Max Weber's Degree-Based Concept of the State and Its Impact on Political Sociology

ANDREAS ANTER*

Abstract: The modern state is a form of political rule that has emerged over the course of centuries. In the past and present, states are not static or uniform entities, but differ considerably in their stability, assertiveness and legitimacy. It was Max Weber who first formulated the insight that the existence of the state is always a matter of degree. With this approach, he breaks new ground in state theory and laid the foundations for the historical study of the emergence of the state as well as for the comparative analysis of its today's threats. This goes particularly for the monopoly on violence, the central feature of the state. Weber developed his approach by strictly distancing it from the contemporary juridical theory of the state, which he accused of turning the state into a thing-like entity. The article shows that Weber is essential for the historical study of the emergence of the modern state as well as for the analysis of its current threats.

Keywords: Max Weber; state; state theory; Norbert Elias

DOI: 10.14712/23363525.2025.3

States emerge in a long-term and violent process – from early beginnings to today's heterogeneous formations.[1] Thus the conclusion is obvious that there must be different degrees of statehood, a conclusion that is the basis for analyzing the emergence as well as the varieties of the state in historical and comparative perspective. However, the theorist who invented the degree-based method is rarely acknowledged and, in some cases, not even mentioned in historical studies [e.g. *Glenn 2013*; *Clapham 1998*]. It was Max Weber who first established this approach, rejecting a binary view of the state existence – as "existent" vs. "not existent". Instead, he reveals the state to be only a complex of actions that always exists to varying degrees. With this approach Weber breaks new ground in state theory. He argued for a process-oriented view that does not treat the state as a static entity, but as a complex of actions subject to constant threats and transformations. But what consequences does this view have for a realistic concept of the state? And what might be the significance of this approach for today's political sociology and historical state research?

The Action-Based View of the State

Weber developed his method by strictly distancing it from the contemporary juridical theory of the state, which he accused of having an "objectifying" view that turned the state into something "thing-like" [*Weber 1913: 439*]. This is paradoxical, insofar as he himself

* Prof. PhDr. Andreas Anter, Universität Erfurt, Fakultät für Staatswissenschaften, Nordhäuser Str. 63, D-99089 Erfurt. E-mail: andreas.anter@uni-erfurt.de

1 For critical comments, I'm thankful to Johann Arnason, Timon Deckena, Frank Ettrich and Keith Tribe.

had a penchant for thing-like metaphors of the state, as a "machine", an "apparatus", or an "enterprise" [cf. *Anter 2014: 195–215*]. Nevertheless, this did not stop him from polemicizing against the "objectifying" view. In a letter to the Freiburg economist Robert Liefmann, a younger colleague, he adopts a strict didactic tone: "Regarding the 'state', for instance, you still express quite old-fashioned ideas. For sociology, the state is nothing else than the chance that particular forms of specific *action* occur, action on the part of particular individual men. Nothing else at all" [*Weber 1920: 946–947*].

In his late letters and writings Weber seeks nothing less than to revolutionize the concept of the state, a project to which he devoted himself during the last months of his life. He does so in a radical critique of the juridical view that treats the state "as a 'legal personality' ['Rechtspersönlichkeit'] as well as an individual person", while for sociology, by contrast, "the word 'state' … *only* covers a course of human action of a particular kind" [*Weber 1913: 439–440*]. For a lawyer, he admits, it might be unavoidable to understand the state as a "person", but for a sociologist such perception would be simply impossible, since the state is sociologically only a "complex of a specific mutual action of individuals" that only exists "because specific individuals orient their action in regard to their idea that the state exists in this form or should exist in this form" [*Weber 1985: 7*].

Weber even goes a step further, bringing the category of "chance" into play. Like every social structure, the state "exists exclusively and solely in the *chance* that mutual action has taken place, is taking place and will take place. This must always be kept in mind to avoid a 'substantive' interpretation of these concepts. A 'state', for example, ceases to 'exist' sociologically as soon as the *chance* that particular forms of meaningfully oriented social action might disappear" [*Weber 1985: 13*].

