

# **Towards a Political Ontology of State Power: a Comment on Colin Hay's Article**

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## **Abstract**

This article offers some critical realist, strategic-relational comments on Colin Hay's proposal to treat the state as an 'as-if-real' concept. The critique first develops an alternative account of ontology, which is more suited to analyses of the state and state power; it then distinguishes the 'intransitive' properties of the real world as an object of investigation from the 'transitive' features of its scientific investigation and thereby provides a clearer understanding of what is at stake in 'as-if-realism'; and it ends with the suggestion that a concern with the modalities of state power rather than with the state per se offers a more fruitful approach to the genuine issues raised in Hay's article and in his earlier strategic-relational contributions to political analysis.

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Colin Hay is correct to note the problematic character of the concept of the state. Many are the attempts, especially in political science, to dismiss it on various ontological, epistemological, and methodological grounds. Yet, as Jens Bartelson (2001) shows, the concept tends to re-enter, in other guises, the writings of those who dismiss it. Hay does not belong to the dismissive camp. Instead he seeks to explain the problematic character of *the state* (and its concept) mainly on ontological grounds and, thus armed, argues for the heuristic power of the state as an 'as-if-real' concept. At the end of a sometimes convoluted argument, however, Hay arrives, without fully acknowledging it, at a political ontology of *state power* as a social relation rather than at a political ontology of the *state* as a structural entity. This conclusion is consistent with his earlier work on structure-agency and state theory and, I suggest, starting from state power would have provided him with a more direct route to solving the ontological puzzle of the state and state effects.

### **Ontology/ontologies**

Ontology has two referents, which are both present but not clearly distinguished in Hay's argument. It can refer, first, to the nature and properties of being or existence and the categorial structure of reality. This involves relatively foundational, transhistorical questions. Hay operates in these terms when he introduces three accounts of reality: philosophical realism, philosophical constructivism, and 'as-if-realism'. The general issue of structure-agency dialectics also belongs here. However Hay suggests 'the existential status of the state, [...] as an ontological matter, is likely to prove insoluble' (2014: xxx). Thus he rejects attempts to 'ontologize the state' in favour of efforts 'to demonstrate and defend the value and insight to be gained from the use of the concept of the state as an analytical abstraction' (2014: xxx, xxx). Accordingly much of his analysis relates to another level of ontological investigation, defined by Jonathan Lowe as 'the set of things whose existence is acknowledged by a particular theory or system of thought' (1995: 634). This involves more specific theoretical issues and is inherently more pluralistic (cf. Jessop 1990: 11-13). Hay operates in these terms when he considers different

approaches to the nature and properties of the state (including the claim that it does not exist) and assesses their analytical purchase.

In addressing ontology in the first sense, Hay rejects philosophical realism (also known as critical realism) and philosophical constructivism in favour of an 'ontological as-if-realism'. Critical realism makes two claims that are relevant here. First, it posits a stratified world in which *real mechanisms* generate effects at the level of the *actual*, evidence for which may exist at the level of the *empirical*. In these terms it asks what the world must be like for these effects to occur, positing or *retroducting* real mechanisms on this basis, and evaluating the evidence for the existence and operation of these mechanisms. Second, it distinguishes the intransitive and transitive moments of scientific inquiry. The intransitive refers to the external world as an object of scientific observation and, perhaps, experimental intervention; the transitive refers to the tools, techniques and practices of scientific communities as they seek to produce scientific knowledge about the external world. Both claims matter for political analysis but, in this section, I focus on the implications of the stratified nature of the natural and social worlds.

Critical realists too often tend to defend their position in general terms against other broad ontological approaches. But one cannot apply '*critical realism in general*' in scientific work – only *particular critical realist positions*, which belong to the second level of ontology (Jessop 2005). Yet Hay considers only philosophical realism *in general* and claims, wrongly, that it commits its state-theoretical adherents to the view that, by analogy with the gravity effects produced by the single underlying mechanism of gravity, the state is the single underlying mechanism that generates state effects. On this spurious basis he rejects philosophical realism for treating the state as 'a structural concept' (or mechanism) and backs this conclusion by criticizing the crude (stylized) Marxist view that the improbable persistence of capitalist social relations is explained, in part, through coordinated state policies whose coherence is guaranteed by the state *qua* 'ideal collective capitalist' (Hay 2014: xxx-xx; the same pseudo-explanation is also critiqued in Jessop 1982: 216-17 and *passim*). However, for critical realists, the 'real' need not comprise a single, gravity-like mechanism with causal powers that generates a corresponding set of 'actual' effects. Hay seems to concede this when he refers to the philosophical realist interest in the 'underlying

structural level of reality (comprised of a *series of structural entities* like the state) which underpins the surface level of appearance (comprised of things that are "actual") (Hay 2014: xxx, my italics). This begs the question whether the state is a just one 'structural entity' among others (outside *the* state) or could itself comprise a series of such entities and their interrelations.

In this sense, the analogy with gravity is misleading. The *real* can comprise diverse mechanisms that, through interacting tendencies and counter-tendencies in specific conjunctures produce *actual* effects that are the overdetermined (or contingently necessary) result of these particular interactions (Jessop 1982: 211-20; 1990: 11-13, 204-5). So it would be a courageous critical realist indeed who argued that the set of mechanisms that generated a heterogeneous set of 'state effects' could be categorized without further ado as 'the state', even if this were analysed as an 'assemblage' rather than a single structural entity. This would entail a fallacy of misplaced concreteness, that is, treatment of a complex set of social relations as if it were a physical entity endowed with powers (a 'thing') or a calculating agent with free will (a rational 'subject'). Ordinary language may sometimes suggest these possibilities but it is a rare state theorist who would endorse them.

