

The Modern State: Imagined or Real?

“The bureaucracy is the imaginary state alongside the real state-the spiritualism of the state” (Marx, 1978a:24)

Is the modern nation-state real or imagined? To answer this conundrum, there have been countless debates on the nature of the State among social scientists. We can categorize these arguments into two competing schools of thought: Marxian notion of the instrumental state and Weberian theory of the state-centered approach.

Which theory correctly captures on the nature of the State? If instrumental, how can we understand people’s nationalistic sentiment firmly grounded in a territorial and social space of the nation-state? If real, how can we explain impersonal, reified citizenry and its abstractedness? Rethinking Marx and Weber, I will argue that there is no contradiction between them, although each had a different emphasis. Thus I treat them not as mutually exclusive but as two sides of the same coin.

Marx(ian): the nominal State

In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels assert that “The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.” This famous definition on the State has been generally represented as ‘the instrumental State’ in canonical Marxism, anchored in so-called economic determinism. Instead of using the

conventional term ‘instrument’, my suggestion is to use a new term ‘the *nominal* State’ in order for us not to fall into the trap of economic reductionism. By describing characteristics of the modern, nominal State, we then discover its hollowness and thus its reified nature. Sayer (1991) illuminates this nominal aspect of the State so my argument below relies largely on his explanation.

Marx’s original work emphasize the nominal aspect of the State in that it is an illusory representation of capitalist society and what Sayer called an “ideological project” (Sayer, 1991: 83). The modern liberal State consists of its subject, the citizen, and therefore it is a truism to say that if it is a mere ‘collective *misrepresentation*’ then a characteristic of citizen is also essentially *misrepresentation*. Sayer argues that Marx focuses on the abstraction of the individual as the basis for civic citizenship and observes that this citizenship has never extended to all individuals who live within civil societies (1991: 84). Thus, according to Marx, a citizen is an ‘abstract individual’ who can be equated with the bourgeoisie: the commodity exchanger in civil society. Here double processes of abstracting, reifying civil society and the State, conjoin. That is the reason why Marx criticizes the Hegelian argument- “the Family superceded equals *Civil Society*, Civil Society superceded equals the *State*, the State superceded equals *World History*” and departs from the Berlin Young Hegelian circle (1964:185). For Marx, the State is not a supercedence of civil society but *another* abstraction from civil society abstracted from the family. Likewise modern world history, the history of inter-state relations, is not a cumulative process of dialectical transcendence from the Family but a consequence of *triple abstractions* from it.

Yet each abstraction has its own façade and we should distinguish among specific abstractions. The subject in civil society and the State is, in principle, not identical but two sides of the same coin. More precisely, the historical process of modern state-making through what Marx called “political emancipation” is “a reduction of man, on the one hand to a member of civil society, an *independent* and *egoistic* individual, and on the other hand, to a *citizen*, to a moral person” (Marx, 1978b: 46: italics original). So the fundamental premises of the human-being in both domains are exactly opposite: one, in the civil society, is selfish, whereas the other, in the State, is moral. According to Marx (1978b: 34):

Man, in his *most intimate* reality, in civil society, is a profane being. Here, where he appears both himself and to others as a real individual he is an *illusory* phenomenon. In the state, on the contrary, where he is regarded as a species-being, man is the imaginary member of an imaginary sovereignty, divested of his real, individual life, and infused with an unreal universality.

It is clear that the abstract citizen who dwells in an imagined political community, the State, becomes reified by means of an illusory embodiment of the ‘moral’ citizen, a good citizen. The virtuous citizen must obey the laws without being monitored by the police. By reciting the Pledge of Allegiances, the dominant ideology of the State becomes deeply embedded into citizen’s mind so it becomes reified and *self-perpetuated* through the social practices of good citizens. Thus **the imputation of a virtuous citizenry makes it feasible to conceal the nominal nature of the State**. I think that is the essence of what

Marx called “the real state-the spiritualism of the state.” In line with this, it thus becomes clear of the *Manifesto*’s contention that “the working men have no country ... national differences and antagonisms between peoples are daily more or more vanishing” because proletariat as an antithesis of moral bourgeois become alienated from the State just as female and symbolized ‘Black’ become estranged from it. Therefore Marx’s classic definition can be restated as ‘the executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole *male White* bourgeoisie.’

However, as Sayer (1991: 81) poignantly points out, major lacunae in Marx’s sociology is his underestimation on the importance of political ideology such as nationalism and nationality. In other words, the project of imbuing ruling ideology using ‘culturally constructed notion of national identity’ is such a powerful, effective scheme so it is impossible to ignore. Therefore I wholeheartedly concur with Sayer’s evaluation that “Marx greatly underestimated (or failed to anticipate) the specifically *cultural* power of the modern state, a power which derives from the plausibility of its claim to represent essential component of *individual* identities, to epitomize who we are” (1991: 82: italics original). So I now examine other theories of the State, especially Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic violence of the State, which have paid more attention to the cultural project of the State. Before we delve into the cultural aspect of the State, however, we need to *reexamine* Weber’s theory of the state which has been perceived the antithesis of Marx’s nominal state. Just as I did on Marx, I will firstly discuss of Weber’s classical definition of the State.

