

# SDGs and Inequality: Towards an Ontology of State Intervention?\*

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## Abstract

In 2015 the SDGs replaced the MDGs. This new set of goals coalesce around a general theme of inequality. This article will argue that in order to understand how SDGs are to be managed, governed, and realised the role of the state in this process must be robustly theorised and contextualised within a world of multi-level governance. Therefore, a robust theory of the state must be outlined to generate an appropriate ontology of state (non)intervention with regard to solving the key developmental inequalities associated with the suite of SDGs. In addition, global, regional, and local actors all influence the ability to achieve these goals; yet the state remains a key institutional site where power coalesces. Therefore, the roles of this plethora of development actors must be delineated to reveal the nature of state power in a 21<sup>st</sup> century characterised by key processes of globalisation.

## Keywords

state, governance, inequality, SDGs

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Development consists of the removal of various types of unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency. The removal of substantial unfreedoms, it is argued here, is constitutive of development.

*Development as Freedom*, 1999  
Amartya Sen

The SDGs, in their various formulations, are concerned with development.<sup>1)</sup> Development and associated development theories are about how positive change in society can be shaped and managed. The processes of development in human societies always involves the organisation, mobilisation, combination, use, and distribution of resources in new ways; it is an historical change process (Kothari, 2005). This process is fundamentally political. Because resources are being produced and distributed in many different ways, decisions must be made by individuals and different societal groups about how and in what ways such resources are to be employed. The presence of power in these (non)decisions means that development is inescapably political rather than managerial or administrative (Leftwich, 2000; Wylde, 2017).

In the context of catch-up development, the key most influential actor, at least in the modern historical period, has been the state. As an entity it has both the capacity and the autonomy to act in ways that shape positive societal change. However, this influence has not always been beneficial to development, and in all too many instances has actually been inimical to it. The core thesis of this article is that in order to further evolve and develop our understanding of SDGs and associated development, a robust understanding of the state and its role in the development process must be articulated. This will be achieved in three substantive sections: the first will outline a robust theory of the state, suitably grounded in a sophisticated understanding of (state) power. Reductionist understandings of globalisation meaning the retreat of the state (Ohmae, 1995) engage more in the politics of globalisation, rather than the globalisation of politics (Hay and Marsh, 2000). It is often all too convenient

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1) The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as the Global Goals, were adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030. The 17 SDGs are integrated—that is, they recognize that action in one area will affect outcomes in others, and that development must balance social, economic and environmental sustainability.

to make a deductive explanation of (international) politics through a crude application of ‘more globalisation must mean less state’. It is true that the hegemony of a neoliberal paradigm in development thinking has led to the dismantling of many state capacities; this does not imply in any way an *analytical* shift in focus from the state. The state acts as a unique site of social cohesion and a coalescing of social forces. The state must therefore be understood as a social relation (see, for example, Jessop, 2016). When combined with a Strategic Relational Approach (Jessop, 2016) this allows us to see the state as a condensation of a changing balance of class forces (Jessop, 2002: 195).

The second section will outline how this understanding of states and state power must incorporate an understanding of multi-level governance, in an era characterised by globalisation. The argument moves away from false dichotomies such as state and market, instead embracing the concept of structuration (Hay, 2014) to understand the ways in which the state operates within a constellation of levels of governance. Through an application of World Order (Cox, 1981) a specific understanding of the stratified social ontology that accompanies this can be reached. This understanding offers a key role for the state: for it is the site of international hegemony and subsequent World Order. In addition, key institutional vehicles for this hegemony - international organisation - can be seen not to dictate, rather shape international development policy through facilitating a ‘political economy of the possible’ (Santiso, 2006) in terms of discrete state projects of a developmentalist nature.

The third section, given the way the role and “capacity” of state intervention in a global era is understood from the previous sections, will demonstrate how and in what ways the state can meet objectives, particularly in the context of SDGs (also including MDGs). In short, theoretically speaking, the contours and process of development have oscillated between two key institutions: the state and the market. From the classic economic theory, Keynesian, modernization, developmental, dependency theory, and neoliberal theory, amongst many others, are in their essence debates regarding the relative efficacy of the state versus the market. In this vein, the 1990s as the first decade of the post-Cold War era, gave rise to a renewed focus on multifaceted actors involved in the development process, increasingly understood in a more holistic manner.

In this sense, the first ever global level meeting of all donor countries agreed upon an International Development Cooperation architecture, called ‘Shaping the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: the Contribution of Development Cooperation’ (OECD 1996), which was at its essence a roadmap for international aid. Prior to that, all aid was ‘piecemeal’, with each state providing according to their national interest and plan. Thus, and also at the same time, the

UN became a key front-runner in development as the advanced countries, including the US, reduced their ODA (Overseas Development Assistance) budgets in the context of “the end of History.”<sup>2)</sup> In this line, a new concept came to play human development (human security) which is implicitly and explicitly coined with the critical concept of ‘No One Left Behind’ under the umbrella of SDGs, which is attached to inequalities. This article will therefore argue how, and in what ways, the state – broadly defined and conceptualised - remains the key actor in carrying out this global level of development goals.

## THE ROLE OF THE STATE IN DEVELOPMENT

The state has been a concept long debated in Politics and associated disciplines. On the one hand, it is merely one particular institutional complex among many others within any given social formation; yet on the other hand it is peculiarly charged with overall responsibility for maintaining the cohesion of the social formation of which it is part. The state thus becomes much more than its associated ensemble of institutions, as whilst its form - or ‘strategically selective limits’ (Jessop, 1990: 353) - is/are constituted through state structures and operating procedures, the outcome of state power also depends on the changing balance of forces engaged in political action both within and beyond the state. This suggests a focus on the institutional context of states is necessary, but not sufficient, for analysis of the state. Agent-centred institutionalism becomes an important intellectual tradition for understanding how social forces make history in specific institutional contexts. Focus is on ‘complex actors rather than on individuals; on actor’s interests, identities, action orientations, and resources in specific actor constellations rather than in generic, context-free terms; and on different forms of interaction’ (Jessop, 2016: 9). This is clearly important. Examination of the ensemble of ‘socially embedded, socially regularised, and strategically selective institutions and organisations’ (Jessop, 2016: 49) - or *Staatsgewalt* - forms a necessary element of any analysis of the state.

