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EDITORIAL

ANOTHER STATE OF MIND: RETHINKING THE STATE TO UNDERSTAND THE ‘RETURN OF THE STATE’¹

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‘But Gentlemen’, Don Gaetano said to the Minister and the Director, ‘I hope you’re not going to distress me by saying that the state still exists...Considering my age and all the trust I’ve always had in you it would be an unbearable revelation. I was so sure it didn’t exist anymore...’

L. Sciascia, *Todo Modo* (1974)

As Don Gaetano, one of the characters in Leonardo Sciascia’s novel *Todo Modo*, sarcastically was, many scholars of political phenomena could today be surprised by the news that the state is not dead yet. In fact, the whole of the twentieth century was marked by a series of recurring diagnoses that heralded the disappearance of the state, or at least its ‘crisis’. It re-emerged in the era of globalisation, the belief that the state was affected by an obsolescence destined to lead it to death cyclically spanned

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the entire twentieth century, even if, from time to time, the accents changed and the causes were seen in different phenomena.

In 1907, in the pages of *Le Mouvement Socialiste*, Edouard Berth —a supporter of revolutionary syndicalism and follower of the philosophy of George Sorel— emphatically greeted the death ‘of this fantastic, prodigious being who had such a colossal place in history’ — the state (quoted in Schmitt, 1972, p. 123). This diagnosis was shared by many scholars at the time. In 1908, for example, Léon Duguit wrote that ‘the personal and sovereign state is dead or is about to die’ (Duguit, 1911, p. 144). The following year, in his famous inaugural address on *The Modern State and its Crisis*, Santi Romano presented —albeit with different accents— a largely similar reading. After retracing the historical events that had led to the formation of the modern state, the Sicilian jurist formulated a rather gloomy diagnosis of its destiny: the state ‘which emerged from the French revolution,’ wrote Romano, was ‘too simple’ (1950, p. 318), and the parliamentary system built during the 19th century, due to this genetic limit, was totally inadequate in the face of the need to guarantee the representation of new economic and social groups.

In the two decades between the First and Second World Wars, the idea that trade unions constituted ‘new’ corporations destined to tear down the edifice of the modern state was in fact shared by a crowded group of observers of political transformations. Giorgio Del Vecchio, retrospectively examining the main stages of this long discussion, even concluded in 1933 that the statement on the ‘crisis of the state’ was now a truth so often repeated as to have become a ‘commonplace’ (Del Vecchio, 1933). The ‘crisis’ that the jurists of the first decades of the century were talking about did not concern the economic role of the state but mainly the image that nineteenth-century legal doctrine had built: social conflicts, the pressure of civil society, the rise of mass parties and the diffusion of ‘new corporations’ (i.e. workers’ unions) put into question the idea that the state was a monolithic entity and, furthermore, the belief that the law was the manifestation of the ‘unitary’ will of the state. The main cause that prompted the jurists of the early twentieth century to welcome the ‘crisis,’ and in some cases even the ‘death,’ of the state was the proliferation of economic and social groups and their claims, a proliferation that became even more evident in the time after the First World War, coinciding with the cycle of collective mobilisation that affected a large part of the Western world. The novelty that suggested the idea of a ‘crisis’ was provided by the fact that —as Del Vecchio summarised— ‘effectively autonomous collective organisations, whether of an economic or religious nature, or of any other nature’ internally elaborated ‘a order or a system of rules that are neither coherent nor harmonizable with those of the State, in-

deed even—in extreme cases— directly contrary to them' (Del Vecchio, 1933, p. 691). Furthermore, after the First World War, the creation of the League of Nations also deeply affected one of the characteristic aspects of the principle of state sovereignty because it seemed to create a superior constraint on the will of the state, especially regarding the 'right to wage war'. Additionally, as a reaction to this 'draining' of state power, Carl Schmitt proposed distinguishing the 'political' from the 'state' (1972).

If, at the beginning of the century, the state had appeared close to disappearing, starting at the end of the 1920s, this trajectory seemed to reverse itself: the pendular movement of history gave back to Hobbes's 'mortal God' its primacy over society and its citizens. Even if the jurists continued to reflect on the 'crisis of the state', the trends of world politics actually seemed to proceed in the direction of a massive 'return of the state', as Karl Polanyi acutely captured in *The Great Transformation*. The projects of a new corporate order gave way to the reality of regimes in which central political authority, far from vanishing, was significantly strengthened. Furthermore, the crisis that exploded in 1929 and the New Deal strengthened protectionist pressures and led to a contraction of international trade; in different ways, therefore, the state began to have an unprecedented driving role in the economic field. Finally, from the point of view of interstate dynamics, the difficulties of the League of Nations revealed the fragility of post-war illusions in the face of a growing conflict destined to fuel nationalism and culminate in the Second World War.

