereign. From another quarter, much of the citizenry demands policies that run counter to the free-market orthodoxy of globalization. For this interest group, the sovereign state is failing to mitigate the problems created by globalization; the state is not sovereign enough.

States augment their power, and thus their capacities to exercise coercion and guarantee their sovereignty, through economic success. Yet, contemporary economic health is linked with integration into a global capitalist economy that appears to ignore sovereign borders. How can the state maintain its usefulness if its sovereignty is eroded? If states are no longer sovereign, then why should we support them? On the other hand, how can a contemporary state guarantee its sovereignty in the world other than by joining the economic competition of globalization? This paradox explains the contemporary difficulty of legitimizing state power within a context of globalizing capitalism.

The ideological solution for contemporary states is to maintain their sovereign agency while insisting that they have given much of it up to the new rules of global capitalism. Today, the state claims that its creation, the market, has become even more autonomous than in the past and stands as an alternate entity to the state. The state can then retreat behind the screen of the “free” market to answer both camps in contemporary society. For the winners of globalization, the state appears to get out of the way of market innovation and productivity. For the citizenry alarmed at globalization’s outcomes, the state claims to be powerless against the inevitable. Contemporary states put forward this position despite the fact that they provide the regulatory infrastructure the market relies upon and the sovereign guarantee necessary to underpin all other agreements, including transnational free trade agreements. States will also violate all the usual “rules” and intervene into the market when necessary to prevent its collapse.

However, state sovereignty, by its very nature, is a competition with other states. This competition requires participation in the global economy in a race to stay ahead of other states. The importance of this fact, and the bearing it has on the continued existence of the state, trumps popular concerns with

globalization's effects. Thus, there is a common interest in maintaining the useful fiction of an inevitable and autonomous global capitalism. For many economic elites, this belief reinforces their class interests. For political elites, this ideology is important because of the power it confers on the state. For many inside and outside of our ruling elite, this ideology reflects a certainty that seems so obvious it is unquestioned.

Nonetheless, there is an obvious contradiction in this ideology. The state cannot strengthen its sovereignty by participating in a regime that undermines it. Yet, contemporary states that are well integrated into the global economic system seem to be the most powerful of all. This paradox dissolves once we realize that states have turned to the ideology of concealing their agency. This concealment relies in part on the diversion of political demands into the closed ideological system of free-market orthodoxy.

The politics of concealment

Increasingly, politicians and policy makers from across the political spectrum insist that the market is an immovable force that constrains their ability to act. To maintain this facade, contemporary states have bifurcated their functions into two broad areas: the deep and shallow state. The shallow state has been freed from much of the policy formulation and implementation that is truly constrained by the needs of state sovereignty. Instead, this important function now rests with the less visible deep state. By compartmentalizing many responsibilities to the deep state, the shallow state can proclaim the limitations of state action imposed by the market, despite the implausible contradictions of this claim.

Although this ideological turn allows contemporary states to dissolve the immediate tensions of globalization, it is also transforming traditional political dynamics. By bifurcating politics into a deep and shallow state, contemporary states hide their ability to act, but at a cost. Political actors in the shallow state are left to visibly debate policies, which, from the outset, have been closely circumscribed by the actions of the deep state. This shift of responsibility allows politicians in the shallow state to pursue votes with popular, or populist, policies that ignore increasingly hard economic and ecological constraints. To some extent, politicians must engage with their constituents (and with each other) in this circumscribed, populist arena because so many issues of substance have been removed from their sphere of influence.

While the state has traditionally had to maintain secrecy in some areas (e.g. defense, intelligence, or the all-pervasive category of "security"), we now see a shift of even mundane policy decisions to less visible agencies in the deep state. Examples include budget recommendations, environmental regulations, consumer and workplace safety, scientific investment, transportation planning,

and educational policies. Thus, elected officials can grandstand on what issues are left in this hollowed out, shallow arena of politics. With substantive (and often unpopular) policy made and implemented in the deep state, we see the remains of politics in the shallows. Here the focus is increasingly on national identity, cultural controversy, consumer frustrations, and symbolic acts of solidarity with constituents. Politicians in the shallow state have come to rely on the quiet competence of the deep state and have little incentive to engage publicly with the difficult policy choices facing society.