As suggested, this institutional analysis is necessary, but not sufficient, for an understanding of the state. Completion requires an analysis of other substantive aspects of the state: its social bases, state projects, and national-popular objectives. This framework can generate understanding of all states, albeit fleeting and necessarily temporally specific due to their constantly evolving nature. Bob Jessop has called this *Staatsidee* (Jessop, 2016: 49):

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2) There are mainly three rationale for the aid, from the donors’ perspective. 1) humanitarian 2) geo-political 3) economic reasons.

the policies generated by the particular institutional ensemble of the state, and enacted on the members of a given society, and done in the name of the common interest of general will.

The specific type of state that this article is interested in is the one that has the authority, power, and capability to strike a relationship with the market that is not one of domination, but one that is able to ‘govern the market’ (Wade, 1990). The literature has described this kind of formation as a Developmental State and is often concerned with the necessary authority, power, and capability to enact appropriate market governance. This intellectual concern has distilled into the concepts of *autonomy* and *capacity*. Capacity can be defined as the ability of a state to implement goals, especially over the actual or potential opposition of powerful social groups or in the face of recalcitrant socioeconomic circumstances. It follows that in order to have capacity a state must also possess autonomy, defined as when it is able to ‘formulate and pursue goals that are not simply reflective of the demands or interests of social groups, classes, or society’ (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol, 1985: 9). Government may have to enact unpopular or even harsh policies in the name of development. To effectively guide economic development a state must enjoy the power to direct society and lead it through traumatic changes. Bureaucrats must be able to draft policies that promote national development, not the advancement of private lobbyists.

Scholars draw attention to the strength, capacity, and autonomy required for successful Developmental States (Rapley, 2008: 155; Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol, 1985: 9). It suggested, capacity can be defined as the ability of a state to implement goals, especially over the actual or potential opposition of powerful social groups or in the face of recalcitrant socioeconomic circumstances. In Developmental State literature this capacity should arise less from crude power and more from a marriage between a technocratic state and a well organised indigenous capitalist class. It follows that in order to have capacity a state must also possess autonomy, defined as when it is able to ‘formulate and pursue goals that are not simply reflective of the demands or interests of social groups, classes, or society’ (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol, 1985: 9). Government may have to enact unpopular or even harsh policies in the name of development. To effectively guide economic development a state must enjoy the power to direct society and lead it through traumatic changes. This idea is key. The failure of industrial policy to promote successful catch-up development in different parts of the world (large swathes of Sub-Saharan Africa for example) can be understood in terms of an inappropriate mix of capacity and autonomy.

Underlying these Developmental State imperatives of capacity and autonomy in the historical record were the two central features of unusual degrees of both bureaucratic

autonomy and public-private cooperation. This facilitated the formulation of independent national goals by the state and its bureaucracy, as well as translating these broad national goals into effective policy action. Therefore, the coexistence of these two features was essential. For example, in the absence of bureaucratic autonomy public-private cooperation could easily degenerate into situations in which state goals are directly reducible to private interests. Argentina and Brazil during their bureaucratic-authoritarian periods could be examples of such a political economy, where close government-business cooperation materialised in the context of a weak state, in the sense that it lacked autonomy from powerful groups in society. The logic of the Developmental State therefore rests precisely on the combination of bureaucratic autonomy and public-private cooperation; the central insight of which is that the degree of government-business cooperation and consensus on national goals is not purely the product of a given cultural environment but has been largely engineered by the state elites themselves through the creation of a special set of institutions (Öniş, 1991: 115).

This thought was further developed as Evans and his concept of embedded autonomy (Evans, 1995: 12, *passim*) was critiqued for having an inadequate or incomplete understanding of state-society relationships; it was not a sufficient explanation of successful development experience as *both* strong states and strong economic groups in society are needed to create 'governed interdependence' (Weiss, 1998: 38). Pempel's (1999: 157) analysis captures this well when he critiques the Developmental State literature for privileging the political and economic role played by state bureaucrats. This is because they are treated as totally depoliticised, socially disembodied, and in rational pursuit of a self-evident national interest (Ibid.: 144). In the words of Chalmers Johnson (1982: 356) 'politicians merely reign, whereas the bureaucrats actually rule'. This led Bruce Cumings (1999: 61) to suggest that the state then emerges as a 'web without a spider'. This critique makes the observation that 'if not from the politicians from whom do bureaucrats get their sense of direction?' (Ibid.: 145). Bureaucracies may well be rational, but in whose interests are they rational? One answer could be the national interest, derived from the possible interests of the politicians or at least of those in power. This opens the door to the possibility of multiple capitalisms and many varied versions of economic development; or many different capitalisms or forms of development, each promoting the interests of different specific socio-economic groups (Pempel 1999: 145). As a result, different 'Developmental Regimes' (see Pempel, 1999; Wylde, 2012; 2014) are possible, based on different constellations of socio-economic interests rooted in state-society relationships that go beyond the narrow confines of embedded autonomy, authoritarianism, and the Developmental State

concept.

It is this critique that the concept of the democratic Developmental State is grounded in. In early Developmental State literature democracy was perceived to be a luxury that was feasible only in countries that had achieved developmental success. Democratic politics were considered to be a barrier to sustained development since unbridled political competition could generate pressures that led to deviation from the appropriate path necessary for sustained economic development (Robinson and White, 2002: 1). Whilst developmental democracy is not an assured outcome of a simultaneous process of economic and political liberalisation, it should not be totally discarded. The political and institutional basis for a number of states that have demonstrated broad-based sustainable development combined with a legitimate and inclusive democracy lies in the form of the democratic Developmental State (Robinson and White, 2002: 1; White, 2002).

