

A FRANCOCENTRIC CRITIQUE OF THE STATE

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We can talk about this book in two closely linked ways: the political one, that criticises the so-called ‘come back to the state’, that some leftists see as an essential tool to break free from neoliberal power, and the historical-analytical one. The historical research on state and sovereignty is the contrastive screen on which the potential political alternative (devised by the authors in *Commun*), stands out: the plural institutionalism of commons, the bottom-up ‘true’ democracy of self-government of groups and individuals.

The debate on going back to the state is both linked to the collapse of the Third Way Left fully subsumed into the neo-liberal model, and to the neo-institutionalist turn of radical immanence thinking that now seems to accept the need for some kind of neo-institutionalist organisation.

Some of the anti-neoliberal Left aims to go back to the experience of the state, renewing the political theological paradigm.

Indeed, the book’s realist foreword is that the world is made up of states and that states affect our obligations and rights. The task is therefore quite a challenge: acknowledging the influence of that political form and denying that it’s necessary.

So, the first step is therefore to refute the state decline narrative. The sovereign state is still central, even in globalisation, as Sassen has shown in her classic books on the transformation (but not demise) of the state. It does not yield to the capitalist economy, but internalises it, constitutionalising the rules that work for Capital, as a new *raison d’état*. The capital/state connection is more radical than the world-system theories (Wallerstein Arrighi) thought: individuals are produced as functional to the system through a double internal-external conditioning.

I fully agree. But historical research (90% of the book) is neither sociological like Sassen's, nor genealogical like Foucault's (about practices and devices that de-construct the state as a 'peripeteia' of government). The aim, rather, is to bring out the imaginary phantasmatic nature of the sovereign state, the *form* that still affects our political imagination.

Focusing on the 'theory', on the form (framed by canonists, jurists and political philosophers and stated in public statements and declarations) is a decisive choice.

That the belief - myth or *fiction-form* or ideology - is 'immaterial' does not reduce but increases its effect and ensures its continuity. Although, I think, it risks emphasising the state over and beyond its reality. Genealogy deconstructs any essence of the state; instead, evoking its phantasmal image produces a trans-historical 'constant feature' in the historical contingent becoming, which should account for why, even today (despite the growing mistrust of the state) we cannot imagine coexistence other than as a unity under a vertical power.

However, it must be taken in account that this constant phantom-form is recalled as such because of the political aim of the book: self-management from below as the state's reverse.

Every philosophical-political book - no matter how careful its analysis - plays its own game from a position in the battlefield. And it strategically chooses its opponent to polemise against. As Koselleck says, every modern political concept has a polemical matrix and defines in order to normalise. The concepts of state and sovereignty were built within a polemical-political project and are now used as antagonists of a polemical-political project.

To the opponent (the leftist sovereigntyism) Dardot and Laval highlight the influence of sovereignty and unity logic on how political change is thought and practiced - from the leninist revolution, to the social-democratic welfare state, to the anti-colonial 'socialist' regimes: the state has always been at the centre, in spite of emerging from very different experiences, such as councils, communes, self-management and autonomy. In order to change the present, we must instead, forget that illusory form, which betrays its promises of government of the people for the people.

I will focus briefly on the historical research on the sovereign state model. A historical and contingent event - the claim of papal sovereignty in 1073 by Gregory VII, supported by canonical jurists - marked its emergence and, therefore, the western political imaginary that conceives coexistence within unity, verticality, exclusivity and expropriation of social powers: therefore within domination (*Dominer* is the striking title of the book).

Of course that form gets more complex as soon as we add the people, the nation; but, as form, while being contingent in its birth, it persists across history.

We must critically point out that - because of its political aim of highlighting a 'form' - this is an Eurocentric, or rather, a Franco-centric history, since the statolatry is quite Western, European, christian, papal and french. France indeed, above all, enacts and exports to Europe (and all over the world) this mythical centralisation of power. It is then the 19th century German legal science (which is not so present in the book) that enhances and formalizes the model. Practices of less centralised state, such as (in the West) Swiss and USA federalism, are put in the shade.

At the beginning, anyway: the Act of 1073, mimicked by national sovereigns; an Act that sets up a legally imposed unitary form from above. That this form is indeed contingent, is proved by the primitive stateless societies (Clastres), by the Greek poleis, lacking monocratic and absolute sovereignty and by the Roman republic and its plural government of assembly senate and consuls, rather than by alternative path of modernity.

All modernity is in the shape of theological-political form and state mysticism, and therefore, theological monism, omnipotence and transcendence.

The 17C *raison d'état* might highlight the pragmatic pliability of government, but Dardot and Laval reaffirm its despotic profile. Even Bentham is embedded in the pattern, despite the biopolitical features noted by Foucault. The Hobbes-Rousseau's line has no discontinuity, although the holder of sovereignty changes; there is always absoluteness, inalienability, indivisibility: an aporetic and sacrificial conceptual machine from Many to One. The people, as a totalised phantom, is the sovereign subject only in the General Will conferred on it through the representation mechanism. The concrete singular wills are sacrificed.

I would like to point out that this mythical widely appealing image of the People-Nation is the mark of the French Revolution (here the only root of Western thought) and, through it, influences the Russian revolution (despite having different experiences in its background) and leftist statism.