This book maps the ideological and functional logic that makes this behavior seem “natural” to the human actors who are, collectively, the state. As I show in the subsequent chapters, political actors within both the deep and shallow state, despite still having sharp disputes on many topics, have come to accept the concealment of the state as a background assumption to contemporary politics. I do not argue that this acceptance is necessarily a conscious one for most political actors and state functionaries. Instead, this behavior can be thought of as agents within the state following an “institutional logic” that colors their perception and frames the choice of actions available to policy makers.⁴

For example, under the pressures of global capitalism, many states have reduced their services to achieve macroeconomic stability. Consider the remarkable responses of governments to economic crisis in 2008 and 2009. In the United States and many other countries, rather than an expansion of welfare services, most state assistance was directed toward large financial organizations. Although many commentators criticized these “bail outs,” fierce criticism was also directed at practically any state assistance to the citizenry in the aftermath of the crisis. Stimulus spending by governments, modest extensions of unemployment insurance, and assistance to local levels of government were routinely attacked in the popular media. Thus, the startling twist in the political fallout from the crisis is that this criticism came from those sections of the population that state assistance was supposed to help.

This phenomenon shows the extent to which states have found a useful ideological logic in the concealment of the state. The removal or reduction of services to the population has become associated with responsible economic management. As a result, we see in European countries, ranging in size from Great Britain to Latvia, the possibility of securing popular support by pledging austerity.⁵ In the United States, we see a popular movement, the Tea Party, demanding that candidates implement pro-business austerity measures to reduce deficit spending. The economic crisis of 2008 also provoked the authoritarian (and notionally still communist) government of China to protest over interference in the free market from the currency policies of the United States. Whether supposedly left or right wing, authoritarian or democratic, a common ideology is beginning to cut across our traditional political divisions.

What about those cases where the citizenry still makes demands of the state? In the aftermath of the great recession of 2008, we have seen governments in Greece insist that they must implement austerity, despite massive protests in 2012, because of “economic reality.” In Italy that same year, a technocratic, caretaker government was hailed as a positive development since it would remove politics from responsible economic management. Thus, decisions about taxing, spending, and what to cut from public budgets were safely removed from politics in these Western democracies.

In all of these cases, the foundation for this political orientation (which claims to be a reality outside of and above politics) is the widespread acceptance that the state should only provide a minimal level of benefits and services to its population. The rest of what the citizenry needs is to be fulfilled through their individual agency within a market as free as possible from government interference. In turn, citizens accepting this view see the state retreating from their lives as social benefits are withdrawn. Privatization of various services leaves more and more citizens with market relationships rather than political ones. This pattern satisfies the ideological imperative to rely on markets rather than the “heavy hand of government.” Of course, there are still political rituals such as voting and some remaining vestiges of local participation, especially in federal political systems. Yet, to many individual citizens, the state has retreated from the horizon of their daily perception.

Evidence for this trend can be seen in its duplication around the world. As in the past, the ideological norms of the developed states are transmitted to developing societies through cultural, economic, and political connections. Thus, some supporting evidence for my argument is the parallel movement we find in the developing countries. Those states have taken up this same behavior, but with some delay. The same processes of influence, cajoling, seduction, and coercion that originally pushed societies into adopting the nation state are now pushing them to adopt the contemporary ideology of the most developed, postmodern states.

The other cache of evidence is in the ideological reactions we see to incidents that expose the state’s ability to act. When faced with great risk, society falls back to an earlier position of looking to the state. However, this sudden surfacing of the state provokes convoluted political responses in a desperate effort to bridge an ideology that denies the state can act with urgent, practical needs. In the case of the United States, we see the odd political maneuvers that have followed in the aftermath of the threat of terrorism and natural disaster.

For example, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, there was the startling call by President Bush for patriots to continue shopping. By fulfilling their duty as consumers, that is maintaining their market relationships, the citizenry could keep America strong. How else should the citizenry be mobilized in response to such an event? Yet, this call

for citizens to remain active in the free market accompanied startling state actions, ranging from the invasion of Afghanistan to extraordinary rendition and the “enhanced interrogation” of suspects. Thus, American citizens were told to show their patriotism and fulfill their longing to help by going about their important daily business of market transactions. In contrast, the decisive, sharp end of the state was deployed without conscription, without a formal declaration of war, or other traditional *political* actions that call attention to the power of the state.

Or, in another striking example from the United States in 2005, the country witnessed the complete breakdown of civilization in New Orleans after hurricane Katrina decimated the city. At first, government reaction seemed to show only an inexplicable inertia. This initial paralysis was quickly followed by odd commentaries that asked why poorer residents, living in one of the areas of deep poverty in the United States, had not saved themselves by evacuating. In other words, why did citizens think that their government would save them from natural disaster? Why would they think the state has the power to do so? Isn’t it unrealistic to expect the state to protect all of its citizens in this way? On the other hand, the authorities eventually took action to assist the city’s beleaguered residents. This belated intervention took place against another set of commentaries: is the United States still a powerful, developed country given that the government cannot muster an adequate response to a natural disaster?