An effective Developmental State requires a particular mix of politics and institutions that can create, maintain, and deepen democratic structures and shape developmental outcomes in both productive and equitable ways. This mix can move beyond state-society relations characterised by embedded autonomy, achieving the same developmental results - i.e. sustained economic growth and industrialisation - yet grounded in a social contract characterised by democratic institutions. This opens the (theoretical) door to the possibility of different constellations of state-society relationships beyond embedded autonomy that can lead to effective development.

The Developmental State's preoccupation with the insulation of state bureaucrats as key to economic development can therefore be (re)interpreted as theoretically constricting. Evans emphasis on the role and character of the state's bureaucracy at the expense of other explanatory factors reduces the basis of legitimacy for state-led developmental intervention to bureaucratic links with industrial capital (Woo-Cumings, 1999: 31; Pempel, 1999: 144). The possibility of legitimacy based on other forms of state-society relationship, or indeed multiples and combinations of different relationships, is not considered. As Pempel (1999: 147) suggests, 'bureaucratic autonomy and mandarin competence in the absence of numerous other conditions are thin reeds on which to rest a strategy of economic development'. In a critique of the Developmental State literature in terms of its analysis of bureaucracies, Woo-Cumings (1999: 31) contends that 'trimming some bureaucratic fat off the Developmental State does not mean the end of the Developmental State; rather, it is a requirement for survival'.

## **Towards a Twenty-First Century Developmental State?**

The ontological theorisation of state-society relationships in classic Developmental State thought, as outlined in the previous section, can be brought into question. Developmental State theory, and indeed the Developmental Regime (at least in its original form as understood by Pempel), conceptualises society as a set of social groups with different economic functions. Therefore the actions of states (including those of a developmental persuasion) can be explained through the 'organisational features' of a given state. Organisational features can be defined as a set of organisations through which collectives of officials may be able to formulate and implement distinctive strategies of policies (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol, 1985: 20-21). In terms of a Developmental State this led to focus on bureaucratic strength and coherence; what matters is the relation between the state and other groups of collective individuals. In terms of Pempel's Developmental Regime this led to a focus on socio-economic alliances as one of the legs of the tripod. This was achieved by interpreting the state as an independent agent that develops and institutionalises relationships with different groups - for the Developmental State with business sectors and for the Developmental Regime a wider constellation of different social groups dependent upon the specific case under consideration. States pursue a distinct 'national interest', independent of discrete social and political interests. Economic competition can be understood as an extension of the national interest, and traditional Developmental State/Regime theory accommodates this in a traditional states and markets, neo-Weberian fashion.

What is needed to solve this problem is an explanatory framework that instantiates the limits placed by capitalist relations of production on the variation in the scope of state action (Radice, 2008: 1161-2). The liberal political hegemony that dominates the intellectual understanding and conceptualisation of the state as a congruence of ideas, interests, and institutions obscures this task as it marginalises the role of class and social relations (ibid.: 1168). The classic example of such a conceptualisation is Evan's embedded autonomy: where the key aspects of a (developmental) state are reduced to state bureaucratic links with domestic capital (Evans, 1995). Class according to this theory are not classes in any relational sense, rather a series of 'social groups' with different economic functions (Chang, 2013: 90). Evans et al. (1985) achieved this by putting the state as an independent agent at the centre of analysis, autonomous from classes and class relations. This downplayed the dependence of the state upon capital (or other class) relations (Chang, 2013: 91). Instead,



understanding of difference in terms of developmental outcomes of state intervention was grounded in different organisational features of a state. This led to a focus on bureaucratic strength - and hence embedded autonomy - and therefore what matters is not the relation between the state and class relations, but the relations between the state and other groups of collective individuals (Chang, 2013: 92). Although Pempel's Developmental Regime offers a wider set of theoretical constellations of social groups and their relationship with the state that can achieve successful developmental outcomes beyond embedded autonomy, these relationships remain the same at an ontological level.

Such a view of the state has been critiqued by neo-Marxists (see for example, Jessop, 2016) as for this theory of the state to work politics must be viewed as analytically separate from economics - or the state as autonomous from classes. 'Class' in Developmental State theories are therefore not actually classes in any relational sense, but closer to 'social groups' with different economic functions. Such a view misrepresents or downplays the dependence of the state upon capital (or other class) relations (Chang, 2013: 90-1). The logical climax of this argument is a concept of the state that stands above class relations without any regard of its relationship to the (re)production of class relations. As Poulantzas (1973) has argued policies are shaped primarily by the constellation of interests *and* the struggle between them. Without this understanding, states are seen as pursuing a 'national interest' independent of social and political interests. As highlighted earlier, this results in such a 'national interest' being defined in abstraction from societal interests - or the state becomes a web with no spider (Cumings, 1999).

What is needed to overcome these limitations is an analytical framework that can generate leverage towards a reinvigorated understanding of the concepts of capacity and autonomy. An understanding that is sensitive to the relational role of class as well as other aspects of social contracts, that understands at a much deeper level the role of power in these processes, and that understands the role of multi-level governance and the interaction of different levels of analysis in an era characterised by globalisation. In other words, what is needed is an appropriate theory of the state, a more nuanced theory of power, and a theory of global governance. This is in order to get leverage on the overarching problem of how a 'national interest' of developmentalism and industrialisation emerges.

## The State as a Social Relation(ship)

The state can be understood as ‘...a strategically selective terrain which can never be neutral among all social forces and political projects; but any bias is always tendential and can be undermined or reinforced by appropriate strategies’ (Jessop, 1990: 354); or, a ‘condensation of a changing balance of class forces’ (Jessop, 2002: 195). This concept has a clear concern for the class character of the state, and is therefore associated with (neo)Marxist analysis (see, for example, Bonefeld, 2012; Jessop, 2016). It postulates that the state has inbuilt biases that privilege some agents and interests over others; but how these biases are actualised depends on the changing balance of forces and their strategies and tactics. It therefore tries to capture the effects of state power as a contingent expression of a changing balance of forces that seek to advance their respective interests inside, through and against the state system (Jessop, 2016: 54). This changing balance of forces is clearly mediated institutionally and discursively - hence the need to seriously and systematically consider the role of the institutions of the state. As Jessop notes (2016: 54) ‘[the changing balance of forces] is conditioned by the specific institutional structures and procedures of the state apparatus as embedded in the wider political system and environing societal relations’. The mixing of these two approaches - agent-centred institutionalism and (neo)Marxism - is a core postulate of this article and will be expanded upon considerably throughout.

