

# The Parameters of State Autonomy<sup>25</sup>

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The notion of state autonomy reminds us about the connection between different levels of analysis, because any comprehensive reflection on that issue compels us to make a connection between the level of the state on the one hand and the international and the sub-national (local) levels on the other. There is a lesson of general relevance here: much development research in recent years has tended to fixate itself on one level and then remain there. That means we get, either very micro-oriented studies from villages or other 'small' contexts; or we get highly macro oriented studies, e.g. trends of globalisation in the international system. Those studies may be helpful, but it is often a very productive and illuminating exercise to make analytical connections between the levels. Development research ought to encompass all levels from the tiniest micro to the largest macro. The discussion of state autonomy productively leads us in the direction of making such connection. My discussion here will focus on the state and from there make connections to the system 'above' the state and the society 'below' the state.

The discussion of state autonomy rests on the *assumption* that states are very important institutions for the promotion of socio-economic development. Radical *neo-liberals* have questioned that assumption in recent decades arguing that bureaucrats in particular and states in general contribute nothing to development; sometimes they are not even considered 'zeroes' but 'minuses' in the development equation. This neo-liberal critique is wrong. States are important for development and therefore it is important to discuss the parameters of state autonomy.

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Yet we should also avoid adoption of the standpoint diametrically opposite from neo-liberalism. We may call it the 'statist' view. Statists appear to assume, without prior questioning, that states are by definition good for development. The implication is that state autonomy is a good thing that should always be maximised so as to maximise the positive developmental influence from states. In any case, when we reject the statist as well as the neo-liberal view, we get to the following two research questions: What is state autonomy? And: under which circumstances does state autonomy contribute positively to processes of development?

The first question is the easy one: state autonomy is freedom of manoeuvre for state elites and their bureaucratic machineries. (This really requires a discussion of relations between state elites and bureaucrats but I cannot go into such an 'opening up' of the state here). As noted by Skocpol, a minimum of such autonomy means that states "may formulate and pursue goals that are not simply reflective of the demands or interests of social groups, classes, or society" (Skocpol 1985:9). We might add: goals that are not simply reflective of the demands of external actors, such as the International Financial Institutions. Maximum autonomy is a situation where states are completely independent of internal and external interests. Such a possibility is purely theoretical, but there have been situations approximating it, for example Mao Zedong's situation in the People's Republic of China in the 1960s.

Given there are different degrees of state autonomy what is the *appropriate degree of autonomy* in terms of maximising a positive contribution to development? We now approach the second question set forth earlier (under which circumstances does state autonomy contribute positively to processes of development?). I am afraid that there is not a brief answer to that question which can be universally applied. The short answer can only be this: *that depends*. The rest of my presentation is devoted to expanding on this: if it 'depends', then on what and how does it 'depend'? I could say: it depends on historical circumstances, but that is of course merely another way of avoiding a more substantial answer.

We may start by noting that very *high degrees of autonomy* have more than once contributed to produce predation and thus *underdevelopment* instead of development. The long rule of Mobutu in Zaire is a favourite example of many authors; after all, he was one of the richest men in the world when he finally died. What gave Mobutu an extreme measure of autonomy? Domestically, there were no social groups outside of the state sufficiently strong to challenge his position. Mobutu's neo-patrimonial state was not about development anyway; it was about enriching himself and a small group of

followers. His state services were up for sale to the highest bidder in context of patron-client relationships. It is sometimes said that the state autonomy required for development is especially autonomy from classes and groups involved in zero-sum activities, that is speculation, corruption, usury and the like. That is 'classes which derive wealth from unproductive activities or which are otherwise hostile to industrial development' (Hamilton 1987:1243). But in Zaire those groups were exactly Mobutu himself and his clique, the state elite was thus part of the problem. When the political elite is itself the strongest zero-sum group in society we can hardly expect it to act as a developmental state in any meaningful way. That kind of autonomy is a real problem for development.

What turned Mobutu into a predator? I have noted the lack of domestic constraint on him, but what about the *international context*? Many people will think about Mobutu as highly constrained by external forces. He was head of a desperately poor country, economically and politically dependent. This is all true. There is even a book by Sean Kelly called '*America's Tyrant*' (1993), which records how Mobutu was dependent on the CIA which saved him from coup attempts by rival military factions on more than one occasion. One explanation for Mobutu then, is that he could conduct his dirty deals under CIA protection. He was a puppet of imperialism and that's the end of that. His autonomy was all domestic and not in the least external.