The discussions of the 'crisis' of the state did not end after the Second World War but returned with force, especially in the 1970s. Again, many saw the cause of the 'crisis' in the explosion of social conflicts, but the main issue did not concern the legal status of the state but rather the relationship between the state and the mixed economy of the post-war era. Indeed, many scholars, especially many neo-Marxists, argued that the Keynesian state (defined, for example, as an 'interventionist state' or a 'planner state') was no longer able to maintain its structural contradictions under a controlled market economy: the growing social complexity, spread of conflicts and growth of claims by a civil society in ferment had led to the growth of public spending, but the extraction of fiscal resources from society risked halting the process of capitalist accumulation and eroding the legitimacy of the political system among citizens (Altvater, 1973; Braunnhül, 1973; Clarke, 1977; Hirsch, 1974; Miliband, 1969; Negri, 1977; Offe, 1984; Poulantzas, 1968, 1969). While the cornerstone of this hypothesis was represented by the structural contradictions of the economy, other explanations concentrated instead on the cultural change that had taken place in Western societies and, in particular, in the

'silent revolution' that had invested the younger generations. In this case, therefore, the 'crisis' (which was, rather than a crisis of the state, a 'crisis of governability') had been caused directly by the explosion of social conflicts and of the requests sent by society to the State: this had caused an 'overload' that could have disastrous consequences if no corrections were made (Crozier, 1975). Between the seventies and eighties, there was also a lively discussion on the need to bring the state (and its autonomy) back to the center of theoretical reflection on political transformations (Block, 1980; Evans, 1985; Krasner, 1984; Lindblom, 1982; Mann, 1986; Mastropalo, 1981; Mitchell, 1991), but the outbreak of globalization and the beginning of the neo-liberal era changed the landscape very quickly.

The 'crisis of the state' that was discussed a few decades later, in the 1990s, had characteristics that were different from the previous ones. The entire 1990s seemed to be marked by the undisputed victory of the economy over politics and, above all, by the triumph of the market over the state. The thesis of the 'crisis' was naturally articulated from a multiplicity of different perspectives. Some analysts saw in the 'death' of state authority something like the announcement of a liberation of the forces of the global economy. Other observers, much less enthusiastically, saw in it the cause of a degradation of the living conditions of individuals and of society. Beyond specific assessments, the discussion on decline involved at least four different aspects of 'statehood' that seemed to be called into question by the globalisation process: i) the monopoly of legitimate force, ii) the 'sovereign' nature of the state institution, iii) the 'national' basis of the state, iv) the control of economic and financial flows. Under the first profile, many scholars argued that the state's monopoly on legitimate force was undermined by the growth of organised violence attributable to non-state actors (such as transnational criminal and terrorist organisations) (Kaldor, 1999; Van Creveld, 1999). On the second front, several observers argued that the role of the state was threatened by the authority of new supranational actors. In other words, a transformation was taking place in the Westphalian international system that took away from the state a part of the 'sovereignty' it had held in the past (Beck, 1998; Hardt & Negri, 2000; Robinson, 2001; Shaw, 2000). The third 'crisis' factor instead brought attention to the nexus between the nation and state: starting at the end of the 1970s, the emergence (especially in Europe) of claims brought forward by ethnic, linguistic and national minorities triggered processes of devolution, decentralisation and regionalisation that have involved almost all the countries of the European Union. The emergence of the 'meso-level' of government, also favoured by transformations in the productive structure of Western economies and by the redefini-

tion of the criteria for disbursing public expenditures, has thus fuelled the idea that the transfer of functions from the centre to the periphery also entailed a crumbling of state sovereignty to the advantage of sub-state bodies (Keating & Loughlin, 1997; Keating, 1998; Ohmae, 1995).