The state must be treated as a specific structural ensemble with its own effects on the reproduction of a society-divided-into-classes. Furthermore, classes have no abstract, unifying consciousness but are constituted as political forces through the state itself (Jessop, 2016). This expands understanding of state capacity beyond narrow and perhaps ephemeral links between business groups and the state - understood in abstraction from their relational terms. Actors act not only because of, and through their particular relationship with the state but also in a more immediate relational sense - due to the nature of structure and agency. Bob Jessop’s ‘Strategic-Relational Approach’ (SRA) that underpins the concept of the state as a social relation reveals that structure consists in differential constraints and opportunities that vary by agent; and that agency in turn depends on strategic capacities that vary by structure as well as according to the actors involved. This further reveals a dialectic between acting routinely or habitually, and ‘evaluating the current situation in terms of the changing “art of the possible” over different spatiotemporal horizons of action’ (Jessop, 2016: 55). Structures are only strategically selective, rather than absolutely constraining. As a result,

scope exists for actions to overwhelm structural constraints; subjects are unlikely to absolutely know their own strategic action(s); and ‘...calculating subjects that operate on the strategic terrain constituted by the state are in part constituted by the current strategic selectivity of the state system as well as by past state interventions’ (Jessop, 2016: 56).

Through this use of neo-Marxist tools the state becomes ‘the instance that maintains the cohesion of a social formation and which reproduces the conditions of production of a social system by maintaining class domination’ (Poulantzas, 1969: 77). The modern state therefore possesses two fundamental roles: an ‘accumulation imperative’ and a ‘legitimation imperative’ (Poulantzas, 1969: 76). The accumulation imperative is the repressive apparatus of the state - the government, army, police, tribunals, and administration - and deal with factors such as infrastructure, the rule of law to ensure growth (especially private property), and defence. The legitimation imperative is there to make the whole system legitimate to workers both institutionally - through the welfare state for example - and ideologically - through concepts such as developmentalism and/or redistribution. Following Gramsci (1971), the ideological apparatus of the state are institutions such as the Church, political parties, schools, mass media, and in certain instances the family.

The historical emergence of society and associated social entities cannot be separated from the evolution of the state. The state is no longer simply defined as a ‘black box’ where competing social interests form, rather it centralises and concentrates social power so that it can be exercised, executed, and directed. (Developmental) policy that emerges from this becomes the application of this social power, grounded in material conditions. Ideology is reduced to the facade (or ‘hegemonic project’ for Poulantzas) of coherence in policy, with its presence helping maintain consistency through articulation of a world view. The state is therefore a dynamic and constantly unfolding system. Its specific form at a given moment in time in a particular national setting represents a ‘crystallisation of past strategies’ which privileges certain strategies and actors over others. As such, ‘the state is located within a complex dialectic of structures and strategies’ (Hay, 2006: 129). It thus becomes ‘a strategic site traversed by class struggles and as a specific institutional ensemble with multiple boundaries, no institutional fixity and no pre-given formal or substantive unity’ (Jessop, 1990: 267). The era of the neoliberal state witnessed the separation of the state from the economy. This separation ‘maps out new spaces for the state and the economy by transforming their very elements’ (Poulantzas, 1978:18). The problem lies in understanding how the shape of these ‘new spaces’ and their interrelations are transformed through the historical development of capitalism.

Viewed in these terms the state is neither a neutral instrument, nor a rational calculating

subject (Jessop, 1999: 11). For the purposes of this discussion the critique of underplaying class through treating the state as equally accessible to all forces and useful for any purpose is overcome. This plugs a key gap in mainstream understandings of the state - pluralism and elite theory - which view class as social groups. A further shortcoming that is overcome is that of seeing the state as possessing a pre-given unity and clear purpose; in the context of the Developmental State literature an *a priori* national interest in favour of developmentalism. Instead, the state is the crystallisation and ongoing metamorphosis of the continuing interaction between 'the structurally-inscribed strategic selectivities of the state as an institutional ensemble and the changing balance of forces operating within, and at a distance from, the state and perhaps, also trying to transform it' (Jessop, 1999: 11).

A number of important observations emerge from this understanding of the state as a social relation. First, the analysis of unequal access to the state for different agents. A strategic-relational approach combines nicely with (neo)pluralism given the shared concern with the changing balance of diverse forces, shared sensitivity to cross-cutting and intersecting groups and social forces, and a shared focus on conflict, competition, and coalition building. However, the introduction of a consideration of the more relational aspects of class - as opposed to simply treating classes as social groups whose relationship with the state is the only ontologically relevant force - further improves our understanding of the strategic selectivity of the state itself. (Neo)Pluralist analysis gives equal weight, analytically, to the structurally inscribed, strategic, selective asymmetries involved in institutions, institutional orders, and societal configurations. Also, it is less attuned to the specificities of the capital relation - especially its inherent structural contradictions, strategic dilemmas, and social antagonisms; less attuned to the relative primacy of profit-orientated, market mediated accumulation as a principle of societal organisation; and less attuned to the ways in which these shape the overall pattern of constraints and opportunities in contemporary societies (Jessop, 2016: 70).

Second, is a better understanding of the mechanisms and modes of state intervention. Combining strategic-relational concerns with (neo)pluralism introduces very important relational aspects to the concept of state capacity. It facilitates a framework for understanding the differentiation between what Michael Mann (1984: 185) called 'despotic power' and 'infrastructural power'. Infrastructural power gives the state the capacity 'to penetrate [Sic.] society and organise social relations throughout its territory on the basis of its political decisions' (Jessop, 2016: 70). This is opposed to despotic power, which 'can be "measured" most vividly in the ability of... Red Queens to shout "off with his head" and have their whim gratified without further ado' (Mann, 1984: 189). What

strategic-relational concerns provide is an understanding that these capacities are relational. For, even when they meet no resistance, states are not omniscient - because every mode of intervention has its strengths and weaknesses.

