

PLT120 Assessment Four: Is the State Dead?

1. The state is said to be “dead”. Evaluate the extent that this is true or false by assessing the role of the state in contemporary global politics.

The state as we know it today began its development with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, but only became a truly global system with the wave of decolonisation post-World War Two. Many perceive that the next ‘natural’ development is global governance. R. and J. Brinkman see “a sequential pattern starting with tribal governance and city-states, leading ultimately to [...] global states.”¹ Some argue that the state has become largely irrelevant in the modern world. In assessing such a claim, one must investigate the use of such discourse itself, before looking into the role of international governing bodies, such as the United Nations (UN), European Union (EU), as well as non-government organisations (NGOs). This leads to the consideration of the effects of globalisation and the issue of identity. Upon the study of these factors, it can be seen that although systems of international governance and collaboration have become significant, particularly through processes of globalisation, the state still lies at the heart of global politics. What appear to be supra-state forces, tend to function in ways that acknowledge, or are even bound by, the existing system of state sovereignty.

Current political discourse, which is often expressed by governments themselves, regularly proclaims that states’ monopolies are loosening in certain areas. Yet it would be a mistake to assume this is a sign of a dying state system. This rhetoric is not new; Bill Clinton in his 1992

¹ R. Brinkman and J. Brinkman, ‘Globalization and the Nation-State: Dead or Alive’ *Journal of Economic Issues*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2008, p.427.

US presidential campaign declared that “the era of big government is over.”² These kind of statements promote a sense of empowerment, with the implication of greater freedom. Yet Lake argues that Clinton’s employment of this idea, was a “convenient political cover allowing the candidate to eschew responsibility for vexing problems of social injustice and inequality.”³ This is a harsh assessment of Clinton’s politics, which may or may not be fair. Nevertheless, it reminds us discourse is not always a measure of reality. An example of this idea can be seen in deregulation and privatisation. These processes are often championed as a decrease in state power, but their instigation is often justified on economic grounds. By decreasing government responsibility in certain areas, more capital is freed for the government to use and further revenue is collected as market forces raise profits that are fed back into the state system.⁴ Snyder argues that “the practical uses of sovereignty in the international arena certainly have never matched the rhetoric. In practice, sovereignty has taken on a much more fluid and more pragmatic role.”⁵

State power is in some ways mitigated by international governing bodies such as the United Nations (UN) or the European Union (EU). However these organisations still operate with the state as their base unit and prime consideration. The United Nations was founded to protect peace *between states*; its 1942 charter stated its purpose to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.”⁶ Yet whether the UN has adapted to the contemporary world is a matter of great debate. New critical theories of International Relations often argue the UN

² R. Lake, ‘Bring Back Big Government,’ *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2002, p.815

³ Ibid., p.815.

⁴ Ibid., p.819.

⁵ F. Snyder, ‘Sharing Sovereignty: Non-State Associations and the Limits of State Power,’ *American University Law Review*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2004, p.386.

⁶ R. Hatto, ‘From Peacekeeping to Peacebuilding: the Evolution of the Role of the United Nations in Peace Operations,’ *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol. 95, no. 891, 2013, p.497.

“encodes the political hegemony of white, Western, liberalism rather than representing universally valid conceptions of human nature.”⁷ This would suggest that the UN is most significant for developed nations, however this is challenged by the fact that contemporary recognition as a state is synonymous with UN membership. This foundation of state sovereignty is problematic as it conflicts with a new concern with the notion of ‘human security.’ Although enforcing the upholding of human rights is now something seen to be part of the jurisdiction of the UN Security Council, direct action is often difficult to secure. This is not only because of the members’ veto powers, but also because UN enforcement is reliant on powerful Western states who are “wary of deploying their soldiers in missions that are of no great interest to them.”⁸

Grant and Keohane discuss how there is also a double standard in the enforced accountability of the UN, where generally it is only weaker states that are subject to international governance, while powerful states become solely enforcers.⁹ We can see this double standard played out in America’s ‘War on Terror.’ Kramer and Michalowski explain how the United States, in attacking Iraq, “invaded a sovereign nation without legal authorization from the international community,” which is a direct violation of UN law.¹⁰ Their ‘National Security Strategy,’ formed a tenuous link between the invasion of Iraq and protecting the US against Al Qaeda, and made an outright incorrect assertion about Iraq’s possession of weapons of mass destruction.¹¹ In another clear violation of UN rules of war, Amnesty International

⁷ Kramer and Michalowski p.447

⁸ R. Hatto, ‘From Peacekeeping to Peacebuilding: the Evolution of the Role of the United Nations in Peace Operations,’ p.511.

