"Power to" or "power over"?: rethinking State strength

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For a structure so often criticized for its rigidity and caricaturized as stale and inept at adapting to changes in its environment, it is intriguing to note the almost continuous process of state reform that has been implemented over the past couple of decades in a large number of countries. Both the internal structures of the state as well as its role in society has changed probably more profoundly during the past couple of decades than perhaps ever before. The previously resourceful state delivering extensive services and pursuing rather obtrusive and interventionist policies is today busy downscaling many of those programs and assuming a more subtle and regulatory role.

In order to get a handle on these changes, this paper will look at the general objectives and strategies of three different types of state reform, state-centered reform, market-based reform and participatory reform. These three models will then be assessed with regard to their impact on state strength, or, more correctly, to how they portray and reproduce state strength. As the role of the state in governance has become a frequently employed approach in analyses of state strength, the paper assesses how different types of state reform affects that particular aspect of state strength. The paper departs from a discussion on how the focus of mainstream political science on the state has changed during the past couple of decades, from a focus on institutional capability towards a focus on collaborative capacity. Following that, we will compare the three types of state reform. The last section of the paper summarizes the discussion and assesses the utility of traditional state models in understanding contemporary state reform.

Understanding the role of the State in governance

It is interesting to note that the renewed interest in the state among political scientists during the 1980s occurred almost parallel with these changes in the role of the state in society in most western capitalist democracies. Social scientists who sought to "bring the state back in" (Evans et al., 1985; for a critique, see Almond, 1988), had to adopt a historical approach almost by default. The role of the state, by most accounts, has been effectively undercut from above, by changes in the international arenas along with the globalization of markets; from below, by subnational pressures for devolution and autonomy; and from within, as a result of deteriorating public finances (Pierre and Peters, 2000).

The main consequence of this discrepancy between the new *Leitmotif* of the academic debate concerning the role of the state on the one hand and what states in the real world were transforming themselves into on the other has been a growing need to reconsider existing models of the state and to search for new such models that can inform contemporary analyses of the state. Certainly, much has been accomplished in this respect although even a quick glance at the literature suggests that there exists substantive disagreement about how these new models should be conceptualized and what should be their main focus. Some have looked at the changing role of the state in a governance perspective to help bridge the gap between theory and actual performance of states (Kooiman, 1993; Peters, 2001; Peters and Savoie, 1995; Pierre, 2000; Pierre and Peters, 2000, 2004; Rhodes, 1996). The role of state structures in governance is seen as a variable rather than as a given; indeed, an important contribution of the governance perspective is that it converts the role of the state in governing from a

Constitutional postulate to an empirical question. To be sure, this approach to the state in governance of the economy is since long established (Campbell et al., 1991; Hollingsworth et al., 1994).

A different strand of thought takes a more definitive view on these issues and maintains that the state as we know it is destined to decline, to be replaced by increasingly comprehensive and powerful international institutions on the one hand and increasingly autonomous and internationally positioned cities and regions on the other (Camilleri and Falk, 1992; Reich, 1991; but see Navari, 1991). The state, according to this line of thought, was historically critically important in bringing about territorial integrity, political democracy and welfare state programs. With those accomplishments either firmly entrenched in the political culture (as is the case with political democracy in large parts of the world; Lane and Ersson, 1994) or no longer sustainable due to the fiscal crisis of the state (as seems to be the fate of the welfare state in most of western Europe), current nation states find it increasingly difficult to legitimize their role.

From a third analytical vantage point, finally, the New Public Management wave of administrative reform offers a different take on issues related to state transformation and change. NPM could be described as an attempt to roll back the role of political actors by opening up for markets inside the public sector and according politicians a goal-setting role without operative responsibilities. In some ways, this strategy of state reform echoes March and Olsen’s observation that the policy system has to some extent been divorced from the representative system in the contemporary state (March and Olsen, 1995). NPM should be seen as market-based state reform, as we will discuss later in this paper, although it must be noted that NPM has significant ramifications for the exchange between state and society more broadly as well. That said, it is important not to conflate the NPM perspective with the governance perspective since they offer different accounts of the role of the state and also different models of state reform and its objectives (Peters and Pierre, 1998).