Weber(ian) and Bourdieu: monopoly of physical and symbolic violence

Social scientists have conventionally thought that Weber's classical definition of the state- "A state is a human community that claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory" - emphasizes the coercive aspect of the State (Gerth and Mills, 1991: 78; italics original). The idea underlying this statement is clear: any kind of private or sectional violence *became* illegitimate and thus illegal in well-ordered modern societies. For instance, lynching people is now illegal in the U.S. Tilly (1985) elucidates this characteristic when he proposes that the States are rackets because they create the threat of war and then charge for its reduction. States acquire the ability to run such a racket not because they have acquired legitimacy but because they hold a monopoly over the means of violence. Thus, for Tilly, the State gets authority because of 'the monopoly of violence' not vice versa. To sustain and enhance the monopoly of violence, the State needs to be equipped with specialized order-enforcing agencies such as the police, military, and the court which are separated out from the rest of social life.

Furthermore, based on Weber's definition, there emerged so-called 'state-centered' perspectives in opposition to the economic determinism of canonical Marxism. Since the publication of *Bringing the State Back in* (1985) or even before, we can observe a revival of classical German schools of the State whose main theorists were Max Weber, Otto Hintze and others (see Mann (1988) for more detail). In this renaissance of the German School, sociologists argue that the modern State is *not* an illusory concept which simply reflects infrastructural condition but a *real* agency that has an autonomous power over

other domains. In other words, they generally emphasize the nature of the State as an autonomous power in that the State has its own functions like what Tilly called ‘war-making’, maintaining physical territory and sovereignty, policing the private use of physical violence, collecting taxes for the sake of common goods, and participating in inter-state relations. Given the five functions of the State, Weber argues that the State is not exclusively restricted to the satisfaction of economic needs. As a political community it regulates more generally the interrelations of the inhabitants of the territory (1978: 902). Furthermore apart from using ‘physical coercion’, the State also wields its power in the domains of ideology, culture, and what Bourdieu called ‘symbolic violence.’

According to Bourdieu (1999: 65-66), a shift from a diffuse symbolic capital to an *objectified symbolic capital*, codified, delegated and guaranteed by the state, in a word *bureaucratized*, is a critical feature of the genesis of modern State (italics original).

Thus his innovative elaboration of Weber’s definition is that “the state ... successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical and *symbolic* violence” (1999: 56: italics original). He analyzed two types of symbolic capital of the State: juridical capital and ennoblement.

Firstly Bourdieu argues that the process of centralization of juridical capital, an objectified and codified form of symbolic capital in the hand of the State, follows its *own logic*, distinct from that of the concentration of military capital and financial capital (1999: 63: italic original). Unlike military, financial capital, the monopoly of juridical capital of the State is, in principle, based on social contract, the *consent* of all the

commoners, rather than appropriations of physical, financial resources by *coercion* of the State. Moreover, the emerging universal legal system gradually infiltrated the whole of society and was paralleled by a process of differentiation which led to the *constitution of an autonomous juridical field*.

Secondly the State is the site par excellence of the concentration and exercise of symbolic power in that it can monopolize the symbolic capital perceived by its juridical subjects - that is [liberal] citizenry- endowed with categories of perception which cause them to know it and to recognize it, to give it value. Thus the State is constituted as “fountain of honour, of office and privilege, and distributes honors” (Bourdieu, 1999: 66). More precisely, *the modern State can exercise a monopoly of ennoblement*; monopolizing the symbolic power of determining honorable positions like conferring membership for the national academy of sciences and faculties of College de France. My father, for instance, recently became a member of Korean National Academy of Sciences in the ancient and medieval Korean history section and thus is *officially* recognized as the best historian in his research area because only one person takes this section and holds the title until his/her death. My example here is not to show off what my father achieved but to raise a critical question; who nominated my father and who bestowed this honorable position to him. Did the South Korean president, Roh, Moo-hyun, confer symbolic capital to my father? Obviously this is not true because he does not know my father *personally*. Instead, it is clear that the distribution of symbolic capital by the State is in principle purely impersonal and is actualized in what Bourdieu called ‘a *bureaucratized field*.’ Likewise,

as I mentioned, the justice system is assumed not to be arbitrary, nepotistic, and irrational so it becomes ‘an *autonomous* juridical field’ aloof from private sphere.

In sum, I think Bourdieu’s notion of monopoly of symbolic power clearly elucidates the cultural power of the modern State and thus can be regarded as a good complement to Marx’s theory of the State. Yet I think we still need to delve more into cultural power of the State with regards to nationality, national identity and nationalism even though all have proved notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyze. Like Sayer, Benedict Anderson poignantly admits that “nationalism has proven an uncomfortable *anomaly* for Marxist theory and, precisely for that reason, has been largely elided, rather than confronted (1991: 3: italics original). Through the process of forging the imagined nation, each nation-state designs and drapes its *own costumes*. I think international sports games such as the Olympic Games and the football World Cup game do promote the sense of belongingness to the nation-state among its citizens. When the Korean ‘national’ football team advanced to the semifinal in the 2002 FIFA World Cup game, for instance, almost every Korean perceived this dazzling event as ‘national pride’ and regarded as the embodiment of the spiritualism of the *nation-state*.