This idea preoccupied him particularly in his Munich course on the "Sociology of the State" in his last semester. Although only recorded in the form of two student transcripts, these clearly document how much the *chance* character of the state preoccupied him. His students, reading the brief announcement Weber posted at the beginning of the semester, must have expected something different from what they subsequently heard in the lecture theatre. Weber asked the following question: "What do people think of when they talk about the state?" His answer was that they think of chances: "Always only the chances for a certain kind of human action. The entirety of these chances is the state" [*Weber 2009: 68*].

In his lecture, Weber outlined a radically new perspective, turning against the prevailing opinion of contemporary German state theory. If the state consists only of specific *chances* of action it is not a static "structure" but a complex of actions and chances. At first glance, this proposition sounds almost libertarian; but since society is shaped by rulership [*Weber 2005: 127*], it is evident that this complex of actions and chances must also be structured by rulership. Weber does not state this explicitly. However, we should note that he is not presenting an elaborated state theory, but merely some unsystematic outlines. This is true of his lecture on the "Sociology of the State" as well as of the remarks made in his essay "On some Categories of Interpretive Sociology" and the first chapter of "Economy and Society", "Basic Sociological Concepts". Here the question of what kind of action make up the state remains open. To be sure: if the state is characterized by domination and coercion, this will be not without consequences for the type of action in the state.

Early critics such as Hans Kelsen and Leopold Franke did not accept this view and rejected the "dissolution" of the state into actions, since only a small part of these actions

belong to the state [*Kelsen 1928: 158*; *Franke 1932/33: 272*]. Quentin Skinner asks the critical question: "Whose actions properly count as actions of this agency?" [*Skinner 2010*]. By contrast, Carl Schmitt and Talcott Parsons understood early on the originality and significance of Weber's concept of chance [*Schmitt 1932: 30*; *Parsons 1937: 629–630*].[2] It is now widely recognized that Weber's use of "chance" is quite original.[3] It plays a prominent role in his work and is omnipresent in his later writings, especially in the "Basic Sociological Concepts". His usage is not limited to the concept of the state, but is a key category used in the definition of terms such as "power", "rulership", "legitimacy" or "class position" [*Weber 1985: 28, 123, 177*].

In the case of the state, the concept of chance effects a significant shift, since it reveals the state to be a "liquid" object.[4] If a "chance" could be "very great or vanishingly small" [*Weber 1985: 13*] one must assume that there are always different degrees of statehood, degrees which could even be empirically measurable. Such a graduated understanding of the state is the corollary of Weber's concept of chance. It corresponds not least to the graduated character of the state's monopoly of violence. "To be, or not to be", that is not the question for the Shakespeare aficionado Max Weber. For him, it is only a question of the *degree* of being.

State Formation as a Matter of Degree: The Unsolved Problem of the Concept of the State

A process-oriented concept of the modern state is essential for any understanding of its emergence. Statehood is not invented overnight, but emerges gradually in a complex and violent process, at different times in different territories.[5] This is particularly true to the central element of the state, i.e. the monopoly on violence, which did not emerge overnight but was enforced through long-term and violent struggle.

In *The Process of Civilization* Norbert Elias reconstructs a process of monopolization that lasted for centuries in Western Europe and gave rise to the state. Despite all ambivalence with respect to Weber's "sociological nominalism" [*Elias 1970: 126*] and various components of his sociology, he agrees with Weber's findings on this point: "It is only with the emergence of this permanent monopoly of central power and this specialized apparatus of rule that the ruling units take on the character of 'states'" [*Elias 1981: 143*]. He emphatically emphasizes the processual nature of state formation – and is therefore one of the forerunners of degree theory. Even more meticulously than Max Weber, he examines the psychogenetic consequences of this process. The monopoly of violence creates "pacified spaces" in which individuals are increasingly forced to control their affects [*Elias 1981: 320–323*], in an act of "self-constraint" [*Elias 1981: 327*]. In this regard, the state is a decisive factor, since

[2] Nevertheless, Parsons translated the concept of "chance" as "probability". See *Tribe 2023*; *Anter 2014: 91*.

