

State-Society Relations

Mary Gallagher
University of Michigan
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In 1994 as a second-year graduate student at Princeton University, I enrolled in a class taught by Lynn White, who became my dissertation co-chair, called “State, Society, and Development.” We met weekly in the evening for three hours in Lynn and Barbara-Sue’s home, surrounded by orchids and drinking Chinese tea. It wasn’t a “China class” so there were graduate students with interests from all over the world, including the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and the newly post-communist Eastern Europe. I remember that my husband, in his first year of law school, teased me relentlessly about this class. Such a grandiose title. Some huge concepts. While he was forlornly reading the minutiae of tort case law and criminal procedure, I was asking “the big questions.” The syllabus was eclectic, as was Lynn’s style. We read political science classics such as E.E. Schattschneider’s *The Semi-Sovereign People: A Realist’s View of Democracy in America*, but we also read Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas* and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.

As with the style and approach of Lynn’s class, “state-society” or “state-in-society” as an approach in political science may seem old-fashioned.¹ I’m not sure it’s still even “a thing”, though the term is tossed around in articles from time-to-time. In this brief memo, I will summarize the concept and provide some historical context for how it might fit into the evolution of comparative politics since the 1950s. I will then present some of the conceptual and theoretical contributions that this approach has yielded in the study of China. Finally, by way of conclusion, I will suggest that this approach is due for a revival in comparative politics. I will suggest some empirical questions and issues that it might be particularly well-suited to address.

State-Society Relations and the Development of Political Science

In the 1930s-1950s, political science began to separate itself methodologically from disciplines with which it had been closely aligned, especially history, philosophy, and law. The discipline moved away from the study of formal organizations/laws to the study of politics itself, broadly defined. While we often think of this as “the behavioral revolution”, it was broader than that, as this era also saw the rise of structural functionalism and the study of political systems as a conceptual endeavor that aspired to show how political institutions “worked” (aka functioned).² Methodologically, of course, this revolution included the rise of statistics and modeling, but alongside other approaches more closely tied to other social science disciplines, especially anthropology. All of these approaches were strongly positivistic, emphasizing objectivity and scientific rigor.

¹ “State-society approach” and “state-in-society approach” are used here interchangeably as the same concept. It was first articulated by Migdal in the introductory chapter, “The State in Society: an approach to struggles for domination,” in the 1994 edited volume co-edited with Atul Kohli and Vivienne Shue, *State Power and Social Forces: Domination and Transformation in the Third World* (Cambridge University Press, 1994). A later volume, *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another*, that expanded the concept was published in 2001 (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

² For example, see the interview with Gabriel Almond in *Passion, Craft, and Method in Comparative Politics* (John Hopkins University Press, 2007).

Structural functionalism admittedly has a bad reputation, but at the time and even now it can provide a useful framework for mapping out comparatively how political systems perform similar functions in varied ways. I'll return to this point later. Alongside structural functionalism, in the 1950s, political behavior as a subfield of the discipline expanded – most often by studying voter behavior and other related forms of political participation in democracies. For those studying communist autocracies, including China, the main debate was whether to conceptualize politics as pluralist or totalitarian. This was a paradigmatic choice, motivated by political ideology and less so by actual evidence.

When the tenets of modernization theory became shaky in the late 1960s, and with Huntington's (1968) *Political Order in Changing Societies* as an intervention, political scientists in the 1970s and 1980s brought back the state, in the Weberian sense, as a distinct and (potentially) autonomous actor in the political system. This brought back the study of institutions and comparative historical work on state formation.

Then, a wave of democratization occurred from the late 1970s with the death of Franco in Spain and the fall of the Berlin Wall in the fall of 1989. The emergency of the “state-in-society approach” is an off-shoot of these two trends. It was a reaction against state-dominant studies that relegated social actors to relatively passive objects; it was also a response to real world events.

Because of the drama and importance of those events, for at least a decade after 1989, comparativists approached autocracies as “emerging democracies” or “weakly consolidated democracies” or autocracies that were halfway democracies. The lens of transitology seemed hard to avoid. Alongside it, there were spin off studies in the China field on the possible break-up of the country, following the events that had transpired with the collapse of the USSR. Civil society was discovered in China, both historically in the late Qing/early Republic and in the reformist present.

The heyday of the state-society approach was this decade after 1989. Below, I will discuss some of the major contributions from that general time period. To finish the historical trajectory to the present, however, let's first discuss the rise of the study of modern authoritarianism as a field, not as a catch-all relegation category. By the early 2000s, it became clear that not all autocracies were (slowly) emerging democracies. It also became clear that some autocracies, but especially China, could not only appear stable, they could also appear dynamically stable – in the sense that they could respond to crises and emerge changed, but stronger and still no closer to democratic rule.

And then all hell broke loose. The Global Financial Crisis happened, then Brexit, and then Trump. Democratic discontent within developed, rich democracies spiked. As a system to be admired or desired, democracy lost much of its cache. Authoritarian backsliding seems to be a global phenomenon, including the United States (Mickey, Levitsky, and Way, *Foreign Affairs*, 2017).

