

Is the Existence of a State Justified?

"Nothing is more surprising to those who consider human affairs with a philosophical eye, than to see the easiness with which the many are governed by the few, and to observe the implicit submission with which men resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers"

- Hume essays: Moral and Political (1741–1742) 'Of the First Principles of Government'.

"... A state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory"

- Max Weber, The Vocation Lectures: Science as a Vocation & Politics as a Vocation.

'Every Communist must grasp the truth, "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun"

- Mao Zedong: Speech to the Sixth plenary session of the Communist Party of China 1938.

JUSTIFYING THE STATE

Attempts by political philosophers to justify the state traditionally focus on an assumed "state of nature" which existed before the state in the sense we understand it today existed.

This leads to an ultimately futile discussion about human nature and how we would behave had the state not developed. Are we inherently aggressive or peaceful? Competitive or collaborative? Selfish or altruistic? Might game theory force us to behave contrary to our own inclinations and interests? (eg in the case of the prisoners' dilemma?)

Why futile? Because the state of nature does not exist, and probably never has done. If we discover a hitherto unknown people in Amazonia or New Guinea we inevitably find some form of organisation, either hierarchical or cooperative, which exercises authority over the members of the group. In particular, it is likely to exercise the power of life and death.

It is useful to consider the views of those who wish to abolish the state. These people can be loosely described as anarchists, though there are many differences in the type of society that they wish to see, and the methods they advocate to abolish the state.

First, a contribution from an anarchist who favours the development of a communist society in which the state has "withered away".

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CeAMZkHF6Go>

The transition to such a society would require:

1. The forced appropriation of privately owned wealth, without compensation, for use by the community.
2. The "defence of the revolution" (presumably from internal enemies as well as external).

Does not any organisation, whether it calls itself a state or not, that abrogates to itself such powers, in effect become a state? Using Weber's definition, surely it does. Anarchists are fond of pointing out that the "dictatorship of the proletariat" advocated by Marxists as a step towards a communist society inevitably leads to a "dictatorship of the party" in which self serving leaders and bureaucrats

use the power of the state for corrupt ends, but don't explain how the necessary steps towards the desired end point can otherwise be achieved without a "monopoly on legitimate violence".

Now let's look at the anarchism of the right, so called "anarcho capitalism".

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anarcho-capitalism>

Broadly, ancaps advocate the replacement of the state by other institutions that work on the basis of contractual relationships rather than any obligation to obey the state.

Unfortunately, most defenders of and critics of capitalism argue that the state and the capitalist system are mutually dependent. An important aspect of capitalism is "enforcement of contracts" which requires an institution that has the power to make people honour their contractual obligations and impose penalties if they don't. Apart from this, a modern capitalist society also requires agencies that can combat crime, imprison criminals, and defend against invaders. In reality most capitalist economies are highly regulated, and the state provides services that cannot easily be supplied by the market, such as social care, health care and so on.

Ancaps argue that these roles can be filled by private companies such as insurance companies, private security firms, and competing court systems.

However, as with anarchism of the left, doesn't this all depend on some overarching authority that can arbitrate disputes and issue punishments and penalties, using force if required? Libertarians advocate that the state should not "initiate" force, that is, force should only be used to defend individual rights, but this is merely to say which force is "legitimate" in the definition put forward by Weber. But then, libertarians are not anarchists.

Robert Nozick, for example, argues that some institution resembling the state would inevitably be required even by the most "pure" free market economy.

So, we are left with a justification of the state that seems rather weak - that is that a modern society can't exist without a state, even if we can't find any moral justification for its existence based on first principles.

Maybe that's the best we can do.

Neil.