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Across Disciplines**

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A STATE OF AMBIGUITY: THE MEANING OF “STATE” ACROSS DISCIPLINES

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Abstract: The term ‘state’ seems deceptively straightforward. We use it so often that we may assume we all mean the same thing by it. It appears not only in everyday discussions, but also in academia, across law, political science, philosophy, international relations, sociology, and other disciplines. Closer examination reveals that ‘state’ is, in fact, a term whose content subtly shifts with the contexts characteristic of different areas of study. These shifts often remain implicit, giving rise to misunderstandings that are not merely terminological, but conceptual in nature.

This article examines the ambiguity of the term ‘state’ by analysing how it is defined and employed across different fields of scholarly inquiry. Drawing on insights from analytic philosophy of language, it argues that the ambiguity of ‘state’ is primarily lexical, while also having an important pragmatic dimension. The complexity of the term ‘state’ across research disciplines arises from divergent disciplinary assumptions and research aims. The paper reconstructs different understandings of statehood, with particular attention to the criteria set out in the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, and explores how elements such as population, territory, government, and capacity to enter into international relations are variously interpreted, emphasised, or questioned. By situating these differing readings within their respective theoretical contexts, the article highlights the practical and theoretical consequences of treating the concept of the state as fixed. It concludes that the meaning of ‘state’ should be approached as open to revision, especially in light of contemporary challenges such as territorial loss caused by climate change.

Keywords: State; Criteria of Statehood; Pragmatic Ambiguity; Meaning of Language; Disciplinary Context.

Resumo: O termo «Estado» é um conceito aparentemente simples. Usamo-lo com tanta frequência que podemos assumir que todos lhe atribuímos o mesmo significado. Este termo aparece não só em discussões quotidianas,

mas também no meio acadêmico, em áreas como o direito, a ciência política, a filosofia, as relações internacionais, a sociologia e outras disciplinas. Uma análise mais aprofundada revela que «Estado» é, na verdade, um termo cujo conteúdo muda sutilmente consoante os contextos característicos das diferentes áreas de estudo. Estas mudanças permanecem frequentemente subentendidas, dando origem a mal-entendidos que não se limitam à terminologia, indo além da natureza conceitual.

Este artigo examina a ambiguidade do termo «estado», analisando como é definido e utilizado em diferentes campos de investigação acadêmica. Com base em reflexões da filosofia analítica da linguagem, defende que a ambiguidade do termo «estado» é principalmente lexical, embora possua também uma importante dimensão pragmática. A complexidade do termo «estado» nas diferentes disciplinas de investigação decorre de pressupostos disciplinares e objetivos de investigação divergentes.

O artigo reconstrói diferentes interpretações do conceito de Estado, com especial atenção aos critérios estabelecidos na Convenção de Montevideu sobre os Direitos e Deveres dos Estados, e explora a forma como elementos tais como população, território, governo e capacidade de estabelecer relações internacionais são interpretados, enfatizados ou questionados de diversas maneiras. Ao situar essas diferentes interpretações nos seus respectivos contextos teóricos, o artigo destaca as consequências práticas e teóricas de tratar o conceito de Estado como algo fixo. Conclui que o significado de «Estado» deve ser abordado como passível de revisão, especialmente à luz dos desafios contemporâneos, como a perda territorial causada pelas alterações climáticas.

Palavras-chave: Estado; Critérios de Estado; Ambiguidade Pragmática; Significado da Linguagem; Contexto Disciplinar.

1. Introduction

The term “state” is deceptively simple. It pervades discussions in law, political science, and philosophy, yet its meaning is far from uniform. Such a multiplicity of meanings creates conceptual uncertainty that can hinder precise analysis, lead to interpretive errors, and complicate interdisciplinary dialogue. The aim of this paper is to explore the phenomenon of ambiguity in the possible readings of “state” across disciplines, examining how it is defined and used, which of its elements are perceived by scholars as

prerequisites of a state and which are often overlooked, with a view to highlighting the challenges connected with the use of this term.