The third and final contribution for understanding the state concerns the unequal capacity of agents to shape, make, and implement decisions. The structural dominance that facilitates unequal access to the state must be combined with a widely accepted 'hegemonic project' if the structurally privileged class (fraction) is to become truly hegemonic. In the absence of this condition, state structures can undermine the pursuit of a project favourable to a class (fraction) other than the structurally privileged. In turn, this indicates that a long-term shift in hegemony requires not only a new hegemonic project but also the reorganisation of the state system towards underwriting a more durable shift in the balance of forces (Jessop, 2016: 69).

## **On (State) Power**

Understanding the state as a social relation draws attention to the configuration of the social bases of state power and the inherently unstable equilibrium of compromise that it is refracted through. In other words, to draw out all the implications of understanding the state as a social relation for the concepts of capacity and autonomy in the context of developmentalism requires a more complete understanding of power. For Gramsci (1971: 257-64) state power was shaped by the relation between the state and the institutions and forces in the broader political system and in society as a whole. Some Gramscian analytical categories are useful here: the 'power bloc', a durable alliance among dominant classes that define the 'art of the possible' (Jessop, 2016: 73); the 'hegemonic bloc', a broader ensemble of national popular forces mobilised behind a specific hegemonic project; and a 'historic bloc', a mutually supportive relation among the economic base, juridico-political organisations, and the moral and intellectual field (Ibid.). These are the building blocks of durable state projects, or hegemonic visions. In the context of late-comer development: a coherent and cohesive national interest rigorously pursued and defined in terms of developmentalism.

Whilst the Marxist debates of the late 1970s imploded 'under the weight of a multitude of competing theoretical starting points and an over-emphasis on highly abstract theorising that blithely disregarded the historical variability of political regimes and the different forms taken by capitalism' (Jessop, 2001: 150), the concepts of the state as a social relation and

‘relative autonomy’ can be retrieved from the wreckage and help facilitate an understanding of the relational aspects of power and its exercise by the state.

The state as a social relation(ship) should not be seen as a mere reflection of class interests - the ‘economic committee of the bourgeoisie’; rather, the state should be seen as possessing ‘relative autonomy’ from different class interests as it advocates the interests of capitalism rather than capitalists. Such an understanding facilitates a firmer grip on the necessary ensemble of social relations of production and associated institutions that link society with the state that best facilitates late comer industrialisation. This view allows for a holistic understanding of the state and its forms. Classic state theory (the debate between Elite theory and Pluralism) views the state as an adjudicator between conflicting interests and groups. Marx saw the state as controlling and suppressing the lower classes. The discipline of public policy looks to how the state achieves targeted goals. But really the state is all of these things (Palan and Abbott, 1999: 45). Given these functions, the key question becomes how to maintain loyalty to the state by its members? The liberal tradition answered this in one particular way. Starting with Hobbes the solution was the sovereign (or ‘might is right’), through to Locke with the guarantee of life, liberty, and property, and then to Rousseau with the concept of the social contract underpinned by the General Will. However, a social contract must pre-suppose the state because people must already have a strong consciousness of their membership of a social community (Palan and Abbott, 1999: 46). In other words (Löwith, 1964: 242) ‘...the individual member of bourgeois society is educated behind his back to the generality of his personal interests. Bourgeois society... is forced against his will to become the true state of an absolute community.’ This Hegelian conceptualisation was critiqued by Marx (2000[1843]: 33) when he highlighted the fact that the state wasn’t a separate social body, but the encapsulation of the entire civil society. Furthermore, it was a material entity, a form of class organisation - rather than a Hegelian spiritual one.

Poulantzas (1973) extended this analysis through the observation that the gap between ‘citizenship’ and ‘individuality’ are not problems that can be surmounted, but profound reflections of changing material conditions. This led to the conclusion that the state must simultaneously be autonomous from and embedded within civil society: or, in other words, it must possess ‘relative autonomy’. It must be autonomous because the government needs to pursue the true interests of the people, and embedded because the government needs to be implanted in the social. The state enjoys a degree of independence from the economy because of its location in the autonomous sphere of politics; but this does not render the state independent of classes which influence the economy through the state. The state thus

fulfils its adjudicatory role between contradictory interests, and development stalls where a state is no longer able to do this - it no longer has (or perhaps never had in the first place) relative autonomy.

Class domination of the state does not simply mean that its form - the institutionalisation of a suite of policies in the form of a public policy profile and the ideological justification underpinning that profile - is a simple reflection of the interests of the dominant class. Rather, the very existence of this domination is made possible by the relative autonomy of the state. That is, state power must be seen in relational terms, i.e. as founded on an unstable equilibrium of compromise among class forces rather than as a monopoly of one class (fraction) (Poulantzas, 1973: 191-3). This power is conceptualised, following Gramsci, as hegemonic leadership, in which prominence is given to the organisation of an ideological and political unity among the classes and fractions of the power bloc, and to the securing of 'active consent' on the part of the dominated classes (Benton, 1984: 149). An essential condition of hegemonic domination over the dominated classes is that they, in turn, have ideological apparatuses - for example, trade unions and political parties - which pursue their interests and thereby achieve concessions (Ibid.).

The concept of relative autonomy helps overcome this reductionist and constricting approach by 'bringing class back in'. The state fulfils an adjudicatory role between contradictory interests and is therefore simultaneously autonomous from and embedded in social relations. It is autonomous because the state needs to pursue the 'true' interests of the people as a whole, rather than any distinct class (fraction), and it is embedded as it is itself part of the social formation of society. Therefore, the historical emergence of society and associated social entities cannot be separated from the evolution of the state. For example, development often stalls where a state has no relative autonomy from society - with sub-Saharan Africa being a clear example of this as states have often been captured by discrete interests. The state centralises and concentrates social power so that it can be exercised, executed, and directed. Policy is therefore the application of social power, and the policies of the state must be understood in the context of this application.