In this sense, the concealment of the state allows for paradox. The state can assert that it has no agency to employ when it is able to shift burdens onto the population within the market sphere. However, if this denial of agency begins to be perceived as weakness, the state can unleash coercion with less political cost or oversight. Thus, we have the paradox of supposedly globalized and less sovereign states that, nonetheless, possess unprecedented instruments of coercion and surveillance.

More globally, we see this phenomenon tied to the political fallout from an increasing awareness of universal environmental risks. Many individuals voice concern about the environment in global public opinion polling. However, in a classic “free rider” problem, citizens around the world also voice frustration at the fact that, acting alone, they cannot do anything about it.⁶ Even if the individual tries to make a difference, their effort seems hopeless in the face of transnational problems like climate change. The failure of collective action in this policy area may also be driving some individuals to take more extreme, direct action. As I discuss below, the deep state has begun to prepare for environmental challenges despite arguments in the shallows over whether a problem even exists.

An interpretation of politics as broad as mine should raise some immediate skeptical questions. Perhaps the most obvious counterfactual to my argument is this: if this is a new hegemonic ideology, then when did it start? The contention of this work is that its origins lie at the end of the

Cold War. While many studies (including ones that claimed to be autopsies) were applied to the former Soviet Union, few have stopped to consider how deeply the end of this conflict affected the United States and the “developed” world.⁷ Yet, the end of the Cold War was also the end of many political certainties for the West. In this sense, the concealment of the state is an ideological reaction to the new political, social, and economic challenges that states face in our post-Cold War world.

The collapse of communist regimes discredited statist economic systems and removed a rival example from the mental map of the world. During the Cold War, state involvement in the economy and daily life in the West could always be contrasted to the extremes of the Eastern Bloc. Now in the twenty-first century, even modest interventions into the economy of the United States are labeled totalitarian, communist, or socialist by partisan opponents. Perhaps one could argue that there has always been a tendency to such inflated and alarmist rhetoric in the political systems of the West, especially in the United States. However, the discrediting of state socialism has led to a general skepticism of the state having a role in any area of everyday life. As I discuss in a later chapter, this skepticism is now so profound that it has led to efforts to conceal the state’s role in exercising coercion and, in the most traditional state role of all, national defense.

In addition, the end of the Cold War cleared the way ideologically for the triumph of neoliberal capitalism as the new global status quo. The tension between the benefits to the state’s capabilities from the globalization of capitalism and the backlash among the population from globalization’s fallout creates a fundamental contradiction. One logical response would be for politicians to clearly make the case for globalization or, at least, argue that its benefits outweigh its shortcomings. However, this response carries the risk of rejection by the population. Such a rejection would be incompatible with the state’s need to participate in this system. Instead, by concealing the ability of the state to act, policy makers can make globalization and its effects on the population seem inevitable. This ideological maneuver limits political debate to “responsible” discourse about when and where we should mitigate the effects of global capitalism.

Aside from its impact upon contemporary politics, the concealment of the state also has a wider cultural impact. In turn, this cultural influence feeds back into the political system. As the state’s positive importance becomes more hidden, the citizenry of the most developed countries begins to think of politics and government only as an interference. Suburbanization has probably fed this tendency, at least in the United States and other developed countries. In such communities, the illusion of a modern self-sufficiency easily takes hold. As commuters do not rely on public transport and withdraw into their private homes, the idea that they do not need government becomes common. They see themselves as maintaining their homes, their private transportation, and their private schools, and become unaware of the deeper

infrastructure they depend upon. This includes the state's maintenance of a legal framework that supports the ownership of private property and that requires safety in the products they consume.

By exposing this behavior and giving it easily comprehensible labels, I hope that popular political activity from below can challenge it more effectively. Otherwise, our political systems are likely to become increasingly opaque despite our traditional forms of participation like voting, grassroots interest group organization, unionization of the workplace, and, at the end of the day, demonstrations or strikes. These forms of political activity were progressive in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, it is difficult to imagine how they can pressure the state in the future, when, from the outset, the state denies that it has the ability to meet our demands.

Ideology and the state

My core argument is that the concealment of the state is a recent ideological turn. Unfortunately, ideology is often seen as a slippery foundation for the scientific study of politics. In recent decades, the methodology of rational choice has become a dominant approach in political science. This turn toward rational choice is popular since it promises political science a firmer foundation for its studies, one akin to the core assumptions of economics.⁸ Thus, an attempt at linking broad political realities to ideological motivations is, from the outset, open to criticism from political science methodologies that attempt to distill politics to clearer, value-free analysis. On the other hand, adopting methodologies that exclude concerns of value such as justice, equality, or freedom seems doomed to fall into a pattern of economic rather than *political* analysis. The political salience of these ideals is not what any of those values ultimately are. Few contemporary philosophers hold out any hope for settling such perennial questions. What is important for politics is what individuals think those values are.

