# Defining the State: It's a Family Affair

Seva Gunitsky
Department of Political Science, University of Toronto

Frank Zappa once claimed that the defining mark of a state is having "a beer and an airline." If only things were so easy. As it turns out, defining "the state" is a considerably more complicated and perhaps even quixotic task. In their article, Butcher and Griffiths make a valiant and useful attempt to offer a transhistorical, "acultural" definition of the state, and to situate that concept within varied political systems and global orders. This is, to put it mildly, an ambitious task for a nine-page article. The fact that they do not fully succeed should not detract from the lucid and helpful insights produced by the paper.

At its root, the article is grasping for a common conceptual language, and thus for a common meaning with which to see the international system through history—part Giovanni Sartori, part Viktor Frankl. Linguistic metaphors abound, from the Babel of the title to the repeated calls for "a consistent vocabulary" (328, 329, 330, 335). So perhaps it's appropriate that my response draws upon the work of a linguist—Ludwig Wittgenstein—as the source of its critique. Here I want to set aside the various elements of the Butcher-Griffiths argument, and focus on their definition of the state. After all, as they note, from that definition flows much of the rest of the argument—"[t]he composition of both anarchy and hierarchy depends on how you define the state" (331.) Put briefly, I argue that any definition of a state that invokes the language of necessary and sufficient conditions—as Butcher and Griffiths do—is doomed to run into serious problems, and that Wittgenstein's concept of "family resemblance" may be a more productive approach to creating a universal definition of the state.

Butcher and Griffiths adopt a two-part definition. First, drawing on Tilly, they define states as "coercion-wielding organizations that...exercise clear priority in some respects...over all other organizations within" a territory (Tilly 1992, 1-2, quoted in Butcher and Griffiths 2017, 330). These "some respects" include basic state functions like "taxation, the mobilization of armed force, and the creation/administration of law and justice" (331). Significantly, as they note, some states may delegate these powers to other sub-state entities like cities or even powerful families. Doing so produces "structurally differentiated" states that cede much of their authority to sub-state actors—yet they remain states because these sub-state actors accept both "the center's supremacy" and the "limits on their ability to interact with other states" (331).

Practically speaking, it's hard to envision a state-like entity that collects no taxes, mobilizes no armed forces, creates no laws and administers no justice—yet still retains supremacy and foreign policy control over the sub-state actors to whom they delegate these tasks. And presumably Butcher and Griffiths don't expect this either—rather, they seem to claim that states vary in the degree to which they exercise these functions, and that such variation is built into the structural differentiation of states. In stating that states exercise a "clear

priority" over "some" of these functions, the argument implies that there is a threshold of state activity below which the organization ceases to act like a state. How they function once they reach this threshold, however, varies across space and time (and accounting for this variation is part of trying to create a common conceptual language with which to describe states).

The second part of the definition, on the other hand, invokes a necessary condition—the ability to conduct foreign policy and "manage its own diplomatic affairs," which Butcher and Griffiths equate with possessing "external sovereignty" (330). It is this move that allows them to separate states from other entities like "federacies, protectorates, and various other types of vassalage that cannot enter into relations with other states as an equal" (330). Interestingly, the ability to enter into relations as equals implies a degree of peer recognition, but the two need not go together. The USSR, for example, was not recognized by the US until 1933, but presumably still qualified as a state since it had control over its foreign policy beginning around 1921.

But the inescapable problem of defining a state by a necessary condition is that we can almost always find states—or at least, entities commonly accepted as states—that fail to possess this critical necessary condition. Here are four categories in which this requirement creates definitional issues, from least to most problematic:

First, this definition clearly excludes states under foreign occupation—thus Austria, for example, ceases to be a state between 1937 and 1955. We may be willing to say that Austria is not a state in 1938, but can we say the same in 1954? Perhaps, although the vast majority of datasets would disagree.

Second, under this definition many countries experiencing civil war would also cease to be states—namely, in those cases where control over foreign policy itself becomes contested.

Third, this requirement would also exclude failed states that have no power to conduct foreign policy and are held up only by the barest thread of peer recognition—Somalia, for example. In such states, sub-state actors rather than the state itself are in the business of foreign policy. Studies of African politics, as Douglas Lemke (2003:129) points out, abound with examples of "substate political actors forming alliances with each other, waging wars, trading—in short, carrying out traditional international relations activities even though they are not official states."

Fourth, this requirement also excludes entities like members of the Warsaw Pact for the duration of the Cold War. Though *de jure* independent states and full-fledged UN members, the Warsaw Pact countries (perhaps with the exception of Romania) had very little room for an independent foreign policy for the majority of the Pact's existence. Are the authors prepared to say that Poland, for example, was not actually a state for long stretches between 1945 and 1989, since it did not possess independent control over its foreign policy? I'm not so sure.

In short, any definition of a state that posits necessary conditions is bound to run into anomalies. I propose that a more tenable definition would abandon the language of necessary and sufficient conditions altogether, and instead focus on the notion of "stateness" as family resemblance.

In his 1953 book *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein argued for the idea of a family resemblance as a way to think about complex and amorphous concepts. When seeking to define a concept like a "game," for example, we should not look for a common unifying

pre-requisite, or some basic quality that unites all games under a single conceptual umbrella. As Wittgenstein argues, there may not even be a single characteristic common to every single member of the "games" category, and the search for such necessary conditions is thus futile. Instead, members of the category are included because they share certain features that recognizably link them together under the same conceptual umbrella.

Note, by the way, that the first part of the Butcher-Griffiths definition actually comes close to adopting a "family resemblance" approach - while there are certain common domestic functions that all states fulfill, there is not a single domestic function that *must* be a part of the state's repertoire in order to be declared a state. The second element of the definition, however, undercuts this approach by adopting the language of necessary conditions and in doing so generates intractable anomalies.

I don't pretend to offer any sort of definitional solution here. A "family resemblance" approach to stateness will undoubtedly produce its own (perhaps lethal) problems that are far too convoluted to examine here. Moreover, I hope the authors take the argument here as a constructive critique of their lucid, ambitious, and helpful article. Domesticating an unruly concept, let alone a series of essentially contested concepts, sets a very high bar for a conversation about the nature of states and international systems. Butcher and Griffiths have produced a valuable contribution to this conversation, but the debate continues.