From the dynastic state into the impersonal bureaucratic state

Print capitalism, the mass media, inter-national sports, competitions, common language promote people’s sentiment of nations and nationalism; modernity *itself* creates a set of impersonal institutions and citizen as the subjects of the State. The modern nation-state is

an ‘imagined community’ abstracting a real community. It is worth mentioning that the ‘democracy of freedom’ guaranteed by the justice system of the State originated *only* in the modern capitalist society. In other words, the discourse of liberal individualism, i.e. rights of ‘free-born Englishmen’ (not of Englishwomen), was only feasible under the circumstances of the capitalist free-market economy. According to Marx (1978a:24), the Middle Ages, by contrast, were “the democracy of *unfreedom*.” Thanks to the cohabitation between capitalist free-market economy and liberal individualism in political society, reified and imagined conceptions- bureaucracy, citizenship, civil subjects, ‘invisible hand’- became so deeply embedded into modern society. What are the relationships between the economic realm and politico-societal domain? Which one came first? The causal argument on the relationships between the two seems unclear but two domains are definitely intertwined. Despite admitting that they are closely interconnected, I feel inclined to argue that the modern nation-state became a self-perpetuating category without regard to the condition of its infrastructural base as well as without regard for persons. I think this is one reason why bureaucratic state structures persisted *even after* the means of production in the Communist countries were socialized. Put it differently, the citizenry, alienated subjects of the State, become a collective *misrepresentation* without regard to Bourgeois civil society.

I believe that modern bureaucracy is a key to understanding this ‘**self-perpetuation**’ **process**, because it is one of the most important State apparatuses conducive to this process. Regarding their perception of bureaucracy, moreover, there is no such opposition between Marx and Weber. As Sayer argues (1991:141), the most significant of Weber’s

echoes of Marx lie in the contrast both draw between personalized and impersonal modes of administration and forms of power, and the base of their legitimacy (in Weber's terms, 'traditional' or 'patrimonial' versus 'rational-legal'). In other words, both Marx and Weber clearly observed the shift from the dynastic state into the 'impersonal bureaucratic state'.

For Marx, he was clearly aware of this self-perpetuation process when he criticized the imaginary aspects of the State. Marx was more straightforward than Weber on the reified nature of bureaucracy and the State; regarding bureaucracy- "the "bureaucracy" is a web of *practical* illusions, or the "illusion of the state"" and regarding the State- "the abstraction of the *state as such* belongs only to modern times, because the abstraction of private life belongs only to modern times. The abstraction of the *political state* is a modern product" (Marx, 1978a). For Weber, he put more emphasis on durable nature of a bureaucratic system and became pessimistic on the shatterability of bureaucracy as an Iron Cage. So he conjectured that this system will exist even in the socialist State. Weber argued that "the great state and the mass party are the classic soil for bureaucratization and socialism and ... would merely increase the power of bureaucratized management" (Sayer, 145).

The bureaucratic system consolidates the self-perpetuation process of the State by enhancing State power regarding physical coercion, tax collecting, war-making, and symbolic violence. For instance, tax collecting can be rewritten as follows- an imagined concept, the State, extracts economic resources from another but *essentially identical*

concept, the citizen. The conscription system, on the other hand, exploits physical resources from the morally virtuous citizen. As Marx argues, since he is regarded as a species-being in the State, man as a moral citizen performs his military duty within the realm of an imaginary sovereignty or an unreal universality. As I already mentioned, **the more he observes a role of moral citizen, the more he becomes reified.** To extract potential resources to the maximum point, furthermore, the State introduces a more efficient, impersonal bureaucratic structure. Thus the **reproduction of reification of the State and its subjects intensifies.** Finally most people take it for granted the world of reified categories seem to be real and does not raise any questions of them.

My understanding thus far is that Marx was clearer on the nominal aspect of state bureaucracy while Weber emphasized its perennialness. Thus the effect of the modern bureaucratic state is what Bourdieu aptly called the “*effect of universality*” (1999: 71: italics original). However, they are actually speaking of the same thing. Thus instead of dichotomizing Marxian and Weberian theories of the State, we need to incorporate them into a single process- the self-perpetuation process of the State or the reproduction of reified categories through impersonal bureaucratization. Yet there are major differences between Marx and Weber on the feasibility of full-fledged human emancipation. For Weber, it is incapable in principle of furnishing any kind of substitute for bureaucracy as an ultimate form of rational disenchantment (Sayer, 1991: 151). By contrast, Marx is positive to human emancipation and thus urges us not just to interpret the world but to change it.

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