Despite significant theoretical and conceptual differences between these different views on the state, however, there are also some important commonalities among these perspectives. One such recurrent pattern is that-with some variation-state-driven models are believed to offer less analytical mileage than society-centered analytical models of the changing role of the state. In the political economy literature, neo-Marxist scholars have consistently seen the state as subordinate to the economic system (Middlemass, 1975; Miliband, 1969; Jessop, 1982; Offe, 1984, 1985; Ronge and Schmieg, 1973), although that view frequently seems to have been more an artifact of society-centered theoretical postulates than a result of empirical inquiry; given the theoretical points of departure, the scope of variation in results becomes extremely narrow. The most significant change over the past few years is that also liberal models of political economy have to a growing extent come to see the state as embedded in, rather than conceptually and empirically distinct from, the economy. Given this change in perspective, one of the major challenges has been to conceptualize autonomous state action and autonomy in an era of globalization, fiscal pressures and increasingly volatile private capital (see e.g. Evans, 1995).

This way of looking at the drivers of state change is surprisingly similar to that of the governance perspective or the New Public Management. In all three perspectives, the emphasis is on solving political failures rather than market failures. This objective of reform is obviously most predominant in NPM but much of the governance literature too argues that since the contemporary state has been deprived of important levers and-more importantly-faces a much more complex environment, the key objective of reform should not be a more encroaching and intervening state but a more coordinating one. If the state cannot govern society because society is becoming ungovernable, it is foolhardy to devise reform that seeks to make the state powerful enough to govern. It goes without saying that underneath this standpoint lies a normative argument about the broader role of the state in society and in markets.

Another similarity among the three models is that Constitutional capabilities are assumed to explain less and less of states´ capabilities to govern society. Whatever capabilities states have in the globalized economy they have generated from different forms of shared resources with other actors. The state, in this perspective, trades some of its control over formal political power in order to secure access to resources held either by private capital, organized interests, other states, or global institutions. This, in turn, leads us to conceptualize state capabilities and state strength as something relative rather than as something absolute, derived from Constitutional mandates (Hall and Ikenberry, 1989; Nordlinger, 1982; Swank, 1992).

A third similarity, finally, seems to be a recognition that states are no longer the most powerful actors in economic and distributive terms, not even in their own territory. What has become increasingly obvious during the past decade or so is the tremendous extent to which the powers of the state-defined either as control over legitimate force or as control over authoritative institutions and decisions-need to be sustained by financial resources in order to be effective. If we for a second reconsider David Easton's (1979:50) classical definition of "political interactions" as "the authoritative allocation of values for a society" it soon becomes obvious that there are a growing number of multinational corporations allocating "values" well matching the gross national product of many small countries in ways which do not qualify as "authoritative" in the eastonian sense but which nonetheless have an impact on society which is as penetrating as the "authoritative allocation of values" conducted there, if not only more so (Maier, 1987).

These elements of the current discussion about the state and its ability to govern society are part of a convergence between the state-centered and society-centered approaches. However, much as we would like to think that this convergence represents an enhanced understanding of the state we must also recognize that they have not taken us much further than previous theories of the state (Rockman, 1989). Despite-or perhaps because of-the wide variety of perspectives we can employ on the state we have not been able to take the analysis beyond the nominal variable level. We still seem to be unable to develop a sophisticated typology of states with regard to their role in economic development. While there seems to be some consensus on different types of states with regard to one of these dimensions, for instance distinguishing between "strong states" and "weak states" (Atkinson and Coleman, 1989; Krasner, 1978)-a consensus which will be challenged later in this paper-we are much less able of clustering states with regard to their characteristics on several dimensions.

We have also for a very long period of time had a static and imprecise image of the relationship between the state and society. The past decade or so has witnessed profound changes both in the economy and in the political sphere. Markets have become increasingly detached from national economies; the deregulation of financial markets have deprived nation states most of its regulatory capabilities vis-à-vis these markets; and, indeed, the emerging global nature of economic interactions seems to place the economy at a different level than the nation state. The currently predominant perspective on state-market exchange seems to be that a new political economy must be conceptualized and thought of as an international political economy. If previous theories of political economy were "horizontal", i.e., they described different models of interaction and exchange between the state and markets at a national level (Caporaso and Levine, 1992), the next generation of such theories need to be "vertical", i.e., describing the relationship between nation states and global markets (cf. Stopford and Strange, 1991).