But even before Trump, there was a renewed interest in understanding autocracies as a system(s) of rule. In a sense, due to the neglect of this notion of autocracy as a system of rule, especially after 1989, we had to return to the 1950s.³ But people were better trained and the divide between China and comparative, not to mention American, was not so stark. Some of us went in a functional direction – mapping out the system and how it worked. Others turned to political behavior and studies of political participation, drawing from American Politics and work in comparative democracies.

³ There was, of course, earlier literature on authoritarianism and totalitarianism, which was relatively neglected in the initial years after 1989. Much of the work on Latin American autocracy was integrated into the “transitology” literature.

If the earlier time period, is any indication of what should happen now, we should see a turn away from institutions and away from formal political behavior and towards state-society or state-in-society approaches. Pepinsky (*BJPS*, 2014) suggested something similar in a recent essay, warning that the “institutional turn in comparative authoritarianism risks privileging research on ‘surface’ politics at the expense of ‘deep’ politics” (p. 650).

I provide this short and incomplete historical summary to place the state-in-society approach in the broader context. I also do so to demonstrate how our discipline is affected by current events, how it seems impossible to analyze China without being affected by normative judgments of the political milieu in which we live.

State-in-Society Approach

The state-in-society approach is associated most closely with Joel Migdal, a political scientist at the University of Washington. Migdal has written that this approach was a reaction against the statist turn in political science discussed above. It is motivated to study domination and the agency of “social forces” in resisting domination. It does so partially by “disaggregating” the state and analyzing the ways in which parts of the state could join with social actors to pursue common interests. In my own opinion, I think the approach also tends to emphasize dynamic relationships over stable equilibrium, to question linear relationships often posited in the discipline, to value the study of behavior over the study of attitudes, and to adhere to a contextually-embedded rationality. The approach might appear to be methodologically squishy, but it is positivistic, not post-modern.

Migdal developed this approach while teaching in his first academic post in Israel in the early 1970s, in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War. His words below convey the strong connection between its conceptual development and events on the ground.

In Israel in the wake of the 1967 and 1973 wars, these conflicts were intense and pervasive. The students witnessed them daily in the form of wildcat strikes, the overnight establishment of illegal settlements in the West Bank, resistance of numerous couples to state-mandated religious weddings...Israel was in turmoil...I asked if the conflicts that underlay these acts, as well as the coalitions that formed around them, might not tell us far more about patterns of domination and change than the designs and goals of single, admittedly powerful sites or actors (Migdal 2001, p. 10).

In a review of Migdal’s (1994) edited volume on the topic, which included two chapters on China, an APSR review criticized the approach for too much “conceptual ambiguity.” While I understand the concern, the criticism is based on an unrealistic expectation. The state-in-society approach is not a theory, it is a paradigm or conceptual frame. It brings with it certain untested assumptions about the relationship between state actors and citizens. The concepts themselves – what is the state, who is society – have to be empirically discovered in the process of interaction. The interaction might include displays of domination, compliance, cooptation or resistance. As Migdal also noted, this approach contains the possibility that state and social forces can mutually empower each other; it eschewed the assumption that civil society is always against the autocratic state, which underlay much of the work at the time on civil society and democratic transitions.

Applications in Chinese Studies

The contributions of the state-in-society approach in the China field have been largely conceptual and theoretical, though based on strong empirical foundations, almost always including extensive and intensive fieldwork or archival work. Due to its concentrated focus, its empirical findings are limited in the ability to generate generalizations, as I note again in the conclusion. However, its conceptual contributions have been significant. Given the space limitations here, I will mention briefly only a few: Vivienne Shue's work on the cellular state, Liz Perry's analysis of state formation and labor politics, Xueliang Ding's notion of institutional amphibiousness and Xuegang Zhou's analysis of unorganized collective action.⁴ The first three works explicitly invoke the state-society frame; the Zhou article provides a related conceptual model of how the institutional construction of the Chinese state can unexpectedly provide opportunities for social agency and mobilization.

Vivienne Shue's essay in the 1994 Migdal volume, "State Power and Social Organization in China," builds on her conceptualization of the "cellular state" (Shue 1988) - which built off earlier work on economic organization in China by Skinner and Donnithorne. Through fieldwork in rural parts of Hebei and Fujian, she found evidence for burgeoning grassroots associational life (among the self-employed and newly entrepreneurial farmers) that was perhaps moving civil society in China along a "state-corporatist path." She explicitly argues that this boom in associational life was breaking down the cellularity of state-society relations and also empowering the state by enhancing its ability to gather information and implement policy (p. 83). Given that this still might be the case, a quarter of a century later, is significant, given how radically transformed China is in other ways that we political scientists take as most important - for example, per capita income or GDP.