There is a lot of truth in that story but it is misleading in a basic sense. That is because it stipulates that Mobutu was completely in the pocket of the CIA. He was not, for the simple reason that he was the leader of a sovereign state. Formal independence is often downplayed by political economists, but that is a mistake. Formal independence, that is, *juridical sovereignty*, is of the utmost importance. At the moment of independence a new political, economic, social, and cultural sphere is created which has some substantial amount of autonomy. This new 'inside' of domestic sphere can still be influenced by external forces of course, but the conditions of operation are very different from before. On the one hand, there is a new need on the part of outsiders for finding domestic allies; that implies some sort of bargaining situation between insiders and outsiders. Mobutu was not merely in the pocket of the CIA, he bargained with them: you do this for me, I do this for you; he had bargaining autonomy. On the other hand, interventions in sovereign states cannot be conducted in complete ignorance of the rules of international society. After all, the basic norm of juridical sovereignty is non-intervention which means that acts of intervention have to be justified. So both in the domestic and in the international sphere the rules of the game change in ways which provide *increased autonomy to domestic actors*.

The Parametres of State Autonomy

Development of international norms after the Second World War has increased the value of juridical sovereignty. The reason is simple: in the old days states were constantly at each others throats. War between states was an important aspect of state building as emphasised by Charles Tilly's well-known phrase: 'states made war and war made states'. An important ingredient in war was the conquest of enemy territory: the stronger swallowed the weaker. We have countless examples of this in Europe. According to international norms after WW2 however, borders are sacrosanct. They can only be changed with the consent of the affected parties. That new norm has provided additional autonomy for weak states. No matter how weak, they will not be swallowed by stronger states. Yet this can also be a free pass for predatory elites to run states into the ground: no matter what the extent of misery and dissolution, we still pretend that there is a Somalian state. *The weak are no longer swallowed, they are merely allowed to disintegrate.*

Compare Mobutu to *Chiang Kai Shek* on Taiwan in 1950. Chiang had perhaps even more domestic autonomy than Mobutu. He had just arrived from the Mainland after being badly beaten by Mao, and thus had no constituency on Taiwan. At the same time, he was an even bigger rascal than Mobutu, responsible for even more corruption and killing of innocent people during his time on the Mainland. In short, a disgusting fellow with as much domestic autonomy as Mobutu. Why was he not a predator? What made him into one of the developmental state heroes, heading the perhaps most singularly successful development model in the whole postwar era? The simple answer is *external pressure*, two kinds of it. The first was from the Mainland: Chiang was afraid Mao would come and eat him for breakfast. The second was from the Americans. Dismayed with his performance on the Mainland, the Americans gave Chiang an ultimatum: behave decently or lose our support. They backed it up with advisors, pushing for agrarian reform and a host of other development measures.

That brings us to an important conclusion: *External pressure* or constraint which reduces full autonomy of the state is *not in itself negative* or counter-productive. It need not lead to underdevelopment. It can indeed lead to development. External pressure in itself is not the problem. It all *depends on the concrete content of that pressure.*

Before moving on to evaluating the degree and content of contemporary external pressure on developing countries, it is relevant to address to domestic situation. From previous scholarship including Peter Evans (1995), Clive Hamilton (1987), Gordon White (1984), Richard Sandbrook (1985) and many others, as well as from the examples given above, we know that a very high degree of domestic autonomy may very well be counterproductive in

development terms; it can easily lead to predation. To be developmental, states not only need a measure of autonomy, they also need to be embedded in society. Embedded in what way? The simple answer is: *the developmental state is connected to the good guys and not at all connected to the bad guys*. Who are the bad guys? That has already been indicated: the classes and groups involved in zero-sum activities, such as traditional agrarian powerholders, foreign and domestic speculators. Part of the state's problem is that there may be zero-sum groups in the state itself, such as sections of the military or the bureaucracy or some state enterprises.

Who are the *good guys*? According to Peter Evans, they are first and foremost *domestic industrialists*. I quote: "Connections that privilege industrialists allow the developmental state to focus on a project of industrial transformation, to keep its involvement selective, and to avoid having its bureaucratic capacities overwhelmed" (1995:234). In a broader perspective, state ties to *popular groups* such as associations of workers and peasants, are also important. In short, industrial ties tend to produce growth, broader popular ties tend to produce welfare, and we can count both achievements as a part of a broader development process. Again, you will note that my general thesis is confirmed: domestic autonomy can be good or bad; it depends on its concrete substance.