There is an alternative, influential methodology in political science that is more akin to the perspective adopted here. Generally described as “new institutionalism,” this approach looks more broadly at institutional constraints and the way structure influences policy. While still assuming that individuals are behaving rationally, this approach attempts to place that behavior within a realistic social and political context. While individuals are indeed probably pursuing interests and policies they consider rational, they do so within an environment that influences what they consider to be possible, plausible, and the best, or morally correct, course of action.

Hall and Rosemary have provided a typology of the “new institutionalism” that has influenced political science over the last two decades.⁹ Among these frameworks is historical institutionalism, which includes a cultural approach. As the authors explain,

From this perspective, institutions provide moral or cognitive templates for interpretation and action. The individual is seen as an entity deeply embedded in a world of institutions, composed of symbols, scripts, and routines, which provide filters for interpretation of both the situation and oneself, out of which a course of action is constructed. Not only do institutions provide strategically useful information, they also affect the very identities, self-images and preferences of the actors.¹⁰

Thus, the concept of ideology becomes more concrete when we firmly link it to the historical development of specific institutions. In addition, the policy choices made by these institutions can serve as further evidence for the worldviews of the actors serving within them.

The use of such a methodology is critically important for understanding the contemporary state. The state is a collection of human agents organized into various institutions. The perceptual framework of these human beings shapes the choices they make, their convictions about the use or misuse of power, and their belief in what is best for society. From the perspective of historical institutionalism, change is created from the conflict of views and interests that human beings pursue within these institutions.¹¹ What is striking about our contemporary times is the similar ideological outlook of political elites across differing societies.

Nonetheless, whenever one turns to a discussion of ideology, the ground is in many ways less firm. In sociological theory, we can find the concept stretched across a broad range of human activity. For example, Mann in his classic study of social power describes the rise of world religions as the triumph of ideological power.¹² Further back in the sociological canon, we have Weber's example of linking the development of capitalism with the Protestant work ethic.¹³ Thus, ideology can quickly become a very expansive concept. In this sense, ideology can become the explanation for more and more areas of social life. There is also a risk when studying ideology to dismiss human action as driven by irrational cultural factors.

In contrast, my use of the concept of ideology is focused more narrowly on the political. Using ideology for more narrowly defined political analysis carries risks too. In this more restricted view, ideology can easily become a simplistic explanation of class politics. In his classic formulation, Marx argued that an ideology performs two very important functions. One is that it takes something historically contingent, for Marx this was the capitalist market, and transforms it into an everlasting universal. Second, an effective ideology explains the order of things so that everyone theoretically benefits, not just the class in charge. From this perspective, ideology becomes a simple product of class antagonisms.

However, the current behavior of the state extends beyond a simplistic explanation of class behavior. There is also more to it than the relationship between the market and the state, discussed so frequently by a range of

scholars and activists. This includes sophisticated studies of the so-called “power elite.”¹⁴ Arguably the most developed criticisms of the state in this category examine the United States.¹⁵ In some cases the analysis of this elite relies on traditional Marxist categories of class. However, the inspiration for this school of thought is the idea that Marx’s definition of a ruling class has become hopelessly antiquated. In Mills’ classic study, he attempted to expand the definition of the ruling elite to include those that direct culture as well as politics and capital. He argued that

The power elite are not solitary rulers. Advisers and consultants, spokesmen and opinion-makers are often the captains of their higher thought and decision. Immediately below the elite are the professional politicians of the middle levels of power, in the Congress and in the pressure groups, as well as among the new and old upper classes of town and city and region. Mingling with them, in curious ways which we shall explore, are those professional celebrities who live by being continually displayed but are never, so long as they remain celebrities, displayed enough. If such celebrities are not at the head of any dominating hierarchy, they do often have the power to distract the attention of the public or afford sensations to the masses, or, more directly, to gain the ear of those who do occupy positions of direct power.¹⁶

Thus, elite studies have attempted to broaden our understanding of who rules to fit our contemporary times.

Yet, even these broader studies tend to explain elite membership and elite behavior in terms of concrete benefits. Although it is difficult to deny that wealthy individuals benefit from current political and economic orthodoxy (i.e. that there is a relevant separation between market and state), there is also a deeper conviction present. For these individuals, the “reality” of the market is an obvious refutation of political interference. This argument resonates so strongly in current society that we find it enthusiastically proclaimed by many individuals who are clearly not in the class that sits atop globalization. For many individuals, the market is the home of their aspirations despite the odds they face.