[3] For the significance and reception of Weber's concept of chance, see *Tribe 2023*; *Döpking 2022*; *Palonen 2019*; *Mori 2016: 18–19*; *Anter 2014: 88–95*.

[4] "Liquid" is one of Weber's favorite metaphors. Cf. *Weber 1985: 2, 16, 18, 32, 38, 123, 198, 200, 217, 420, 424, 524, 638, 662, 774*.

[5] The fact that the modern state emerged in Western Europe is emphasized by numerous authors [e.g. *McGovern 2022: 21*; *Pierson 2011: 30*; *Ertman 2005: 173–186*; *Reinhard 2003*], even though it took some centuries to catch on.

the "pacification, the relatively peaceful coexistence of large masses of people", belongs to the effects of the emerging central power of the state [*Elias 1980: 100*].

The process of monopolization of violence, as Weber, Elias and their successors reconstructed it, lasted several centuries in European territories. At present, however, the monopoly of violence is under constant threat [*Anter 2019*]. This applies to many Western European states. In any case, large parts of Africa and Latin and South America have never succeeded in establishing such a monopoly.[6] Although, following Weber, one can only speak of a "state" once a monopoly of force proves enduring, it is not an absolute concept. The monopoly can never be absolute, since no state in the world can completely prevent any kind of violence on its territory. Monopolization inevitably remains imperfect, since violence is a form of human action that always remains latently or manifestly present [*Popitz 2017: 36–41*]. Like the state itself, the monopoly of violence is therefore to be understood in a gradual sense, as a claim that must be constantly renewed and enforced [*Anter 2014: 32–35*].

In historical terms, however, Weber's concept of the state cannot be stretched arbitrarily, since he classifies the state as a specific achievement of the Modern Age. Weber does not believe that there was a "state" in the Middle Ages. "There was no question of a 'state' in the modern sense of the word" [*Weber 1917: 367*]. This is because there was no monopoly on violence in the Middle Ages, but rather a variety of essentially independent holders of prerogatives. Thus, patrimonial structures were merely "precursors" of modern state institutions; "the concept 'state' in its modern sense of the word" is not applicable to them, since they were still in the constant "struggle between the central power and various centrifugal local powers".[7]

If one can only speak of a "state" after the enforcement of the monopoly of violence, the concept of the state should be reserved for those political communities that have at least basic components of the monopoly. The insight that the concept of the state cannot therefore be applied arbitrarily throughout history has prevailed since the 1920s, particularly in German state theory. Hermann Heller insisted that "the state as a name and as a reality is something historically unique, and that this early modern individuality should not be smuggled back into earlier periods". He opposed "the retrospective projection of the concept of the state", since "an unlimited expansion would entirely denature the concept of the state and renders it useless" [*Heller 1934: 125*]. Heller, outing himself here as a Weberian, left a lasting impression on subsequent state theory. Carl Schmitt in particular adopted his position [*Schmitt 1941*]. Otto Hintze examined in detail state-building processes in European territories, considerably influenced by Weber [*Hintze 1931*; cf. *Anter – Bruhns 2024*]. Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, the later doyen of German constitutional law, could only emphasize that it was "no longer possible today" to speak of the "state" of the "ancient Romans" or the "ancient Greeks" or the Incas.[8]

But anyone who thought that the talk of "ancient states" would become passé will be disabused by a glance at today's research in ancient history and historical sociology. The talk of the "Roman state", the "Greek state", the "Aztec state" or "ancient statehood"

