

Assess what should be the role of the state

The issue of the role of the state, and the activities it should therefore undertake, is one that has long been contested by political theorists and commentators alike. The enormous span of permutations of what the state's role may involve leads to much dispute over definition, and with this, overlapping views from different thinkers and ideological groups. There is of course no real-life example that can be cited as the 'perfect' state – each society has its own unique requirements and conflicts – but human experience of the 20th century has seen the basic discrediting of some theories of state role, whilst giving credibility to others. For example, totalitarian regimes have essentially been rejected outright by the free-thinking world since the Second World War, whilst communism had very publicly fallen by the 1990s. However, the debate over what should be the role of the state continues, and seems unlikely to subside.

A quite extreme view on the subject of the role of the state is one whose modern roots lie in the first half of the 20th century. Obviously, many nations in the developed world lay in a dire politico-economic situation – for example, Italy and Germany following the First World War. That liberalism appeared to have failed these nations gave a newfound credence to the view that the state should take absolute authority over the country (possibly going so far as to become an oppressor). The commentators Friedrich and Brzezinski identified a *six-point-syndrome*¹ necessary to be adhered to for the state to have effective, absolute authority. However, the *syndrome*'s points were notable in their undesirability. A solitary, unopposed party with one *official ideology*¹ can surely only mean an inescapable democratic deficit of the worst possible kind. This problem is merely exacerbated by the need for a *terroristic police force*, *monopoly on communications* and a *monopoly of weapons*¹. It is difficult to understand how anyone could feasibly suggest that, with the possible exception of safer streets, these aspects of state rule might be beneficial to the everyday life of citizens.

The view's economics lie in a *centrally directed economy*¹ - although theoretically sound, practical examples of command economies suggest it usually serves as a catalyst for shortages and poverty – again, undesirable and unpleasant connotations. Ultimately, this *project of suppressing civil society*² sees all personal freedoms removed: everything and everyone must be dedicated to the common goal; that is, the survival of the state at all costs. Effectively, *Individuals and communities possessing divergent values and beliefs, may no longer coexist in peace*². This is surely a depressing situation for mankind to find itself in. Nonetheless, it must be made clear that this view of state role is not inherently 'bad'. In times of national crises, often when totalitarianism has been able to emerge and flourish, a state taking absolute authority may indeed be just what a nation requires. It is the *exploitation* of power, apparently inextricably linked to totalitarianism, which makes it so unacceptable. The aftermath of Marx's revolution would, he emphasised, require the newly-installed authority to take what could be seen as oppressive levels of control, in order to deconstruct the capitalist system they had inherited. However, in practice, the oppressive nature of Stalinist Russia did not end there, and Russian lives continued to be fundamentally controlled by the state as an absolute authority. Communism's basic

¹ C.J. Friedrich & Z. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*

² J. Gray, *Totalitarianism at the crossroads*

discrediting as a feasible politico-economic system of administration by the end of the 1980s must show that this form of state role has very little hope of practical success, let alone any moral justification. More recently, the fact that Western authorities recognised the disgraceful behaviour of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and intervened accordingly, is surely testament to the opposition to the belief that a state can operate fairly and humanely whilst possessing absolute authority. Indeed, that fascism and nazism, two ideologies with totalitarianism at the heart of their doctrines, brought with them such unacceptable interpretations of social Darwinism, did much in seeing the effective discrediting of totalitarianism after the Second World War.

Acknowledging these severe flaws in the arguments for absolute state authority, a strong case has been offered suggesting that rather than take *absolute* authority, the state operates best serving as a *paternalistic* figure, providing strong enforcement of law and order. Those who champion this view have a tendency to uphold an opinion of human nature reminiscent of Hobbes. That is, their pessimism towards mankind dictates that a strong legal system, backed by (the threat of) coercion, must be in place to keep the people in check and ensure their social contracts are upheld. Barry is in agreement with this view – *Those who believe in the organic state must establish legitimacy through authority rather than approval*³. From this, it is obvious that this is a view ultimately conservative in its rootings.

The view is packaged with a strong association towards the free market; although Smith's ideas on the subject often appear wholly desirable, their practical use has displayed severe shortcomings towards poorer citizens. States providing no welfare whatsoever, such as South Africa, simply do not succeed: they bear witness to crippling problems of poverty and infrastructural weakness. These problems, combined with the reduced personal freedoms of stronger law enforcement, have seen this view of state role become a progressively unattractive one. In recent times, the state as a paternalistic provider of law and order has been a vision adhered to by both 'One Nation' Conservatives and the 'New Right.' The fact that Europe is currently dominated by administrations who are far removed from these, instead looking to social democracy and the *third way* for their rule, suggests that although this view of state role has not been entirely discredited, popular opinion currently lies elsewhere. It seems electorates do not generally see social disorder as enough of a problem to necessitate the election of a party prepared to deal with it severely. That is not to say that the opinion is by any means dead – many would argue that hitherto, George W. Bush has displayed a penchant for the reinforcement of law and order, passing substantial legislation in the pursuit of increased security. Certainly, despite the aforementioned undesirable associations, the strong enforcement of law and order is a state role seen by many as a just one, especially in the current international climate.