Relative autonomy represents an excellent tonic to the limited ontology associated with either Evans' embedded autonomy or structural Marxism; it distinguishes between either overly deterministic or overly agent-driven understandings of power. But it isn't in itself a theory of power: it is an explanandum, not an explanans (Jessop, 2016: 93). In other words, in the context of empirical analysis it becomes descriptive rather than analytical. Instead, it must be recognised that relative autonomy arises from relationships between economic region, civil society, institutional structures, social bases of support and resistance, and

effectiveness of policies. As a result, a theory of power needs to be articulated that encapsulates an understanding of how power comes to be realised and exercised in the context of the hegemony of different constellations of class (fractions). Or, how a general will is realised and, in the specific context of this article, how a national interest in favour of rapid development comes to be hegemonic within the state.

The elaboration of a state project clearly emerges from the historic record: both in terms of institutions and social relations. This state project - or specific accumulation strategy - can be seen as the product of the hegemony of one class fraction. Although, and crucially, a class fraction that is seen to represent at least some of the interests of different fractions of capital (finance capital, commercial capital, national capital etc.). This state project must be relevant to the interests of the hegemonic fraction, but also to a critical mass of different fractions of capital. Furthermore, and once again following Gramsci (1971), this hegemony is (re)produced through elements of civil society - which are themselves part of the state; and hegemony is only truly achieved through the consent of both subordinate classes and the non-hegemonic fractions of capital.

The overall implications of this are a hegemonic accumulation strategy that is linked to the changing balance of forces between capital and labour as modified from time to time by the influence of other class or non-class forces (Jessop, 2016: 114). Therefore, hegemonic politics and policies acquire a particular content as a result of the exercise of power. In other words, hegemony of a particular accumulation strategy can be seen as the product of domination. For (neo)Marxists, this is expressed through class domination, with class understood very much in a *relational* sense and therefore it is social relations that acquire ontological primacy. For (neo)Weberians this domination is expressed through political party, status, *and* class domination - although class here is understood more in terms of social groups and therefore relational aspects are not analysed. For Feminists, it is patriarchal domination that is of utmost importance. For (neo)Pluralists it is a vast array of resources, identities, and interests across an array of governance levels that form domination. What all these approaches can have in common is a rejection of state power being above society, and class power being anchored wholly in the economy or in civil society. Therefore, state power is in fact a mediated effect of the changing balance of all forces - class, party, status, gender, identities, and interests - in any given scenario. It therefore follows that state power itself is an explanandum (Jessop, 1990: 117), and the explanans is the strategic-relational terrain that reflects and refracts mediated power grounded in a constantly changing balance of different forces: a state's relative autonomy.



The levels of co-ordination and capital required to facilitate successful catch-up development in the form of rapid industrialisation requires more than just markets. It requires markets to be harnessed in order to act in a long-term national interest, rather than short-term individual interests. The only viable contemporary institution that is capable of such co-ordination is the state. The pre-requisites of successful state-led interventions to facilitate catch-up industrialisation have been investigated through the vehicle of Developmental State theory. This article has attempted to show that whilst this has represented a good start, in order for these theories to remain relevant in the twenty-first century further analysis is required.

This analysis involves two fundamental reformulations of traditional Developmental State theory: the first concerns better understanding of state-society relations, the second integration of national-international concerns in an era of accelerated (neoliberal) globalisation. This article has completed the first task, with the next part examining the second. In terms of the first task, the state and its associated capacity must be understood as a social relation(ship) - an entity that is the product of a changing balance of social forces. The constitution of those social forces is best conceptualised through the lens of relative autonomy. State power is not therefore a simple reflection of dominant class interests or the monopoly of one class, but rather a complex amalgam and unstable equilibrium of compromise among class, and other social forces. The state provides a context within which political actors are seen to be embedded, and with respect to which they must be situated analytically (Hay, 2006: 10). The state therefore is the institutional landscape which political actors must negotiate. For Bob Jessop this landscape is 'strategically selective' - i.e. it is more conducive to certain strategies, and therefore certain actors, than to others (Jessop, 1990: 9-10). The state therefore becomes a 'factor of cohesion' (Hay, 2006: 62); or, '...the state is understood in terms of its effects and is defined in terms of its role in maintaining the unity and cohesion of a social formation by concentrating and sanctioning class domination' (Poulantzas, 1978: 24-25; see also, Jessop, 1985: 61, 177). In being strategically selective, the state presents an uneven playing field whose complex contours favour certain strategies (and hence certain actors) over others. As a result, '...there can be no general or fully determined theory of the capitalist state, only theoretically informed accounts of capitalist states in their institutional, historical, and strategic specificity' (Hay, 2006: 76).

## GLOBALISATION, THE STATE, AND DEVELOPMENT

It must never be forgotten that this relative autonomy not only functions in the context of competing and conflicting domestic social interests, but also (real and perceived) external environmental interests: i.e. those of (neoliberal) globalisation and the forces of international capital. In other words, amidst this theorisation and conceptualisation of the state is globalisation. Integration of social relations and relative autonomy into a robust theory of the state requires an appreciation of the fact that ‘long-term, structurally consolidated, class or class-fraction alliances are no longer located purely on the national level’ (Jessop, 2002: 190). However, this does not mean that foreign capitals directly participate as autonomous forces in power blocs: ‘instead they are represented by certain fractions of the interior bourgeoisie within the power bloc and also have access, through various channels, to the state apparatus’ (Ibid.). Therefore, the state does not have its own independent power which can either be fused with that of capital or eliminated due to the growing counter power of capital. Instead, state power must be seen in terms of class power; that is, the actions of the state can only be understood as a product of the interaction of social relations of production constituted at a domestic level. Different class fractions that constitute the building blocks of those social relations of production are the product of complex interactions of domestic and international pressures must not be forgotten in the analysis, and through such an approach the role of contemporary neoliberal globalisation can be integrated into a framework for understanding the contemporary (capitalist) state.