[6] See *Fukuyama 2014*; *Andersen et al. 2014*; *Krause 2012*; *Rodgers – Muggah 2009*; *Baker 2006*.
[7] *Weber 2005: 343, 411*. For this, see *Troper 2021*; *Anter 2014: 149–158*; *Breuer 2011: 87–95*; *Pierson 2011: 28–51*.
[8] *Böckenförde 1967: 92*. – Similar *Forsthoff 1971: 11–20*; *Quaritsch 1970: 32–35*. – For the Weberian criteria, see *Isensee 2023: 741*; *Troper 2021*; *Anter 2019*; *Luhmann 2014: 84–90*; *Pierson 2011: 5–9*; *Schuppert 2010: 38–45*.

is widespread everywhere – as if Max Weber had never existed. Numerous authors insist on retaining the concept of the state under any and all circumstances. Ancient historians insist on speaking of the "ancient state",[9] and proclaim defiantly: "I use the terms 'state' and 'statehood' consciously and without a bad conscience for the Roman imperial period" [*Wiemer 2016: 2*].

The same goes for the political sociologist Stefan Breuer, who rejects Weber's historical limitation of the concept of the state [*Breuer 2014: 9–37*]. In his study on "The Charismatic State", he traces the emergence of ancient "states" in the Andes, Mesoamerica, China, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Aegean.[10] In doing so, he refers to the generous use of the concept of the state in relevant disciplines such as archeology, ethnology or anthropology, which naturally speak of the "state" of Aztecs, Greeks or Romans [*Breuer 2014: 10*]. But is the reference to a practice that refers to most diverse structures of rulership as "states" a convincing argument? Breuer, one of the most renowned experts on Weber, himself admits that the arbitrary use of the term "state" in the aforementioned disciplines lacks conceptual clarity [*Breuer 2014: 11*]. Although he rejects Weber's concept of the state, he believes that it is so complex "that it can be used for non- or pre-modern forms of state through a methodological reduction and specification of its characteristics" [*Breuer 2014: 12*]. He asks "how many compromises can be made with Weber's definition without leaving the sphere within which one can still speak of a state" [*Breuer 2014: 12*], and his suggestion is that political associations that reveal a "tendency" towards a monopoly of force should not be denied the designation "state" [*Breuer 2014: 15*].

At this point, Breuer touches on a core problem of the degree-based theory of the state. Historical research is always faced with the problem of determining from what point in time one can speak of a state. Decades ago, Breuer had apparently advocated a binary approach when stating that "a monopoly can no more be weakly developed than one can be a little pregnant" [*Breuer 1990: 12*], while his later studies on the genesis of monopoly underline its inevitably processual character [*Breuer 2016*]. But does his "tendency proposal" offer a way out of the conceptual dilemma? Ultimately, it leaves the fundamental conceptual problem unsolved, since the problem will only be shifted back to earlier epochs. At what point can one speak of a "tendency" towards a monopoly of violence? Moreover, the striking differences between the modern European state and ancient formations should not be neglected. To defend a conceptual distinction, it seems appropriate to reserve the concept of the state for the modern state – and to refer to earlier forms as structures of rulership.

The Degree-Based View of the State in Contemporary Research

The generous use of the concept of the state in today's ancient history and historical sociology stands in a paradoxical relationship to the popularity of Weber's monopoly formula in current international legal and social sciences. There is hardly a fundamental study in state theory that does not refer to it. Weber's concept is a fixed point of reference in state

[9] See, for example *Bang – Scheidel 2016*; *Wiemer 2016*; *Lundgreen 2014: 18–28*; *Günther 2009: 259–281*; *König 2009*; *Demandt 2007*; *Stahl 2003*.