However, not everyone agrees with this fairly bleak image of the state and its centrality in contemporary governance. Much of the current globalization was propelled by political decisions, primarily those implemented by the neo-liberal, deregulative regimes in the United States and Britain during the 1980s. While the argument could well be made that for most industrialized states the relaxed control over markets was a response to demands from the domestic business community, the initial wave of deregulation was set off by the U.S. and the U.K., forcing other capitalist states to follow suit in order to sustain competitive advantages (Boyer and Drache, 1996; Hirst and Thompson, 1996; Kapstein, 1994). Interestingly, this perspective on globalization and economic liberalization echoes the basic tenor of the political economy debate of the "pre-globalization" literature, i.e. that domestic political economies are integrated systems of political and economic action aiming at strengthening the competitiveness of the system as a whole, not just the corporate side of the equation (Hall, 1986; Hall and Soskice, 2001; Katzenstein 1984, 1985; Porter, 1990; Zysman, 1983).

It is perhaps not customary to approach the issue of state reform from the perspective of globalization and changes in the international political economy. However, as we will see in a minute, these developments have set in train a change in the way we look at what constitutes state strength. Since administrative reform to a large extent revolves around the issue of how to make the state and the public sector a more efficient and responsive structure and actor in governance, there is a close linkage between these overarching changes in the centrality of the state and the internal restructuring of state structures. Equally important, we need to assess state reform against the backdrop of the emerging role of the state in contemporary governance.

Beyond "strong states" and "weak states"

We have traditionally had a fairly clear idea about what constitutes "strong states" and "weak states". However, as soon as we focus the discussion on the changing roles of states in economic development and governance more generally it becomes clear that their ability to facilitate effective governance is not primarily derived from their strength. Instead, those states which have proven able to play these roles most efficiently seems to be those states that may not be strong states in the traditional sense of the concept but rather states that combines some degree of institutional insulation and autonomy with a large number of points of contacts with the surrounding society (see e.g. Katzenstein, 1985; Pierre and Peters, 2005; Porter, 1990). Traditionally "strong states" have been seen as possessing an institutional capacity to impose losses on segments of society by implementing discriminatory policies.

This way of looking at state strength opens up for the complexity underlying that concept. On the one hand, the approach suggested by Evans et al. (1985) implies that strong states are less able of responding to changes in their environment, hence smaller and weaker states come out winning in the global competition. On the other hand, it also seems clear that in many cases strong states have been more apt to facilitate a coordinated mobilization and fusion of public and private resources and leading the process of economic development. Japan is the obvious illustration of this theory (cf. e.g. Johnson, 1982).

State strength is determined at least as much at the societal level as within the state itself. This is the case in the state’s relationship with economic actors whose compliance is more negotiable and contextual compared to most other policy targets. Peter Gourevitch (1986:238) puts this nicely:

> The strong state is one with the political support to be strong, a state with the compliance or enthusiasm of at least some societal actors that support the actions of strength. When that support disappears, so does state strength.

The societal base of state strength is critical to understanding state reform, as we will see below, as it highlights a governance perspective on the state. Different models of state reform affect state-society relationships in different ways. Gourevitch is far from alone in advancing this perspective on state strength (see, e.g., Hall, 1986; Migdal, 1988; 2001; Zysman, 1983) but very few have linked state reform to this particular aspect of state strength. The governance perspective helps us understand how states can achieve important political objectives through other means than traditional, coercive policy instruments. Clarence Stone’s (1989) classic distinction between “power over” and “power to” offers a good illustration of the various channels and instruments available to the state in ensuring societal compliance for its policies. “Power to” highlights the governance perspective on political clout; end results matter more than agency.

This argument suggests that we need to differentiate more clearly between the internal and external strength of the state and we need to know more about the relationship between these two dimensions of states. States can be highly vertically integrated systems of institutions, offering policy makers full control over implementing institutions and subnational governments, and at the same time be inefficient in their exchange with society. Indeed, there is a case to be made for a negative relationship between internal and external state strength; the tighter the system of government the more rigid and top-controlled its exchange with economic actors and the less efficient will the state be in the process of governance (Pierre and Peters, 2005).