Furthermore, a second group has an interest that is often absent in the usual critique of class interests or the hidden relationships of the state and market. To individuals serving in the institutions and agencies of the state, maintaining the power of the state is important for the common good. From their perspective, society needs the organizational power that the state provides. Without this force, how can one right wrongs in society and protect the vulnerable? The ideal of a career in “public service” is based upon this very basic idea that the state exists for the benefit of society. From this perspective, the state must constantly enhance its capabilities for maintaining sovereignty to continue its beneficial role.

Thus, my discussion of ideology has a more focused target than broader sociological studies, but at the same time, it is not a narrow discussion of class politics. There are cultural implications from this ideological turn, which I explore in a later chapter. However, even when examining the cultural fallout from this set of ideas, my concern remains focused on its political implications. My argument is an attempt to explain how a particular political development has become both so prevalent and unquestioned. It is in this sense that my study is one of ideology.

Does the state still exist?

The concealment of the state is not confined to conscious efforts to assist in ideological obfuscation. Critics of the state, including some currents within contemporary anarchist thinking, question whether the state even exists, or, more accurately, whether it is useful to think about the state as a separate, concrete institution. For example, Richard J.F. Day's reflections on the work of Foucault and Lefort lead him to argue that activist politics needs to move on beyond making demands of the state.¹⁷ From this perspective, the state has metastasized into society. Now that the state's mechanisms of discipline are everywhere, the state is in effect nowhere.

Thus, the state as a separate, comprehensible institution is gone, and Foucault is right in criticizing anyone who still thinks that a revolution must behead the king. On the other hand, Foucault himself states,

I don't want to say that the state isn't important; what I want to say is that relations of power, and hence the analysis that must be made of them, necessarily extend beyond the limits of the state in two senses. First of all, because the state, for all the omnipotence of its apparatuses, is far from being able to occupy the whole field of actual power relations; and further, because the state can only operate on the basis of other, already-existing power relations.¹⁸

In this sense, Foucault does not dismiss the state, but wants to expand our understanding of power. For Foucault, this is essential to grasping the creative aspects of power beyond the repressive power we associate with the state.

Thanks to Foucault's insight, this broader perspective on power, and its expansion across social space, underlies many observations about contemporary society. For example, in the burgeoning field of surveillance studies, the current consensus is that surveillance, and its social effects, must be approached as the study of something more than state action. Although the state does engage in surveillance and deploys cutting-edge technology for this purpose, individuals encounter surveillance pervasively throughout

society in the most developed countries. Thus, the recent trend in surveillance studies is to explore the “assemblages” of surveillance found in the market as well as the state’s activities.¹⁹ The main thrust of this line of inquiry is that aside from the surveillance activities of the state, we increasingly find individuals being tracked in the developed world through credit reports and various market tools. Arguably, the disciplining effects of surveillance outside of the state have a profound effect on the behavior of individuals in the developed world compared to state surveillance directed toward traditional concerns of security and military affairs.²⁰

I suggest an additional complication with our reading of this situation; there is agency and design to the contemporary state’s declining visibility. The state is still an important institution, but this fact has become more difficult to see thanks to ideological camouflage. Rather than arguing that the market is doing the disciplining of the state, rendering the state somewhat obsolete, we should consider the possibility that there is no independent, free market. From this perspective, the state has not metastasized into society and become less relevant. Instead, the state has greatly expanded its control of society by employing surveillance and discipline at a distance. This sleight of hand allows the state to creep into (or to use the terminology of Jurgen Habermas, “colonize”) more and more areas of life. Nonetheless, the state remains an organized institution behind this colonized front.

For example, drawing again upon research in surveillance studies, why has surveillance of individuals thrived? In the United States, the state has decided to allow credit bureaus to co-opt the social security number of citizens to aid surveillance. Various mechanisms for tracking individuals online for marketing purposes are cleared by state agencies for deployment. The US government opened up the GPS system, initially designed and deployed for military purposes, for commercial exploitation. These efforts have now led to the ability of law enforcement to subpoena and track individuals through their cell phones. Thus, it is obviously true that a comprehensive understanding of surveillance today requires scholars to examine market and commercial activities as well as state actions. Nonetheless, the linchpin for these efforts and the approval for operating these commercial forms of surveillance always lead back to the state and its decisions.