However, the debate was dominated above all by the fourth declination of the debate on the crisis of the state: in this case, the main threat to the sovereign state was seen in global flows, and especially in economic and financial flows. In this sense, although the idea of the erosion of the 'economic sovereignty' of states was often evoked, the principle of sovereignty operating in the interstate system was not, because the problematic aspect was actually related to the capacity of the state to exercise control over its own citizens, economic activities, transnational actors and, above all, its ability to extract resources capable of financing services and transfers. A similar thesis has even been articulated with notable differences in accents. However, at the basis of many positions that emerged above all in the 1990s was the basic idea that the set of processes brought under the effective (albeit equivocal) formula of 'globalisation' had come to challenge—in an almost inevitable way—the contemporary state, whose instruments of action are incapable of harnessing, controlling and regulating the flows of goods, people and capital. In this direction, Susan Strange has, for example, described the process of the 'retreat of the state' in an extremely effective way, focusing in particular on the extension of the real power of transnational economic actors (Strange, 1996). This dynamic implies, on the one hand, the disappearance of the foundations of the post-Westphalian interstate system and the emergence of an increasingly marked asymmetry between states and, on the other, the senescence of the instruments through which the state has been able until now to control and regulate the economic dynamics (Held, 1999; Sassen, 1996). In other words, the set of technological changes, transformations that have taken place in finance and international integration of the markets attack the very foundations of the state model of concentration of power, rapidly eroding all the functions exercised by the old modern state and, to an even greater extent, those carried out by the twentieth-century welfare state, such as control of currency, intervention in the economy, the adoption of anti-cyclical policies and the introduction of social safety nets (Kapstein, 1994; Rosecrance, 1999).

On each of the fronts of discussion, however, convincing responses emerged, which did not, however, limit themselves to recognising how, all things considered, states in recent years have not disappeared at all and have, on the contrary, remained the main subjects of domestic and international politics. From the point of view of international

politics, it could be observed that, despite the apparent ‘emptying’ of the political and military powers of states, the number of state units has not decreased at all in the last twenty years (Krasner, 2001). On the contrary, the end of the Cold War—which also seemed to initiate a process of more intense globalisation—has rather contributed to a considerable increase in the number of states, and even in requests to become independent states made by regions or territories both in Europe and the rest of the world (Bellocchio, 2006). In this sense, the process that characterises the period after 1989 seems rather configurable as a dynamic of the ‘fragmentation’ of the international system not at all in contradiction with the logic of ‘globalisation’ (Clark, 1997). As far as the actual power of the state to govern social processes, to ‘contain’ and regulate economic dynamics or the communication flows themselves, every independence claim tends to lead to the formation of a new state and, therefore, to the recognition of the existence of a new state unity by the international community. As Carl Schmitt observed at the end of the 1970s, commenting on the words of Santiago Carrillo, every twentieth-century revolution paradoxically aimed at adopting a ‘legal’ form offered precisely by the form of state organisation. Precisely for this reason, although the *jus publicum Europaeum* is now in decline, ‘the State is by no means dead, on the contrary, it is more necessary and alive than ever’ (Schmitt, 1978).

Of course, the politically relevant players at the global level—i.e., the subjects who manage to influence the choices of national governments—are probably more numerous than in the past and involve economic players, transnational organisations and the set of realities included in the so-called ‘global civil society’. However, international politics has continued to be, in the first place, the scene in which states move—states obviously more or less endowed with economic, technological and military resources but all ‘sovereign’ by the very fact of being defined as such by the international community and moving as *magni homines* in the theatre of world politics.

Even the thesis of the victory of the global market over the state has found a series of rather fierce opponents who have questioned its most basic assumptions and who, above all, have called into question the actual causal order that binds ‘globalisation’ to ‘end of the state’ (and makes the second descend from the first) (Barrow, 2005; 2016; Bonefeld & Psychopedis, 2000; Bonefeld & Holloway, 1996; Bonefeld, 2014; Clarke, 1991; Mann, 1997; Panitch, 1996; Streeck, 2014). In some studies, Linda Weiss has, for example, strongly opposed the idea that the growing openness to the international market necessarily determines a decrease in the power of states; many indicators—relating to social spending, the tax burden and commercial and industrial strategies—do not

seem to confirm, at least in general terms, the thesis of the weakening of the state vis-à-vis the market, while some responses to the social and economic effects of globalisation even involve an expansion in the role of public institutions (Weiss, 1998; 2003). More generally, it has been underlined that, as the sizes of states are indispensable for globalisation and for the construction of a world market, even their functions and operating methods change over time.

In the 30 years that have passed since the end of the Cold War, however, the trajectories of the discussion on the fate of the state have significantly changed. Above all, the last decade has been marked by a progressive 'return' on the scene of the state itself, that subject that, in the eyes of many, had appeared in 'crisis', in 'decline' or even destined for inevitable obsolescence. Already in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, John A. Hall predicted that that event would trigger a significant strengthening in state power, not only in the United States but in all countries involved in the fight against terrorism (Hall, 2001). Indeed, on that occasion, attacks planned and carried out by non-state organisations had the effect of leading the state to be 'rediscovered'—especially the importance of solid state structures capable of maintaining public order—also by those liberal authors who, like Francis Fukuyama, had long underestimated its role (Fukuyama, 2004). However, it was the long sequence of events inaugurated by the global financial crisis that brought the state back to the centre of the discussion. In January 2010, the *Economist* announced, for example, the return of the old Leviathan, that Big government that during the 1980s and 1990s seemed to have been definitively defeated. Several analysts began to point out how, in the 21st century, a substantial share of large companies are actually represented by companies directly or indirectly owned by sovereign states—in particular, but not only, in the energy sector (Bremmer, 2012)—so that the idea of a 'state capitalism' is in vogue (Economist, 2012; Alami & Dixon, 2021; Alami, 2021).