Let us now, against the backdrop of this very brief discussion about different ways to think about state strength, look more closely at three different types of state reform to see how they may affect the particular type of state strength that is derived from a collaborative form of state-society relationship.

State-centered reform

State-centered reform aims at altering the structures and processes of the state so as to make it work better. This, coupled with market-based reform (see below) has been the focus of administrative reform throughout the Western world for the past couple of decades. Typical examples of state-centered reform include the creation of agencies or quangos (Pollitt and Talbot, 2003). This type of reform would also include decentralization and deconcentration which has been another Leitmotif in administrative reform.

The common denominator of these different reform objectives and strategies has been partly a belief in separating policy from operation and partly a desire to increase transparency and accessibility of the public sector. Also, to some extent this type of reform marks a growing skepticism with the uniform types of services which the public sector previously excelled in. Citizens are believed to want a more customer-attuned service, something which requires decentralized government and service production. Space forbids a closer evaluation of this reform. It appears clear that decentralization has been effective in fostering closer contacts between political institutions at subnational levels and their external environments. Also, much of the decentralization and deconcentration was implemented during the 1980s and it appears as if central governments now have gradually learned how to achieve some degree of vertical policy coordination (Peters, 2001).

It should be noted that state-centered reform does not aim at weakening the role of the state in governance but rather to make the state more apt in performing that role. In some ways, the overall objective of this reform could be described as a strategy to update the machinery of the state to match changes in its external environment over the past couple of decades. That said, in some countries decentralization has also been driven by a desire in central government to "hive off" administrative and financial responsibilities for various public service programs.

How have these reforms affected the state itself? Have they meant a strengthening or a weakening of the state? Agencification and decentralization both tend to deprive government of some political and administrative levers; they both make it difficult for the state to pursue policies aiming at ensuring equal standard across the country, or to implement similar policies across policy sectors. But that is not the same as saying that these types of reform have weakened the state. If anything, these types of reform have produced an institutional arrangement which facilitates some models of public policy while it prevents other forms of policy, i.e. the policy emphasis has shifted from objectives of equal standard and uniformity to flexible service production and increased local (or sectoral) responsiveness. Thus, these reforms create institutional arrangements that, all else being equal, increase the points of contact between state and society and also allows frontline bureaucrats and operative staff to engage more directly in communication with societal actors. Thus, these reforms have probably contributed to the state's collaborative capacity and strengthened the role of the state in governance. The downside to the reform has been a growing challenge of vertical and horizontal coordination as decentralization and agencification both could be seen as centrifugal models of state reform which creates a distance between decision makers and the operative elements of the organization.

Market-based reform

The second type of state reform we will discuss is market-based reform. This type of reform presents itself in many different guises although different versions of New Public Management reform are the most common. The paper will not rehearse the elements of such reform as it should be well-know material to most readers (see, for instance, Osborne and Gaebler, 1992; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2001).

To understand the ramifications of this type of reform on state capacity we need to reminds ourselves of the distinction between the role of the state as a producer of services on the one hand and its role as a regulator on the other. New Public Management as a strategy of administrative reform tends to focus on the former role of the state-the service-producing role. Not very surprisingly, NPM advocates often show (or at least purport to show) that bringing in markets into the public sector service production can enhance effectiveness and efficiency. However, the literature is almost quiet on how NPM can be implemented in the other sphere of the public sector, i.e. the sector where political institutions implement the law and, overall, act as legal authorities. Adhering to due process and allowing for transparency and political accountability are objectives which do not fit the NPM vernacular very well.

This would not have been a problem was it not for the fact that the role of government in governance is not that of a producer but that of a regulator. Political institutions are critical to governance because they warrant political legitimacy to the process; to be sure, governance without any political presence is almost impossible to justify from a political and democratic point of view. In networks or public-private partnerships, political actors provide a gateway into the political process and also serve as channels of political input. Their key role is not to emulate the roles of corporate actors but rather to complement that role by offering the necessary political, democratic and institutional underpinnings of the network or partnership.