An entirely different outlook sees the state's role as being the (radical) re-distributor of wealth amongst its subjects. For an effective redistribution to be achieved, high taxes are a clear necessity. They must be progressively staggered so as to achieve a more equal outcome. Thus, the view is socialist in its essence. Where a liberal would seek the provision of equal opportunity, an equal outcome, effectively regardless of the means required to provide it, is the primary concern of a socialist. For wealth to be radically redistributed it is necessary for industry to be nationalised – this will ensure equality and prevent exploitation. The view's roots have obvious connotations with Marx's insistence that we *secure the workers the full fruits of their industry and the equitable distribution thereof*, but more modern champions of the

³ B. Barry, *Political Arguments*

vision have also offered their own views on the subject. Acknowledging that *Public ownership and government attempts to induce private investment in depressed areas have failed*⁴, Benn prescribed a *further extension of state ownership, increased industrial democracy, and greater public accountability of nationalised industries*.⁴ The view is subscribed to by groups with socialism at their cores. Marxists, Democratic Socialists and Social Democrats are examples, each with their own widely publicised views (of varying extremity) on how equality will be achieved. The state as a radical redistributor of wealth, just like most views on state role, appears theoretically sound. However, the spectacular failure of collectivisation in Soviet states has shown that, in the Marxist interpretation at least, radical redistribution has experienced huge difficulties in operating practically. Furthermore, that leftist parties around Europe; notably the British Labour party, have been forced to the centre in order to survive, has seen a far smaller sense of responsibility for redistribution displayed in recent years. This would suggest that incomes are generally high enough, or at least not so small at the lower end of the scale so as to provide justification for a particularly popular support of a radical redistribution of wealth.

A large number of thinkers and groups subscribe to the idea of the state as an *arbiter*. Although this general concept covers a large number of specific views, I will look at two. First, that of the state as a *Nightwatchman*. Rooted in the 17th Century social contract theories of Hobbes and Locke, the view owes more to Locke in its optimistic assertion that human nature only requires a minimal state. It has only three basic tasks to undertake – the minimal state of law and order: a police force; a courts system to uphold voluntary contracts, and an army to protect its citizens from outside forces. Therefore, the state is not bound to provide *any* welfare, social security or indeed interfere in any way in its citizens' personal lives. The economic aspects of the *Nightwatchman* view clearly owe much to Adam Smith - *It is in the best interests of everyone to allow people the freedom to make their own choices*⁵. However, laissez faire economics has already been seen to have potentially dangerous flaws. The view is ultimately classic liberal in its utilitarian vision of state intervention. This view was incredibly influential throughout the late 1970s and the 1980s, seen in the neo-liberalism of Thatcher and Reagan. Britain and the U.S. were ruled almost as a direct reaction to the *nanny states* of previous years.

The appeal of the *Nightwatchman* view is obvious, and is not blighted by any particularly glaring disasters in its practical examples. However, Thatcherism has its staunch critics, most of whom base their dislike for her view of state role on the shortcomings felt by the working class, and those on low incomes, during her tenure. The lack of any welfare provision is an obvious flaw to the view: history has shown that the poorer end of society simply cannot be ignored in this way. Thus, with the state still as an *arbiter*, an alteration to the *Nightwatchman* view, and one I firmly believe is the most effective role the state could take, is that of the state as a welfare provider. Although still reasonably *hands-off* in its opinion on state intervention, it is accepted that certain social groups unavoidably require the help of more advantaged groups. This change to liberal thinking can be traced back to the 19th Century, when widespread poverty forced re-thinks of ideology. Hobhouse defended the alteration, arguing that modern liberals could justify the extension of public control on *humane grounds*⁶. By providing welfare, the state is effectively making opportunities *more*

⁴ T. Benn, *Arguments for Socialism*

⁵ A. Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*

⁶ L. Hobhouse, *Liberalism*

equal. Having observed the damaging long-term consequences of the *Nightwatchman* role, *One Nation* Conservatives also agree. Wanting to unite their nation rather than divide it, they agree that the wealthy must help the poor; through welfare provision the natural hierarchy of society that they firmly believe in can come into effect.

Thus, whilst providing society with the undeniable benefits of the *Nightwatchman* view, such as greater individual freedoms and less unwanted and unnecessary state intervention in our personal lives, by taking the role of *welfare provider*, the state is also able to address the fundamental problem of the *Nightwatchman* view – that is; the inequality shown in 1980s Britain under Margaret Thatcher. The free market, as Smith asserted, provides us with more choice and freedom. However, in altering it so as not to put less fortunate citizens in danger, the *whole* of society can enjoy the benefits of the state as a welfare provider. Observing western democracies at the start of the 21st Century, it appears that this view is one currently popular with mass electorates. More extreme administrations appear to have subsided, at least for the time being; their views on state role usually discredited as they fell.

It is of course difficult not to assess the most popular current view on state role as the ‘best’; if an alternative was seen to be ‘better’, it would presumably be enforced. It is also important to bear in mind that the world’s political climate is never static. Especially in internationally hostile times such as these, it is not inconceivable that very different outlooks could become dominant very quickly, changing our views on state role just as rapidly. A ‘world electorate’ of growing incomes could become swiftly disgruntled with state welfarism if economic downturn saw their wealth crippled. Of course, as history has shown, it is precisely this type of event that has necessitated and ensured the transition of state into different roles than before, and will continue to see such transition into the future.