⁹ R. Grant and R. Keohane, ‘Accountability and Abuses of Power in World Politics’ *American Political Science Review*, vol. 99, no. 1, 2005, p.40.

¹⁰ Kramer, R., and R. Michalowski, ‘War, Aggression and State Crime: A Criminological Analysis of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq’ *The British Journal of Criminology*, vol.45, no.4, 2005, p.447.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.449.

estimates that over 10 000 civilians were killed during the first year of occupation.¹² The fact that America, despite being one of the key members of the UN, has faced no repercussions in international law, demonstrates the limits of such global governance. Although the US is no longer fighting in Iraq, it is still engaged in activities that would invite heavy scrutiny if undertaken by a state without elite privilege. Development of drone technology under the Obama administration and the new Defence Clandestine Service (DCS) which aims to expand espionage efforts beyond war zones are clear examples of this.¹³ Although the UN is an important forum where, theoretically, world-wide voices can be heard, its effects on state power are far from uniform.

Apart from global organisations, regional arrangements are also possible counterbalances of state power. Bieler and Morton argue that “it is increasingly possible to think in terms of a European form of state, a European statehood.”¹⁴ In some ways this makes sense; most of the EU shares a currency and allows free movement and trade across national borders. Yet Rosato argues that “the slow fraying of the Community that has been going on for a decade now will probably continue.”¹⁵ This is because, ultimately, each state chooses whether to be part of such ‘optional’ regional governance based on its own interests. The EU is intended to strengthen the financial position of Europe; when it is perceived to no longer perform this duty adequately, it is in danger of falling apart. The United Kingdom is currently assessing the merits of staying within the EU; the Conservative Party have made an election promise to hold

¹² Kramer and Michalowski, ‘War, Aggression and State Crime,’ p.451.

¹³ N. Turse, ‘The Decade of War to Come’ *Al Jazeera*, 1 July 2012, n.p.

¹⁴ A. Bieler and A. Morton, ‘The Will-o’-the-Wisp of the Transnational State,’ *Journal of Australian Political Economy*, no. 72, 2014, p.44.

¹⁵ S. Rosato, ‘Europe’s Troubles: Power Politics and the State of the European Project’ *International Security*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2011, p.86.

a referendum by 2017.¹⁶ While, the arguments presented by the Labour Party for staying are still about state interests; they argue that leaving the EU “would risk billions of pounds in lost profits, risk millions of jobs and would make Britain weaker, not stronger, in the world.”¹⁷ As such, while the EU is an important institution of transnational governance and is argued by many to be a positive force; its existence is still dependent upon the consensus of states.

Non-government organisations (NGOs), tend to be placed in a category of their own and seen as independent actors that hold government organisations to account. Grant and Keohane explain how NGOs are perceived to be “the ‘virtual representatives’ of publics adversely affected by other global power-wielders.”¹⁸ This is a potential of NGOs, especially in terms of raising global awareness, as we often see with organisations such as Greenpeace. Yet this is not a simple relationship. Sollis explains how within Central America during the 1970s, “national security considerations justified legislation to control the activities of development organisations.”¹⁹ This reminds us that without coercive power, the possibilities for NGOs have limits. The global trend in more recent times has been increased government support for NGOs, but this is also problematic. Nair discusses the case of India which has seemingly encouraged NGOs, yet she perceives that “there have also been attempts to curb NGOs by co-opting and funding them to fulfil a role” and as such exercising influence in non-government sectors.²⁰ Nair also points out in India, that despite apparent support, groups

¹⁶ Hickey, S., ‘Should we stay or should we go? The low-down on an EU exit’ *The Guardian*, 4 May 2015, n.p.

¹⁷ Ibid., n.p.

¹⁸ R. Grant and R. Keohane, ‘Accountability and Abuses of Power in World Politics,’ p.37.

¹⁹ P. Sollis, ‘Partners in Development? The State, Nongovernmental Organisations and the UN in Central America,’ *Third World Quarterly*, vol.16, no.3, 1995, p. 529.

²⁰ P. Nair, ‘Evolution of the Relationship Between the State and Non-Government Organisations: A South Asian Perspective’ *Public Administration and Development*, no.31, 2011, p.255.

“advocating structural and policy change” are still discouraged.²¹ This is not to say that NGOs are not significant global actors, just that they should not be seen as part a demise of states.