The extent to which market-based, NPM-style administrative reform strengthens or weakens these roles of political institutions in governance cannot be assessed on a general level. That said, since of the keystones of such reform is to downplay the role of elected officials in the public sector and to "let the managers manage" (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992), there is a tendency in NPM to weaken the role of those actors and institutions that are critical to some models of governance. By making these actors weaker in the internal processes of the state, they will also be weaker externally to the state.

Participatory reform

Participatory reform has become somewhat of a reform fad in recent years. The emphasis on participatory objectives has, for instance, become an important theme of reform in some of the Scandinavian countries. In administrative reform, notions of relaxing hierarchies and providing front-line staff with extensive autonomy vis-à-vis higher echelons of the organization have been integral to the larger objective of increasing the service performance of the public sector. Also, there has been a rapidly growing interest in devising models for users of public services to have an input on the design of those services. Participatory reform can have two different types of participation in mind. One such objective is to reform the state in ways which enhance the opportunities for public-sector employees to engage more actively in the governance of the public sector organizations (Peters, 2001). The other type of participation is that which encourages users and clients to become engaged in the production of those services.

To some extent, participatory reform poses a challenge to the historical model of aggregate, collective participation such as we have seen taking place in political parties, trade unions or in groups of organized interests. By supplementing participatory reform with customer choice in service sectors such as medical care or education, the individual client or customer is empowered, although this is to some extent at the expense of more traditional channels of political demand.

From one analytical vantage point, this type of state reform appears to be rather neutral in terms of its ramification on the role of the state in governance. Certainly, the increasing exchange between the public and private spheres of society which this reform seeks to create should have many positive consequences for facilitating governance. But these exchanges are highly selective and, for the most part, more driven by self-interest than concerns about the public good. Users involved in boards and committees in the public sector have little information (beyond their own personal interests) about the public's needs and demands. And even if they had that information, it remains an open question to what extent they would voice demands unless they were not consistent with personal interests. The role of users and clients should not be seen as a democratic role but as one in which a small, disaggregated segment of society can present their views on the services they use.

Thus, participatory reform is conducive to a particular role of government in governance-the distributive role-but it is of little help in providing the public tout court with an alternative avenue towards involvement in the process of defining collective goals.

Conclusions: Reproducing state strength or weakening the state?

The three different types of state reform briefly discussed in this paper are not mutually exclusive and tend to be implemented alongside each other, as Guy Peters has pointed out (Peters, 2001).
From the analysis earlier in the paper it is difficult to escape the impression that in order for the state to function properly in governance, it cannot be subjected to too far-reaching reform, particularly with a market or participatory orientation. This is however not to suggest that current models of governance are elitist models of governance; if anything, it is merely proof of the continuing dilemma in designing good and effective governance in an era of dismantling public and elective office (Suleiman, 2003). In a similar vein, March and Olsen (1995) suggest that there has been a separation of the democratic system and the policy system of the state, something which would lend further support to the notion that long-term sustainable governance requires some degree of control of elected officials in order to be transparent and accountable.

The basic argument that we have been entertaining in this paper is that models of state reform which historically were implemented to strengthen political institutions may be counterproductive in terms of how they impact the emerging role of the state in contemporary governance. By a similar token, reforms which in a previous political and analytical context would have been described as detrimental to state strength may in fact have a positive influence on the ability of the state and its institutions to forge coalitions with key societal actors.

The debate on how best to reform the state has been divorced from the debate on what we want the state to do. This is unfortunate as it is almost common knowledge that any organizational analysis must depart from what the organization is supposed to do and what should be its objectives. To the extent that there is a linkage between function and structure it is an implicit one in which function follows form. The "hollow state" is a state largely unable to implement coercive and interventionist policies. The market-embracing and neo-liberal model of state reform thus effectively prevents the state from implementing policies that are not themselves neo-liberal and market-embracing.

The search for the optimal model of government in governance is not altogether unlike the pursuit of the "holy grail" of administrative reform. Such reform, it has been argued (Peters, 2001; Suleiman, 2003), has not only changed the internal processes of the state but also the relationship between the state and the polity. The next wave of administrative reform should depart from a debate on what should be the role of government in governance. From there, we should be in a better position to assess the virtues of competing models of state reform.

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