[10] For the reception of Breuer's study see especially the detailed review by *Arnason 2014*; also *Assmann 2014*; *Reinhard 2014*.

studies,[11] particularly since a "Weberian approach" has become established in international state theory.[12] Even the object itself, the state, is referred to as the "modern Weberian state".[13] Only a few authors turn against Weber's concept of the state – and they generally suffer from a lack of knowledge of Weber.[14]

Apart from a few distorted positions, it can be said that Weber's degree-based view of the state has also become internationally accepted. It is indeed methodologically advantageous to understand statehood as a gradual phenomenon, which is especially true for Comparative Studies and International Relations. The term "gradual statehood" was established in 1998 by Christopher Clapham's essay "Degrees of Statehood", which illustrated the concept using data on the situation in sub-Saharan Africa [*Clapham 1998*]. The idea of gradual statehood can be found as early as 1968 in the essay "The State as a Conceptual Variable" by the American political scientist J. P. Nettl, although he initially met with little response before his approach later found followers. Recent studies on statehood emphasize that Weber's approach was the first to enable "an understanding of the state as a variable" [*Lambach et al. 2016: 21*]. With some delay, Canadian comparatist Hugh Patrick Glenn advocates the concept of the "degrees of statehood" from a comparative legal perspective and argues in favour of replacing Hobbes's "binary" logic with a new "degree" theory [*Glenn 2013: 11–12*]. In so doing, however, he ignores the fact that this approach had already been developed by Max Weber. Significantly, Weber does not appear in his book.

Only a degree-based understanding of the state makes it possible to reconstruct historical state-building processes [*Brooke – Strauss 2018*] or develop typologies of strong and weak statehood [*Schneckener 2007*] or evaluate the data of individual states in a *State Fragility Index* [*Marshall – Cole 2014*]. At present, for example, it is difficult to recognize even fragments of statehood in a failed state like Somalia. The *State Fragility Index* shows that weak statehood is primarily due to a weak monopoly on violence due to terrorism and civil war, and that strong statehood worldwide is the exception rather than the rule. The claim that the discipline of International Relations is "particularly resistant to acknowledging varying degrees of statehood" [*Tull 2005: 76*] can only be described as untenable.

When Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg complain that Weber's concept cannot be applied to African states because neither these states nor their populations have a uniform order [*Jackson – Rosberg 1982*], the complaint misses Weber's point. Their criticism arises from ignorance, because for Weber the struggle between rival orders was the precise reason for developing his theory of the validity of orders. In his 1920 Munich lectures on "Sociology of the State", it becomes clear that his approach was influenced by the experience of the civil war-like 1919 Munich Soviet Republic, when revolutionary and monarchist troops faced each other, where the monopoly of violence and the validity of order

[11] Cf. *Isensee 2023: 741*; *Hay – Lister 2022: 7–8*; *Döpking 2022*; *Troper 2021*; *Anter 2019*; *Brooke – Strauss 2018*; *Lambach et al. 2016: 20–22*; *Hall 2015: 61–62*; *Lemay-Hébert 2014: 92*; *Fukuyama 2014: 23*; *Voigt 2014: 185*; *Schulze-Fielitz 2013*; *Isensee 2011: 460ff., 497ff., 521ff.*; *Pierson 2011: 5–11*; *McGovern 2007: 20*; *Portinaro 2006*; *Fukuyama 2005: 19–20*; *Isensee 2004: 40–41*; *Schiera 2004*.

[12] See *vom Hau* 2015: 135–136. Cf. also *Hall 2015: 61–62*; *Lemay-Hébert 2014: 92*. – In today's International Relations theory, Weber is considered "the father of modern IR theory" [*Lebow 2017: 1*].

[13] See, for instance, *Lemay-Hébert et al. 2014: 7*.