This tradition rests on the *damnatio memoriae* of self-organised forms of social life. A Nation, according to Sieyes, is a community of shared identity, matching rulers and ruled. Representation and representative (in French, indeed, the word is the same) coincide, as do the constituent power of the people and the power constituted of sovereign institution. Society has no internal links. Pluralism is a threat and a betrayal.

There are few and weak voices (always French, anyway) challenging this powerful mainstream: Fourier, Saint-Simon and Proudhon criticise the revolution and imagine

another horizontal sociality that would preserve pluralism and autonomy. The book, moreover, does not deal with the practices of self-government within the American state, nor with the European anarchist tradition, from Spain to Italy, Switzerland to Russia...

The welfare state gets us closer to the book's political challenge: with the welfare state, the Left lets itself be embedded in nationalism and today into sovereignism, taking sides against the private enterprise, but not against the state, as it were a neutral device that can help social issues. Thus, it disregards authoritarianism within technocracy, nation's mystique and racialisation. Nationalist socialism confirms the sovereignty theory by only widening its economic and social role.

However - maybe a bit too hastily - the authors devalue its achievements: a weak membership and a low degree of solidarity and redistribution. Well-founded as the remarks are, they do not account for the widespread demands for social rights...

This is now: despite the anti-statist neo-liberal ideology, the state still occupies, as we said, the central and disciplinary role of legislative guardian of the competitive market: society falls under the transnational rules of capital's absolute freedom and a new world economic constitution that constrains and limits parliamentary legislation.

But let us say: if critical focus is on the ideological form/fetish of sovereign state (and not on practices) is that monolithic ideology still so powerful, or should the analysis better mark the discontinuity of both: the current state device (today governmentalised and embedded in a multilevel power network) and the ideological monocratic form? Of course, the state is still a main political actor, but there is a clear break with the past; of course, the ideological form is still there, but it's weakened and challenged by the individualist and anti-social 'common sense'.

Indeed, it is just from the ideological point of view that the cultural neo-liberal revolution against the state should not be undervalued. This battle was won, even though neo-liberalism, in its practices (and mainly in its ordoliberal form) uses the state as a necessary aid to ensure the competition rules.

Everything else has been demolished step by step, with no resistance, just because the ideological block of the sovereign state had been dissolved. A part of the left, linked to the social rights struggles (despite its lack of democratic involvement in decision-making) thinks - and it is wrong - that it can turn back. It doesn't take into account the ambivalence of neo-liberal ideology, which enhances autonomy and self-government, producing subjects who refuse to be sacrificed to the general will, and are diffident towards the state, the fisc, judges and public information. That Left is going to lose and it

works to keep alive a myth of the sovereign state that is already a *cul de sac*. (Even if the demand for social universal services will still be a problem as long as they aren't self-organised from below)

Are Dardot and Laval right to argue that the political imaginary of those who want to occupy the state in order to change it, is colonised by the old paradigm that reduces all politics to a sovereign, unitary and vertical state. But this is not the mainstream. The authoritarian Right itself, urging defensive-offensive myths, is reacting aggressively to the loss of national influence, but does not repeat the sacrificial pattern at all, dependent as it is on the markets.

So, if there are lots of marks of a concrete shift in the state - institution among institutions - how should we read the block of imagination?

Rather than emphasising the sovereign state, it is better perhaps to split the two concepts: the state is historically a machinic assemblage that can be disassembled, in a Foucauldian way, into practices and institutions, some with which alliances and coordination may be possible.

Sovereignty, instead, is a logic-ideological construct, a cognitive format with performative aims for understanding (and forcing) social powers and government practices into a coherent, unitary and ordered framework (which doesn't admit antinomies or anomalies). A logic-ideological structure that takes from the legal lexicon and logic the imperative of order, predictability, coherence and therefore verticality; in a reciprocal conditioning: public law as language of politics exists insofar as it has been able to give its own form to the concrete practices of government.

It might be of some interest - but it is beyond the discussion of Dardot and Laval's book - to ask whether this format of *reductio ad unum* is so persistent: either because it secularises theocratic monism or, more radically, because it 'repeats' the logical pattern of Western logical-linguistic representation: the Exception -mechanism (the Master Signifier) required to order a sequence of differences into a Whole. In this latter case (beyond the mysticism of domination, which however repeats its logic) it would be inherent in the symbolisation process required to identify a subject, political or otherwise. Even in a municipal organisation, or in a common, is it not the symbolic framework that "represents" the converging (not necessarily identitary) of *plures* on a project, a management of the common? If such is the case, it is rather to think about very new forms of organisation to rule this process.

In short, it is important, I think, to stress that the logic of transcendent unifying is the very logic of representation: to be taken or left, as Deleuze, who tried to leave it,

well knows. According Lacan, it's the framework in which any signifier unifies a Whole, the outcome of which is always a failure, always a hole. (Failure, however, becomes the active driver of political change).

The problem, therefore, is whether or not it is possible to avoid the symbolic logic of the *reductio ad unum*, which not only rules politics, but rules the whole symbolic.

Of course, this does not mean that a monolithic state is needed: it is possible, it is even required, to multiply the transcendences by shifting from the logic All/Exception (proper to sovereignty) to the logic of *pas tout*. Multiple transcendences, which are always open to change, means more bottom up social institutions.

What is amazing is that this logic of *pas tous* (for Lacan) is that of women.