These organisations are part of the wider movement of globalisation that has had an enormous impact on international relations and has undoubtedly affected the role of states. Snyder argues that modern communications, multinational corporations and global trade has “made the old territorial State less powerful and less able to control its own citizens.”²² Globalisation has in some ways created international communities which limit opportunities for national indoctrination, as well as creating a sense of international support for common causes. Yet many of the most influential aspects of globalisation on world order, such as trade legislation, appear to be things governments consciously decide upon. Kong explains the link between North Korea’s closed economy and unwillingness to be part of global interactions, with its extreme poverty in contrast to South Korea’s development.²³ Yet being at the forefront of globalisation is not always just about choice. Much of the populations of poorer countries in the world have limited access to the technologies and opportunities that fuel global connectivity. Bieler and Morton remind us that globalisation is “situated within a global political economy characterised by uneven development.”²⁴ Yet Moore argues that “in large part because of the opportunities provided by late 20th century globalisation, power in weak states lies in the hands of elites;” who have little incentive to loosen control in ways which

²¹ Nair, ‘Evolution of the Relationship Between the State and Non-Government Organisations,’ 259.

²² F. Snyder, ‘Sharing Sovereignty: Non-State Associations and the Limits of State Power,’ p.388.

²³ T. Kong, ‘The Political Obstacles to Economic Reform in North Korea: The Ultra-Cautious Strategy in Comparative Perspective’ *The Pacific Review*, vol.27, no.1, 2014, p.73.

²⁴ A. Bieler and A. Morton, ‘The Will-o’-the-Wisp of the Transnational State,’ p.44.

would benefit the general population.²⁵ So while developed states may lose some ideological influence over their populations, globalisation does not signal the demise of the nation-state.

Despite the interconnectedness implied by globalisation, statehood is still significant in the identity of population groups. The existence of a state, is still the only clear measure of legitimacy and the vehicle for self-determination. This is most obvious in conflicts surrounding identity politics, which often occur when groups of people, bound by a particular ethnicity or culture, perceive themselves to be unrepresented or unduly ruled and as such attempt the formation of their own state. The process of decolonisation post-World War Two, which saw an explosion in the number of existing states, cemented the concept that possessing self-determination and distinct identity, meant the creation of a new state. Wendt argues that “nationalism may be in part ‘pri-mordial’ and thus inherent to societies’ self-conceptions as distinct groups.”²⁶ Much of the post-colonial state formation during the twentieth century ignored these identities, instead being based largely on past colonial boundaries, which has created contexts conducive to volatility and violence. Bereketgab explains how in Africa “identity-based conflicts with a view to seceding from the postcolonial state have become a widespread occurrence.”²⁷ Despite the idealised notion of a ‘global society,’ it is unlikely that people will stop trying to form themselves into distinct groups, especially amongst peoples under conditions of hardship with histories of oppression. There seems to be no ‘natural’ end point to claims for new state formation, because if all states are constructions, what clear measure do we have to allow some and exclude others? Currently, we can see the

²⁵ N. Moore, ‘Globalisation and Power in Weak States’ *Third World Quarterly*, vol.32, no.10, 2011, p. 1772.

²⁶ A. Wendt, ‘Collective Identity Formation and the International State,’ *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 88, no. 2, p.387.

²⁷ R. Bereketgab, *Self-determination and Secession: A 21st Century Challenge to the Post-colonial State in Africa*, Uppsala, Sweden: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2012, p.1.

implications of this in extremist organisations such as the self-titled 'Islamic State' who have come to define themselves in opposition to the 'other' of the neoliberal Western world.²⁸ Clearly statehood is not dead within the hearts and minds of people, when wars are fought over their formation and reformation.

It is easy to proclaim that 'the state is dead'; such statements appeal to attractive ideals of progression and liberation. Yet ultimately such rash judgements, although powerful rhetoric, do not reflect our contemporary reality. The United Nations, despite often being seen to be the cornerstone of our new world order where all countries take part in global democracy, is still reflective of the uneven systems of state power. Regional governance such as the European Union can be seen to be 'made' or 'broken' based on state interests, and non-government organisations have less power than it may initially seem. The conclusion drawn from this is that although globalisation has significant implications for states, the centre of governance and identity still resides within the state system. This perception of the role of states is important. Lake argues that "uncritical universal agreement on the irrelevance of the nation state under globalization may become a self-fulfilling prophecy that conceals important openings and opportunities for change."²⁹ On the other hand, it is also significant to know that although the state is not dead, this does not mean that it is indestructible. Although we are experiencing increasing international co-operation in contemporary world politics, states have never been truly independent. The very classification of statehood was a collaborative effort in the Westphalian treaty, as well as after the First and Second World

²⁸ M. Matei, 'The Intellectual Origins of Islamic Radicalism: Nationalist Jihadism Versus Global *Jihadism*' *Impact Strategic*, no. 3, 2010, p.32.

²⁹ R. Lake, 'Bring Back Big Government,' p.815.

Wars. The transformative powers of globalisation should make us aware that we have the power to change anything and everything.

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