The decade that began with the economic crisis, continued with the explosion of 'populist' protest and culminated with the pandemic emergency then confirmed rather unequivocally that the state was not dead and that, in many ways, it was instead becoming more important than never. The response to the Covid-19 pandemic has, in fact, seen an astonishing expansion in the role of the state, both in terms of related health policies and measures to contain infections and in terms of support for economic activities. Rather quickly, the neo-neoliberal agenda that had guided global elites for three decades was shelved, as national governments and supranational bodies began to recognise the need to 'take back control' of global economic flows, 'shorten' the value chain, 'rethink' globalisation and once again assign the state a pivotal role in economic

policy. *Foreign Policy* wrote that, after the long neoliberal season, we had all become 'statist' (Crabtree et al., 2020), and in general, 'many analysts and pundits around the world have been predicting the "return of the state" after what is generally seen as many years of neoliberal retreat' (van Apeldoorn & de Graaf, 2022, p. 306).

In his recent book, Paolo Gerbaudo argued that we are entering a new ideological season: a 'neo-statist' era in which the entire political debate will revolve around the tasks of the state and its ability to 'regain control' of global flows. In other words, if in the neo-liberal era the state was characterised in decidedly negative terms, such as 'parasitic', 'unproductive', 'expensive' and 'corrupt', most political forces must now return to a much more positive state because it is necessary to respond to the feelings of insecurity, anxieties and fears of citizens. In this way, we then return, at least on an ideological level, to the image of an innovator and investor, protector and planner — that is, a state capable of responding to the uncertainty and fears of the 21st century (Gerbaudo, 2021; 2022).

It is probably too early to establish whether the neo-statist ideology really corresponds to a 'return of the state', but it is easy to predict that the discussion on the 'return' of the state will continue for a long time. It is, however, certain that to understand the logic of this (presumed or real) 'return of the state', it is essential for us to equip ourselves with a new theory of the state capable of addressing many unresolved issues and avoiding the risk of recovering old theoretical models, which could reproduce fatal optical distortions. A rather striking example is offered, for example, by the singular revival of traditional geopolitics, of which neo-Marxist authors have also been supporters in recent years. Indeed, one of the clearest limitations of the Marxist theory of the state in the 1970s had been the underestimation of the international dimension: many of the schemes constructed at the time, incorporating a stylised image of the political system, in fact ended up forgetting that states acted within an international system and economy. In the last thirty years, these schemes have become obsolete for this, too. However, to the need to account for the international dimension, even neo-Marxist scholars in the broadest sense have responded by recovering the simplified schemes of the 'old' geopolitics, which represents the states (often depicted as monolithic entities) looking for dominion over space to pursue the goal of power (Davenport, 2011). In this way, the inevitable consequence is in fact that social conflicts are forgotten (or neglected), while the transformation of the state is interpreted as a simple adaptation aimed at interstate competition and the achievement of constant objectives.

With this issue of *Soft Power*, we want to contribute to the debate on a 'renewed' theory of the state capable of interpreting the contemporary 'return of the state' and its

relationship with the previous neo-liberal phase. One of our purposes is, first, to rearticulate the idea according to which there is a constant (albeit problematic and tendentially conflictual) relationship between the state and the market, and therefore between the state and globalisation. This does not only mean that the state is necessary for the existence of a global market but also that, in its various historical phases, the role of the state changes, and that the functions it is called upon to perform also change, due to international competition and internal political and social conflicts. Moreover, this also entails the need to consider the state as a 'machine in its complexity, i.e., as an apparatus in which knowledge, tools and conflicts are concentrated, and which therefore, as such, can respond in very different ways to solicitations and interstate competition.

By intertwining different levels of discourse and methods, this issue therefore represents, to some extent, the first chapter of the work that awaits us in the coming years. And even if we cannot be sure of the direction that the 'return of the state' will take, it is certain that, to truly understand its logic, we will need new theoretical tools or perhaps another 'state of mind' that allows us to use the old tools in a perspective equal to the change we are experiencing.

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