If we delve deeper into the intellectual history of anarchism, then we often find claims that the state does not really exist. Rather than an independent institution, we are told that the state is a false category serving one or more different purposes. In some interpretations, the state is an idea for obfuscating the power of the ruling class. In other descriptions, the state’s purpose is reifying the rule of some human beings over others. Or, more abstractly, the state is seen as a fictional, ideological entity that embodies economic power (which is the *real* source of power).

However, this line of argument often blends together two things: the state and metaphysical claims of who or what inhabits it. For example, the idea

of the nation or country is often blended together in the literature with the state. Anarchist literature can easily compare arguments about the political legitimacy of European states (whether based on the divine right of kings, nationalism, or other traditions) to theological arguments.

For Bakunin, the concept of state sovereignty is an obvious parallel to the role of God, the unmoved mover, in various theologies. In both cases, we find metaphysical claims that are often irrational. Yet, behind these irrational claims, the state is still a real force in the world. As Bakunin noted,

The state is force, and for it, first of all, is the right of force, the triumphant argument of the needle-gun, of the *chassepot*. But man is so singularly constituted that this argument, wholly eloquent as it may appear, is not sufficient in the long run. Some moral sanction or other is absolutely necessary to enforce his respect.²¹

Nations are much like God in this sense. One chooses to believe in them or not. The state though is a much more real entity. Anyone who fails to pay his taxes can find out how real the state is when it comes to collect. There is also a very sharp end to contemporary states when we look at their coercive abilities. Thus, we should distinguish between describing the institutions that are the state, staffed by “real” human beings, and the metaphysical ideas, including ones about nations, countries, and supernatural beings, that legitimate these institutions.

On the other hand, skepticism about using the state as a category of analysis does emphasize an important point. The success of the state’s colonization of much that we regard as “social” is beyond dispute. However, this does not mean that the state, which is everywhere, is now nowhere. Instead, this looming presence of the state in more and more areas of life creates the contradictions that have led to the ideology of concealment. The increase in our dependence on the state, and its ever-growing invincibility, undermines many of the ideas that have legitimated it in the past. Thus, we see a turn toward a new ideology, one that attempts to conceal the ubiquitous state. Denying the usefulness of the state as a category of analysis risks aiding this concealment.

A postmodern state?

Rather than denying that the state exists, or that it matters, we should instead look at states as they are. Just as the state has, through previous centuries, undergone many changes, so too the contemporary state differs from the past. For want of a better term, we can describe contemporary states as postmodern. Unfortunately, the term “postmodern” has become overused to the point of almost losing any meaning. Nonetheless, it can

serve as a marker for us if we are attempting to distinguish the current nation state from its past iterations.

The term “postmodernism” was coined to try and express the idea that our contemporary situation differs from that of other recent history. In other words, we live in a different context than the recent past. So, too, the context within which contemporary states operate seems fundamentally different from the modern period. Today states must compete within the globalized form of contemporary capitalism to maintain their sovereignty. Thus, contemporary states face a paradoxical situation with global capitalism: it empowers them as well as imposing constraints. Does this mean that the state is postmodern?

The context of globalized capitalism also appears to be one of enormous risk. Increasingly, we face potential global disasters from climate change to the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Yet, our political institutions are organized into nation states with sovereign borders. Transnational risks and policy problems are inherently endemic to such a system. Furthermore, though we are economically interconnected with individuals on the other side of the world, we vote alongside neighbors we barely know.

Both of these observations are closely intertwined with the cultural context of contemporary states. In a recent analysis of this phenomenon and contemporary politics, Paul James notices something similar. Attempting to describe the “postmodern nation,” James points out that today

...the state is most often viewed either as a baleful institution to be minimized or deregulated or as a necessary, if intrusive, organ of public administration, as a provider of essential services for the vulnerable.²²

This indeed is the common picture we have of the contemporary nation state. Yet, as James notes further,

The image of the nation state as an aging Leviathan, more comfortable lumbering amidst the inglorious structures of the past, is belied by the alacrity with which “it” has taken up various administrative techniques such as electronic information storage and other forms of disembodied surveillance.²³

The quotes around “it,” in the above statement, are intended by James as a qualifier. For him, as for so many other theorists, the state is a complicated agglomeration of institutions, individuals, and practices, making it difficult to define. Nonetheless, as these observations by James point out, the state has not gone away.

Thus, we should still be concerned with the state. However, the state we are attempting to understand is different than its earlier, modern form. Or at least, we can say that the problems, international context, and needs of

the contemporary state are no longer modern, despite its politics remaining stubbornly modern in form. In this sense, the behavior of the state that I describe in subsequent chapters is an attempt to bridge the continued practice of a modern politics by states confronting the postmodern condition.