How is the situation in terms of domestic autonomy? In gross oversimplification, it seems that *East Asian* states have been connected to the good guys (the industrialists), *a few states here and there* have been connected to the good guys in terms of popular forces (Costa Rica, Kerala in India, maybe some of the Latin American countries today), a great many states in *Asia and in Latin America* are at least partly embedded with the bad guys, and the *Sub-Saharan African states* are generally only embedded with themselves and that has most often led to predation.

There is a caveat here which should be drawn out in the open. The notion of 'embedded' or 'connected' as a description between the state and groups in society is potentially unclear, to say the least. What does such embeddedness actually mean? Peter Evans emphasises that it does entail a dependency relation where the state is merely expressing the interests of groups in society. 'Embeddedness' means that on the one hand, state elites and their bureaucracies are able to impose decisions on groups in society, for example the introduction of competition to improve efficiency and quality. On the other hand, 'embeddedness' means connections which provide channels of information and which pave the way for effective implementation: "Efficacious states combine well-developed, bureaucratic internal organization with dense public-private ties. The recipe works only if both

The Parametres of State Autonomy

elements are present" (Evans 1995:72). In other words, the connections implied in 'embeddness' contain a special kind of state power which has nothing to do with coercive power. It is sooner what Michael Mann has called "infrastructural power", i.e. "the institutional capacity of a central state ... to penetrate its territories and logistically implement decisions. This is ... 'power through' society, coordinating social life through state infrastructures" (Mann 1993:59).

What can be done to create a better situation in terms of domestic autonomy? The standard answer is *democratisation* and in the long run I believe that is the correct answer. But democratisation takes an awfully long time to develop, especially where the societal conditions are adverse, such as in Sub-Saharan Africa (cf. Sørensen 1998). Therefore, early results from scattered electoral processes should not be expected. Democracy cannot be installed overnight. I believe that there is even a need for developing new models of democracy different from the standard liberal models of the West, and better suited to development country conditions, but this is not an easy task.

Situations *change over time*, especially because successful development breeds new social groups that change the relationship between state and society. Embedded autonomy in South Korea today is different from what it was 25 years ago. Unsuccessful development on the other hand, tends to produce less change and more stagnation.

Let me relate the discussion of domestic affairs to the external pressure. External developments clearly present both new opportunities and new constraints. The current phase of globalisation is no exception. As a rule of thumb, *success in development breeds success*. That is, those countries best equipped in terms of embedded state autonomy and good state capacity are those with the better possibilities for exploiting opportunities and avoiding constraints. For the weakest states, such as many states in Sub-Saharan Africa, the situation is one of increased constraint. One might even add, that to get the developmental dynamic of 'embedded autonomy' going, a certain level of development is a pre-condition. If there are no local industrialists, for example, they cannot figure in an 'embedded' relationship with the state. And local industrialists presupposes a minimum level of industrial development.

The specific type of external constraint is related, not only to the level of domestic development, but also to its *specific profile*: East Asian countries have been squeezed by the Fund and the Bank in context of the financial crisis. So have the large countries in Latin America. This is all related to a process of increased interdependence: a crisis in one place is quickly felt everywhere else. Market liberalisation, especially for financial flows, have created a

Georg Sørensen

situation of high vulnerability for many countries, including the developed ones.

Let me focus on the weak states and end with what I hope will be a provocative view. Given the domestic situation in most weak states, where state elites are most often either too autonomous or, alternatively, in bed with the wrong guys, there is, in the short run, *no alternative to external pressure* and thus, to external constraint. If domestic forces are unable to discipline the state, external forces need to take on the job. The alternative is predation and maldevelopment.

What does that mean in concrete terms? It means, for example, that the IMF should not continue to bail out the ruling oligarchy in Russia, because it only postpones the day of reckoning for a sick economy and a predatory elite. Instead, it should apply maximum pressure for real economic and social reform. In Sub-Saharan Africa it means that international institutions and individual donors should sustain the pressure for achieving better governance. What we should do, is not argue for an easing of the pressure. Instead, we should point out all the instances where policies are short-sighted, counterproductive, and in pursuit of narrow donor-interests. The struggle then, is for *changing the content of the pressure for good governance in direction of the best possible measures. It is not for removing the pressure*, because there is no alternative to it in the current situation.

I hope to have demonstrated my main thesis: the answer to the question is: What is the appropriate degree of autonomy in terms of maximising a positive contribution to development is: that depends ... It depends on historical circumstances; I hope to have identified the most important of them in this essay. Put differently, the discussion of autonomy is a moving target that is not easily pinned down by a general theory. As a starting point, we may say that both too much and too little state autonomy is problematic from the view of promoting development. A more precise answer requires the study of concrete historical situations.

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