In the same volume, Perry's "Labor Divided: sources of state formation in modern China" examines state formation in two time periods - the Nationalist Regime, 1927-1949 and the Communist Regime, 1949-1989, to show how these two regimes linked up with different parts of the Shanghai working classes. Perry frames her analysis as a critique of Euro-centric theories of state formation that failed to disaggregate the working classes, which led to unrealistic expectations about working-class consciousness and the potential for social revolution. In a sense, the success of the Chinese revolution was based on divisions between workers, not their unity. Upon the Communist takeover of Shanghai, and eventually the whole country, the earlier networks between Communist Party activists and skilled artisans shaped the development of the Maoist welfare state toward "exclusivity and paternalism" (p. 163). This workplace-based system of inequity has proved to be remarkably durable. Even in the most recent iterations of workplace reform and labor law reform, the Chinese state continues to prefer workplace-based systems of protection and insurance that privilege certain types and strata of workers, while leaving those in the "low-end" with scarce security.

Xueliang Ding (*BJPS*, 1994) pits his concepts of "institutional amphibiousness" and "institutional conversion" against the dominant construct of the time - "civil society against the (late communist) state." Institutional amphibiousness captures an important facet of Chinese society, which is its tendency to construct associational life in the image of the Communist state. Liu Xiaobo captured this brilliantly when he was interviewed for the documentary, *The Gate of Heavenly Peace*.⁵ In it he recounts observing a student leader "tourist map in hand" making military plans as the "commander in chief

⁴ Arguably, O'Brien and Li's concept of rightful resistance (1996; 2006) could also be included here. I've left it out assuming that it will be covered in other sections on contentious action.

⁵ The comments are at about 1:45 in the first part of the documentary.

of the student security division.” Liu laughs as he relates the student’s vocabulary to an old Communist propaganda film, “Victory to Victory” as he wonders “how did I end up involved with this bunch?” Ding, however, also shows how socialist institutions, which are constructed to limit social solidarity and break down horizontal connections, can also be appropriated by social actors for acts of rebellion and resistance against the state.

In a similar way, Xueguang Zhou’s (ASR, 1993) work on unorganized collective action demonstrated how large-scale rebellions and mass protests against the state could occur even in (or especially in) the absence of autonomous civil associations and pluralist politics. Using the Hundred Flowers Movement and the 1986 Student Demonstrations as examples, Zhou shows that the paucity of intervening actors and targets for social grievances can concentrate contention on the state. This might still help explain why Chinese contentious action is so often directed at state actors even when the misdeeds – bosses who don’t pay wages, factories that pollute the local neighborhood, restaurants that violate food safety standards – are committed by private actors.

Current and Future Developments

The state-in-society approach is most often identified with the politics of the everyday as opposed to engagement with formal political institutions. Methodologically it is associated with qualitative research, especially focused case studies and anthropological methods such as participant observation and ethnography. Despite this association with qualitative methods, as a conceptual frame, the state-society approach does not necessarily only have affinity with qualitative work. However, given its strong interest in how state institutions and social forces are mutually constituted and can even mutually empower, it is not particularly suited to questions that are narrowly focused on explaining causality.

Despite that limitation, the state-in-society approach continues to be useful to understand the development of associational life in China and patterns of social solidarity. For example, in current work on the responsiveness of the Chinese state, debates about the success and limitations of China’s consultative authoritarianism continues. Findings are diverse. Teets (*The China Quarterly*, 2013) argues in line with the state-society “mutual empowerment” thesis. However, Looney (*The China Quarterly*, 2015) argues that rural reconstruction has been far less consultative and more “top-down” and inflexible. In a similar vein, Gao and Tyson’s (*The China Quarterly*, 2017) work on administrative reform and social organizations in Guangzhou is pessimistic that delegation to SOs improves governance or public goods provision.

As the rate of urbanization in China intensifies, I believe it is especially important to research intra-societal (not only state-societal) conflict over distribution and redistribution. The Chinese government’s plan to urbanize hundreds of millions of rural residents and migrants over the next twenty years will create (is already creating) massive pressure on local governments not just to expand public goods provision and accelerate hukou reform, but also to manage conflicts between urbanites and the newly urbanizing. The state-in-society approach is particularly suited to understanding these moments when new alliances may be forming between state and social actors. More work should be done within schools, workplaces, villages, and neighborhoods to understand how this is playing out across different political economies across the country. As with the research on consultative authoritarianism, findings will vary across the country, which is to be expected given China’s internal diversity. This will make generalizations and overarching statements about the nature of state-society

relations in China more difficult. It also provides opportunities for comparative research at the subnational level.

Just as structural functionalism wore out its welcome in the first decade of post WW II modern political science, the institutional turn in comparative authoritarianism (and in the study of Chinese authoritarianism) has its limits. It encourages work that is both superficial and narrow (Pepinsky BJPS 2014). A state-in-society approach also has its limitations, but during a time of political upheaval and mass discontent toward normal politics (most clearly obvious outside of China, at least so far...), Migdal's advice in 1994 and Pepinsky's in 2014 to turn away from institutions should be seriously considered.