Globalisation is the structural condition that dominates current study of the political economy of development. It is not though a new phenomenon; rather, it is the ‘intensification of an old process, the continuing internationalisation of commodity production and capital accumulation’ (Soloman and Rupert, 2002: 284). The issue of governance is not a dry technical question, but goes to the heart of how order is established and sustained in human societies and, therefore, what a good society is (Gamble, 2014: 13). While ‘government’ is about institutions, ‘governance’ is about the ‘social and economic, as well as political, processes by which power and influence are put into practice, outcomes are shaped and decisions made and implemented, and broad social, political, and economic trends managed and controlled by a range of actors’ (Cerny, 2014: 48). This clearly challenges our understanding of the state and state power. Whereas statehood presupposes an apparatus or bureaucracy, governance lacks this fixed institutional reference point. In addition, the concept of the state signifies a direct relationship to a polity, governance is

more related to policy. Governance is broader in scope and ‘advocated as a means to avoid the iron fist (even when concealed in a velvet glove) of state power’ (Jessop, 2016: 166).

In broad terms, governance refers to the mechanisms and strategies of coordination in the face of complex reciprocal interdependence among operationally autonomous actors (Jessop, 2016: 50). These actors can come from ‘above’ the state in the form of regional or global institutions, (transnational) corporations, or global markets and their attendant social relations that produce World Order (Cox, 1996: 98); or ‘below’ the state with more national or local actors and, at least for Foucauldians, the governance of minds and bodies through the concept of ‘governmentality’ (Foucault, 2008[2004]). Governance then can be said to operate at different spatial levels of analysis, with complex mutually reconstitutive interactions between them. Yet, the previous section showed empirically that these different spatial levels of analysis interact with each other differently across those very spatial contexts, as well as changing over time. In other words, ‘...interdependence is hardly likely to prove politically neutral’ (Hay, 2014: 33). Relationships between actors at different spatial levels of analysis can be characterised by either interdependence or dependence, with the latter being far more biddable than the former.

One analytical solution to the problem of differentiated power across spatial levels is called structuration. This is a complex process that would benefit from extended definition:

‘...a dynamic system in which the conduct of actors and the context in which they find themselves are intimately and iteratively interlinked... we conceive of political-economic processes as operative at distinct spatial levels within each of which actors orient themselves strategically to the context in which they perceive themselves to be located and seek to realise specific goals and intentions.’ (Hay, 2014: 38).

By introducing the concept of power into this analysis, it follows that there are deeper levels of structuration present - a stratified social ontology. Structural constraints can be imposed by the agency of the more powerful, setting the context for the less powerful (or powerless). In other words, ‘they [powerful agents] condition the possible range of strategies and actions within a specified social and political context, but are not immediately accessible to transformation by the agents that they embed within such a context’ (Hay, 2014: 39). It follows that power in this context becomes the ability to transform aspects of the context in which other less powerful groups and individuals are constrained to formulate their strategies. Also, it follows that higher levels of structuration are not immediately accessible to direct intervention by actors in lower levels - even though these higher levels have a

crucial bearing upon the strategic selectivity of the context in which they realise their strategic intentions.

At the highest level of structuration - 'the global' - there is an analytical problem of an object without a (discrete) subject. In other words, in the absence of any higher levels of structuration there are no decisive actors in the same way as there are at lower levels. There is a deficit of actors capable of refashioning global political economy directly. Instead, there are a multitude of actors at lower levels whose actions and interactions with each other ultimately contribute to a series of global process - for the purposes of the current era: globalisation. This implies that globalisation *per se* should not be used as an independent variable in the sense that it is a process of tendencies and counter-tendencies that vary over spatial and temporal contexts (Hay, 2014). Whilst globalisation plays a role in shaping state capacity and autonomy, accounts need to be made that are sensitive to the fact that globalisation as a process shapes and constrains different actors in different ways, whilst simultaneously being open to shaping by those very actors that are constrained by it, also to differing degrees at different times.

In summary, governance shapes and is shaped by a complex process of structuration across multiple spatial levels. As the previous section demonstrated, the state has a key role as a site of institutional integration of power relations and social domination; but, structuration clearly shows that it simultaneously exists in a complex, heterogeneous, and multilevel network. On the one hand the state is but one spatial level in this model, but on the other, when combined with the analysis of the previous section, the state can be seen as more than this. What structuration gives us is not a state that is of equal ontological weight but analytical weight. In other words, the state is clearly not a sovereign authority in a single hierarchical command structure, but rather it can be considered to be an institution that is *primus inter pares* (Jessop, 2016: 185).

## **SDGs and role of State**

Between September 25-27, the 70<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations General Assembly, UN member states convened a special summit for the adoption of the declaration, "Transforming Our World – the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." This moment was a universal call to action for the betterment of people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership, a.k.a., 5P, which was somewhat a continuation of and at the same time beyond the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Below is a part of preamble of a resolution adopted by the

General Assembly on 25 September 2015.

This agenda is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity.

It also seeks to strengthen universal peace in larger freedom.

We recognize that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development.

All countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan. We are resolved to free the human race from the tyranny of poverty and want and to heal and secure our planet.

We are determined to take the bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path.

As we embark on this collective journey,  
we pledge that ***no one will be left behind.***

Source: UN 2015, Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. A/70/L.1, New York, UN. Italics and bold is mine, for the purpose of emphasis.

With the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as seen in the above-statement, 193 UN member states pledged to ensure “no one will be left behind.” In practice, this means taking an explicit measure and action to eradicate extreme poverty, and curb inequalities, which are mainly concerning for the individual (people) level, while planet (environment), peace and partnership are also different level of main axis for Sustainable Development goals (UN 2015).