Of course, terms like the “postmodern condition” have become suspect to many of us because of weak scholarship. However, the idea and description of the postmodern condition is a useful one so long as we remain clear about what we mean. Lyotard explains the broad cultural atmosphere, historical moment, intellectual perspective, and social context that is the postmodern as “the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies.”²⁴ This condition is one of a crisis of legitimation because of the skepticism with which we regard all narratives. From this foundational crack running through contemporary knowledge, profound consequences follow.

The state, too, is affected by this cultural shift. Postmodernism is a challenge to our modern theories of political legitimacy. As Lyotard and other serious scholars of this unfolding moment in intellectual history point out, the most solid characteristic of the postmodern condition is a profound skepticism toward any metanarratives. These narratives include claims of nationalism, religious affirmation, and even the civic myths that underpin our identities as citizens of the state. How does one justify the state’s absolute authority in an age where absolutist arguments are viewed with cynicism?

The best example of this quandary is the current efforts in political theory to justify citizenship as a positive category. Skeptics, influenced by the postmodern deconstruction of identity, have questioned how one can morally justify borders. For example, Joseph Carens argues that in today’s world, citizenship in the most developed nations is an inherited privilege.²⁵ The moral luck of one’s birthplace has profound consequences. Some of us will experience the educational and health care systems of the developed nations, while others are condemned to grinding poverty. Carens draws the parallel between this luck at birth and the past consequences of being born to privilege or servitude in the feudal age. What moral grounds can justify us excluding individuals who want to come and join our wealthier society? Aren’t we just trying to defend our privileged existence?

This problem of political philosophy underpins the current obsession with identity politics. How can we define citizenship in an age skeptical of narratives? On what basis do we decide who belongs? What narrative of identity in our postmodern universe can withstand deconstructive criticism?

Other theorists, such as Benjamin Barber and Richard Dagger, have argued that we can anchor citizenship in the value of democracy.²⁶ The argument is that we must have citizens to establish functioning democracies. From this perspective too, boundaries are necessary to enable meaningful democratic participation. How can I influence the decisions affecting my neighborhood or county, unless voting is limited to local residents? If instead, I only vote

as a global citizen, then how can I meaningfully influence policy that affects my small corner of the world?

Democracy is also the suggested answer for who belongs. Noted theorist Jurgen Habermas argues that we can establish citizenship as an identity solely through legal, constitutional means. Habermas' conception of "constitutional patriotism" suggests that we can create an identity that will hold up the corrosive deconstruction of postmodernism if we remove the past residues of nationalism and other narratives from it.²⁷

However, these suggested answers to the dilemma of political legitimacy in our postmodern world cut against the grain of contemporary states. As discussed earlier, globalization has pushed states into an increasingly paradoxical competition. To maintain their sovereignty, they must participate. To provide the guarantees to other states necessary for this system of global capitalism (most starkly free trade agreements), nation states cannot risk too much democratic control of this infrastructure. Thus, the suggestion of theorists like Habermas for more democracy runs headlong into the state's growing reliance on technocratic management.

Similarly, focusing on the need for local boundary drawing, so that citizens can democratically influence local policies, runs counter to the state's needs. Globalization is about reducing barriers to capital. Strengthening local control risks democratic support for "protectionism." At the same time, returning to our modern narratives of political identity runs counter to the needs of contemporary states. Although much of the population in the developed world might be comfortable with such a *revanchist* turn, the state cannot pursue such a turn as real policy. Narratives of nationalism may be used in elections and political marketing; however, our political and economic elites cannot maintain such ideas with a straight face when conducting business across the borders (political and cultural) of global capitalism.

Thus, we have the paradoxes that make up the postmodern state. In our contemporary situation, states lack a description of citizenship that can satisfy postmodern skepticism toward grand narratives of identity. The suggested solution of our contemporary philosophers is to replace these old stories of nationalism and cultural identities (which postmodern deconstruction shows to be hollow) with more transparent democratic procedures. However, that solution poses great risk to the state because the demos might vote to opt out of or restrict global capitalism. Such a turn would make the state less competitive and undermine its strength in the international system.

The solution to this dilemma has become the ideology of concealing the state. While our political systems continue to use institutions, procedures, and rhetoric that is relentlessly modern, the postmodern state conceals itself. Although many of the forms of modern politics are still with us, like elections, lobbying, demonstrations, and local participation, these forms seem more and more antiquated. The rapid changes in communications technology and

our popular culture surrounding these changes make politics seem like a backwater of stagnated practices and ideas.