[14] When Denis M. Tull, for example, accuses authors oriented towards Weber of ignoring "the discrepancy between ideal-type and real-world states" [*Tull 2005: 76*], this only shows that he misunderstands Weber's ideal-type concept.

began to falter.[15] The method pursued by Jackson and Rosberg, namely the distinction between an "empirical statehood", which can be measured in stages, and a "juridical statehood", which can only exist or not exist (i.e. is binary),[16] is unconvincing, since this "two states" assumption only leads to fresh methodological problems.[17] Their lack of knowledge of Weber becomes evident when they complain that Weber "does not explore what many students of international law consider to be the true character of territorial jurisdiction: the reality that such jurisdiction is an international legal condition rather than some kind of sociological given" [*Jackson – Rosberg 1982: 2*]. Jackson and Rosberg ignore the historical context in which Weber developed his positions, and that such an explanation could not have been his intention.

The modern state is considered "the globally most powerful idea of political order in the twentieth century" [*Hansen – Stepputat 2001: 10*], although the practice of the established state order was never free from threats. States are not static entities but constantly exposed to processes of decay. Talcott Parsons identified this problem in 1937 as the "Hobbesian problem of order" [*Parsons 1937: 36*]. He considered it illusory to assume that the problem of order would be solved by the formation of the modern state. In contrast, he made it clear that every political order inevitably remains precarious and fragile [*Parsons 1968*]. This diagnosis has often been confirmed by history – and by comparative state studies [*Marshall – Cole 2014*].

A decisive factor in a state's stability is its perceived legitimacy, which is no less essential than the monopoly on violence. The intimate relationship between the state and legitimacy becomes particularly apparent in times of crisis. Only an order that is perceived as legitimate will be followed and supported. Things change when a growing part of the population opposes the state order, as increasingly the case in many Western European states today. Due to mass immigration from Islamic cultures, parallel societies have emerged in many countries that are alien to Western culture and state order. In many places, they have established their own Islamic parallel justice [cf. *Bauwens 2016*; *Wagner 2012*]. Moreover, Western European societies are confronted with new phenomena of violence that pose unexpected challenges to the state order. In this respect, a latent process of erosion can be observed here.

If we follow Max Weber, the stability of a political order can be determined by the degree to which the actions of individuals are oriented towards the validity of that order. This is evident in the history of the modern state, but it is also evident in contemporary states. Today's studies on state collapse, which often draw on Weber, conclude that a belief in legitimacy is a central factor that "determines the success or failure of a state. The state therefore only exists to the extent that people follow its rules" [*Lambach 2008: 278*]. This conclusion confirms Weber's conviction that the existence of the state is based on people's belief that this state should exist, and therefore ultimately on the belief in legitimacy. Otherwise, the state order would not persist.

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[15] *Weber 2009: 68*. The struggle between rival orders is what interests Weber: "Soviet Republic, Democracy, and Kingdom side by side in Bavaria!"

[16] *Jackson – Rosberg 1982: 4–12, 12–16*. – "Juridical statehood" Jackson – Rosberg [*1982: 12–16*] corresponds to the rules and regulations of the United Nations. Here there is only a choice between recognition and non-recognition of a state, which is a binary code. Tertium non datur.

[17] This is even true of Georg Jellinek's classical "two-sided theory" [*Jellinek 1900: 174–183*].

Conclusion

Weber laid the crucial foundations for the comparative and historical study of the modern state. Since his degree-based view of statehood has been widely received in political sociology and state theory, the argument that research is "resistant to the recognition of varying degrees of statehood" has proved untenable. His degree-based view of the state makes it possible to trace the historical emergence of states and analyze current phenomena of state-collapse. In the interest of conceptual distinction, it is appropriate to retain Weber's concept of the state, even if its key criterion, the monopoly of violence, is a matter of degree. Weber generally proves to be a theorist of degrees. In this regard, the stability of the state depends on the degree to which the actions of individuals are oriented towards the validity of the state order. Even legitimacy is a matter of degree.

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*Andreas Anter (*1960) is Professor of Political Science at the Faculty of Economics, Law and Social Sciences at the University of Erfurt, Germany. After his studies of Political Science, German Studies and Sociology in Münster, Freiburg and Hamburg, he taught Political Science at the Universities of Hamburg, Leipzig and Bremen.*