### **The as if 'as if' real**

In addition to his rejection of philosophical realism for positing the state as a structural entity, Hay rejects the constructivist position that the state is a fictional 'non-entity' that may none the less have actual effects if agents orient their actions in light of this fiction. This critique is misleading. It is not the 'non-entity' that produces these effects but the actually existing fiction as an element of situated action. He then introduces his alternative. The state is neither really real nor purely imaginary: it is 'as-if-real'. This term has three possible meanings and Hay opts for the third.

First, agnostic realism infers (retroduces) the real from its effects but, without hard evidence for its existence, it must conclude that it is only *possibly real*. This would seem to make the 'ideal collective capitalist', previously rejected, possibly real. Second, sceptical as-if-realism accepts that the state is *not* real but emphasizes that to *assume* that it exists provides a useful synthetic or synoptic reference point for

political analysis. This position would probably be better described as *pragmatic* rather than sceptical (which, at least in philosophical terms, connotes the claim that certain kinds of knowledge are impossible) and is similar to mainstream economists' use of models as necessary simplifications.

Third, ontological as-if-realism, Hay's position, argues that the 'as-if-real' is rendered *real to analysts* by its effects. More clearly than in the other two cases, this position privileges what critical realists term the *transitive* moment of social science. Whereas 'agnostic as-if realists' are not certain that the real exists in the intransitive world but are inclined to assume that it does by virtue of its alleged effects, 'sceptical as-if realists' are certain that it does *not* exist (or, perhaps, are convinced that one cannot know whether or not it exists) but pretend that it does on pragmatic grounds, at least for some theoretical and/or practical purposes. In contrast, Hay argues that, in so far as positing the existence of the state in full knowledge that it is a simplifying abstraction is scientifically productive, this would justify treating it as an 'as-if-real' phenomenon. He argues that this position should not be interpreted from the viewpoint of lay actors and/or authorized political subjects who may orient their political actions in the light of ideas about the state, with practical effects that appear to them to confirm the reality of the state (Hay 2014: xxx-xx). Rather, central to Hay's argument is the open question about how useful social scientists find it to interpret and explain practices, processes, and effects in terms of the 'state' as an analytical or conceptual abstraction (Hay 2014: xxx). This open ontological question avoids the charge of misplaced concreteness because it refuses to treat the 'as-if-real' as if it were really real (Hay 2014: xxx-xx). Word play apart, it is clear that this approach does not commit the ontological 'as-if-realist' to agnostic possibilism or pragmatic pretence. This is because it concerns the *transitive features of scientific investigation*, not the *intransitive features of the world* studied by scientists. For the same reason, this approach does not commit her/him to a claim to have grasped the full complexity of the real. On the contrary, to posit more or less useful as-if-real entities enables her/him to cope with the very real impossibility of such omniscience and to reflect on the theoretical and practical limits as well as heuristic utility of her/his abstractions. Here, in other words, and paradoxically, Hay unwittingly deploys the critical realist distinction between the intransitive and transitive, which highlights the fallibility and incompleteness of knowledge about the real world and has served

to critique the 'ontic fallacy' that knowledge is a direct, unmediated relation between a knowing subject and the external world. But he cannot build on it because he has already dismissed philosophical realism and does not engage (here at least) with how different scientific paradigms and/or communities develop knowledge and, in particular, evaluate their assumptions and hypotheses.

### **Conclusion: towards a political ontology of state power**

In addressing the nature of the state, Nicos Poulantzas, building on Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci, posited that 'the state is a social relation'. Less elliptically, this implies that state power is the form-determined (institutionally-mediated) condensation of a shifting balance of forces oriented to the exercise of capacities and powers associated with particular political forms and institutions as these are embedded in the wider social formation (Poulantzas 1978). Philip Abrams (1988) adumbrated this position when he rejected the mystifying notion of the state as a unified structuring mechanism that actualizes the general will and argued that scholars should study how ideas about the nature and purposes of the state shape the exercise of state power in the context of the state system *qua* institutional ensemble. Pierre Bourdieu (2014) likewise analysed the 'collective fiction' of the state – a fiction with very real effects – as the path-dependent product of all struggles among different interests, the stakes in these struggles, and their very foundation in the state apparatus as the site of symbolic and coercive power.

All three positions (and similar ones also exist) suggest that starting from state power rather than the state provides a better entry-point to questions of political ontology. It invites immediate attention to: (1) the nature of the state as a heterogeneous institutional ensemble (comprising, minimally, a territory, apparatus, and population) that has no agency *per se* but does have various capacities and action-relevant biases inscribed in itself when considered as a strategic terrain; (2) the role of ideas about the nature and purposes of state power, or state projects, in creating the appearance that the state acts *as if* it were a unitary subject by orienting political subjects as they seek to coordinate heterogeneous powers and resources to enact and reproduce the state itself and to generate 'state effects' beyond it; and (3) the shifting balance of forces that are mobilized, organized and disorganized through

competing political imaginaries and state projects and how the uneven strategic terrain of the state outlining these ideas at the end of his article, Hay arrives at a critical realist as well as a strategic-relational position on the ontological specificities of *state power* rather than the state per se. And this is the context in which we can make sense of the political effectiveness of ideas about the state and the heuristic potential of the concept of the state.

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