For these various reasons, the postmodern state is an institution that attempts to conceal its agency. By denying it has the power to act, the postmodern state makes the continuing development of globalized capitalism seem inevitable. The postmodern state also claims that the market it has created is now an autonomous entity. This claim allows the state to avoid responding to democratic demands to modify the rules and outcomes of the market. Finally, by concealing its agency, the postmodern state can continue to neglect the ossifying modern political system it inherits from the past. Arguably, the urgency for action in this last area is diffused if we come to believe it does not matter much anyway, especially in comparison to the reality of the market.

With a topic as broad as this, where do we begin? A good starting point is the bifurcation of the contemporary state into a shallow and deep set of institutions. This separation is arguably the central mechanism for the concealment of the state. In many ways, this bifurcation of the state's institutions is also reliant on the idea of a separate free market, autonomous from the state. It can also be argued that this is not a new political development but rather the outcome of a long historical trend. Nonetheless, as I argue in the next chapter, the deep and shallow state has become so important to contemporary politics that one can also argue that it is a defining characteristic of the postmodern state.

Notes

- 1 Here, I am referring to the enormously popular book: Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006). This quote is from p. 11 of their book. For a scholarly critique of viewing economics this way, see Ben Fine and Dimitris Milonakis, *From Economics Imperialism to Freakonomics: The Shifting Boundaries between Economics and other Social Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
- 2 See: *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, 558 U.S. 50 (2010).
- 3 This statistic can be found at www.oecd.org, and in early 2012 this site contained accurate figures through 2007. We can assume the average will be quite different with data from 2008 forward, reflecting the stimulus efforts of some governments, and the austerity cuts by others, during the great recession.
- 4 Excellent studies on the impact of institutional logic include James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), or Graham Allison's classic *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Little Brown, 1971).

- 5 Consider the pledges and program of the British Conservative–Liberal coalition that took power in 2010, or the re-election success of the Latvian government of Prime Minister Dombrovskis in October 2010 by pledging to stay the course on an extreme austerity package.
- 6 The classic description of the “free rider” problem comes from Mancur Olson’s *The Logic of Collective Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).
- 7 For example, Jack Matlock’s *Autopsy on an Empire* (New York: Random House, 1995), or David Remnick’s, *Lenin’s Tomb* (New York: Random House, 1993).
- 8 For an overview of the debate in political science about this approach, see Donald P. Green and Ian Shapiro, *Pathologies of Rational Choice: A Critique of Applications in Political Science* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994) and the closely related volume, Jeffrey Friedman ed., *The Rational Choice Controversy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).
- 9 Peter A. Hall and Rosemary C.R. Taylor, “Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms,” *Political Studies*, no. XLIV, 1996, pp. 936–57.
- 10 Hall and Taylor, “Political Science,” p. 939.
- 11 For a good discussion of the role of conflict, see B. Guy Peters, Jon Pierre, and Desmond S. King, “The Politics of Path Dependency: Political Conflict in Historical Institutionalism,” *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 67, no. 4, November 2005, pp. 1275–300.
- 12 For a summary of this expansive discussion, see Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*. vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 363–71.
- 13 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans Peter Baehr and Gordon G. Wells (New York: Penguin Books, 2002).
- 14 This is the title of C. Wright Mills’ classic study. See C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956, 2000).
- 15 Including the popular textbook by Michael Parenti, *Democracy for the Few* (9th edition, Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2010).
- 16 Mills, *The Power Elite*, p. 4.
- 17 Richard J. F. Day, *Gramsci Is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the New Social Movements* (London: Pluto Press, 2005).
- 18 Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, vol. 3, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1994), pp. 122–3.
- 19 For a discussion of the logic behind this approach, see Sean P. Hier, “Probing the Surveillant Assemblage: On the Dialectics of Surveillance Practices as Processes of Social Control,” *Surveillance and Society*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2003, pp. 399–411.
- 20 David Lyon, *Surveillance as Social Sorting* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
- 21 Mikhail Bakunin, *God and the State* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), p. 83.

- 22 Paul James, *Globalism, Nationalism, Tribalism: Bringing Theory Back In* (London: Sage Publications, 2006), p. 257.
- 23 James, *Globalism, Nationalism, Tribalism*, p. 257.
- 24 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. xxiii.
- 25 Joseph H. Carens, "Aliens and Citizens: The Case for Open Borders," in *Theorizing Citizenship*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 229–53.
- 26 See Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), and Richard Dagger, *Civic Virtues: Rights, Citizenship, and Republican Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- 27 Jurgen Habermas, "Citizenship and National Identity: Some Reflections on the Future of Europe," in *Theorizing Citizenship*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 255–81.