The MDGs were not emphasizing enough for the purpose of tackling inequality. While MDGs are implicitly embedded in this matter, the Goals cared more about social development issues, especially when compared to the last five decades of international development practise. Primarily, since the end of World War II, Global aid(assistance) is heavily entangled with the prioritisation of economic development and (GDP) growth. However, subsequently, international development discourse has been paying attention to human-focused development, particularly with and through the UNDP Human Development Reports (HDRs) over the course of 1990s. In this vein, a critical report that explored the notions of the MDGs, called ‘Shaping the 21<sup>st</sup> century: the contribution of development cooperation,’ was developed and presented by OECD in 1996. At this moment, another line of international development discourse was environmentally attentive development, so called, sustainable development. Particularly, the theme of UN Conference on Environment and

Development, UNCED in Rio Janeiro, Brazil in 1992 was environmentally sound and sustainable development. Within this fundamental orientation, the MDGs were embarked on. Specifically, eight goals (with 21 sub-goals) were launched.<sup>3)</sup>

It is arguable as to whether the MDGs were successful or not. It is unquestionable that the all the MDGs were not met quantifiably. However, it was at the least a meaningful set of stepping stones for considering social development as a whole, including the “people-centered” development aspirations. Moreover, the Goals were the first ever global strategy with quantifiable targets to be agreed upon by all UN member states (Michale Woodbridge, 2015). ‘The result-oriented’ culture and/or paradigm of development cooperation was central to the whole project. In short, within certain deadlines, relevant stakeholders acted to meet the MDGs by having a series of institutional approaches, including base survey, monitoring and result evaluation. To reiterate, the institution of MDGs was a historical moment that international development cooperation had been moving towards in order to go beyond development understood as simply GDP growth, thus incorporating social development and human-focused aspects. Additionally, this was the first time ever that all donor countries set up a common aid road map. However, these aspects were led by donor countries, and therefore limited by their understandings of development and discrete interests of different class fractions within their own domestic political economies. As the previous sections have shown, this led to a specific set of strategically selective limits placed on developing states by developed states in the context of hegemonic World Order, and imposed through complex processes of structuration. In short, donor countries prioritised support for “good governance” and reform of associated institutions that translated into infrastructure-led solutions through targeting areas such as education and healthcare.

This has important implications regarding inequality. First, from the beginning of the setting up of the MDG blue-print for development, the under-developed countries were not ‘invited’ to discuss and then to formulate the architecture of MDGs. This was a key critics that MDGs faced due to the sense of inequality, which means being imposed one the developing countries by the more developed. Second, another sense of inequality is revealed through an examination of the domestic level. Because MDGs were an agenda set by

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3) 8 Millennium Development Goals: 1) Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. 2) Achieve universal primary education 3) Promote gender equality and empower women 4) Reduce child mortality 5) Improve maternal health 6) Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases 7) Ensure environmental sustainability 8) Develop a global partnership for development

developed countries, not taking into less developed countries' conditions account seriously, critics attributed rising (economic) inequality between and within countries (UNDP 2016) to the MDGs themselves. In short, according to UNDP (2016) report,<sup>4)</sup> as the poorest and most marginalized people slip further behind, inequalities have been pushed to new heights between and within countries. From 1980 to 2016, the world's richest 1 percent captured twice as much of the growth in income worldwide, as the bottom 50 percent.<sup>5)</sup> The world's poorest countries have also grown relatively poorer; while the spatial disparities between localities within countries become wider.

In this context the Post-2015 Agenda (or SDGs) was a process from 2012 to 2015 led by the United Nations to define the future global development framework that would succeed the Millennium Development Goals. Furthermore, this agenda set out to overcome the limitation of MDGs. Thus, subsequently, 17 Goals, along with a total of 169 concrete targets have emerged at the international level, officially referred to as the Sustainable Development Goals. 'Leaving no one behind' is a recurring and overarching objective of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs. Implementing the pledge, thus, does not imply a separate course of action but is intrinsic to the action required to achieve the SDGs. As people who are left behind are likely to include more than just the income-poor, countries implementing the pledge will need to go beyond single-factor metrics in order to understand the severity, multiplicity and distribution of disadvantages within their societies (UNDP 2018). In this vein, by and large, this article views that the SDGs emerged to challenge this two level of inequalities by inviting all UN member countries and looking more carefully setting agenda, taking into LDC domestic matter more seriously. In this vein, one of the major criticism and/or challenges facing the successful implementation, particularly targeting for the matter of the inequality in a sense of SDGs is the level of national governments. As pointed by Michael Woodbridge (2015), "the national government will choose to focus only on the goals that align with their existing development agenda." This will happen along lines suggested in the opening sections of this article, by class (fraction) interests employing their differentiated agency to control the State agenda and thus shape the (institutional) "limits of the possible". In other words, the state is 'the' key actor as to whether the SDGs are being successful or not.

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4) *The proportion of the world's poorest people in Least Developed Countries (LDCs) has more than doubled since 1990.* United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, "UNCTAD Least Developed Countries Report 2016," Geneva, Switzerland, 2016. Available from <http://unctad.org/en/pages/PressRelease.aspx?OriginalVersionID=384>

5) World Inequality Lab, "World Inequality Report 2018," page 11. Available from <http://wir2018.wid.world/files/download/wir2018-full-report-english.pdf>

## CONCLUSIONS

A robust twenty-first state seeking to realise the SDGs in an era of globalisation characterised by multi-level governance must develop both the capacity and autonomy to do so. Much research to date has focused on state capacity. This is not unimportant. However, what this article has argued is that in order for these capacities to be used appropriately in the context of the SDGs, it must also possess the appropriate autonomy. In other words, the politics cannot be ignored; realising the SDGs is not simply a technical and technocratic exercise. Thus, as stated above, the state is still ‘the’ key actor in the way of realizing the SDGs to be truly completed by 2030. Particularly, in the sense of carrying out the ‘leave no one behind,’ which is the under the umbrella of the notion of inequality, UN member states understood that inequalities and acute deprivation will subside only when the furthest behind benefit to a greater degree and faster pace from government policies and investment. In this sense, it assures that reducing inequalities and ensuring no one is left behind are integral to achieving the SDGs. Practically, the pledge to ‘leave no one behind’ means all governments must chart a new course aimed specifically at curbing inequalities between people, groups and places. And national governments intend to correct for legacies of discrimination and exclusion both between and within countries; and prioritizing and fast-tracking progress among the furthest behind. All understand and agree that all stakeholders in a global architecture need to overarchingly and comprehensively endorse each other and with no such doubt the national state should be an upfront runner who realizes the “development as freedom.” The scope of this piece of work is aligned to the realm of theoretical aspect. Thus, this will guide a ‘room’ for empirical cases to see how and in what ways state is still ‘the’ critical actor in enhancing the SDGs to be met.

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