By ambiguity I understand the fact that a sign bears at least two different legitimate meanings. Considering possible readings of “state”, I will resort to the general meaning of “ambiguity”, associated with the use and understanding of language: with certain lack of clarity. In this approach, the term “state” is ambiguous whenever its application is uncertain, doubtful, or equivocal. I do not find that the restricted meaning of “ambiguity”, according to which words are ambiguous if they bear multiple definitions and sentence structures that enable more than one possible reading, would be sufficient here (Schane, 2002: 167). As I will argue, the reading of “state” is dependent, first, on lexical properties of the term, and second, on the context in which it is employed.

Moreover, I will approach the ambiguity of “state” from the perspective of an external judgment. According to Farnsworth, *et al.* (2010: 6), saying that the term is ambiguous can carry two meanings: it can be either (1) a claim that ordinary native speakers would disagree about its reading (this is the external judgment), or (2) a private conclusion that, regardless of what others might think, the reader is unsure how best to read it (the internal judgment).

The reason why I lean toward the external judgment of whether the term “state” should be deemed ambiguous is that my aim is to present how “state” is understood in contemporary theoretical accounts. My focus is, thus, not on how a single person understands what a state is, but rather on how the notion of “state” is perceived and how its core elements are defined in different areas of study.

The main method employed in the research is contemporary analytic philosophy of language. During the examination of the reconstructed definitions and conceptions of “state”, I will refer to ideas, arguments, and cases analysed in the literature.

2. How is “state” ambiguous

From the point of view of linguistics, types (and, hence, sources) of ambiguities are categorised in numerous different ways (Bach, 1998; Hutchins, 1992; Trujillo, 1999; Wasow, 2003). Following the division of types

of ambiguity into four groups, i.e., lexical, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic ambiguity (Ceccato, *et al.*, 2004)¹, I will determine how the noun “state” is ambiguous. Bearing in mind that the scope of this paper is limited, I will focus on “state” as a noun only and leave aside the analysis of “state” as a verb or an adjective.

First of all, the term “state” alone clearly cannot be either syntactically or semantically ambiguous. Syntactic ambiguity occurs when there are many logical (syntactic) forms that correspond to the same sentence; it can be localised at the level of full sentences or phrases, not separate words (Sennet, 2021). Also, semantic ambiguity refers to full sentences only – those which have more than one way of reading within their context (Ceccato, *et al.*, 2004). Semantic ambiguity is in a way “scopal”, involving operators and quantifiers; it relates to e.g., assignments, binding, or reference uncertainties.

Lexical ambiguity is claimed to occur when one word has several meanings, which usually refers to the situation in which a term has at least two legitimate dictionary entries. There are numerous suggestions as to how the category should be subdivided; traditionally, lexical ambiguity is divided into polysemy, homonymy, and homophony (Sennet, 2021).

“State” can be clearly deemed lexically ambiguous. Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries list as many as five legitimate meanings of this term as a noun; it can be understood as:

- 1) country – a country considered as an organized political community controlled by one government;
- 2) part of country – an organized political community forming part of a country;
- 3) government – the government of a country;
- 4) condition of somebody/something – the mental, emotional or physical condition that a person or thing is in;
- 5) official ceremony – the formal ceremonies connected with high levels of government or with kings and queens.

1. See also Pool (2006); Bünzli and Höfler (2012: 21–42).

While the definitions provided in (1)-(3) may be assessed as polysemous, all three are homonymous to the definitions provided in (4) as well as in (5).

Syntactic, semantic, and lexical ambiguities have been traditionally identified in the literature on the topic, since it was noticed that confining ambiguity to these does not seem sufficient in light of the reality of complex social relations. It has been argued that there are many sentences that are ambiguous neither syntactically nor semantically, but in some other way (Donnellan, 1966: 298). This formed a basis for distinguishing pragmatic ambiguity, which occurs when a sentence has several meanings in the context in which it is uttered. The context comprises the linguistic context, i.e., the sentences uttered before and after, and the context beyond language, i.e., the situation and circumstances of the utterance, the background knowledge and expectations of the speaker and hearer, their beliefs, intentions, expectations, and many other factors that influence their understanding and interpretation of language expressions.

In the further analysis, I will focus on the pragmatic ambiguity of “state”. Although covered by this general definition, the readings of “state” change slightly depending on the context – political, legal, geopolitical, philosophical, sociological, and others – in which the term is used. I will argue that the meaning of “state” is highly context-sensitive and changes, i.a., due to the domain in which the term is uttered.

3. How is “state” understood in public international law

Formulating a uniform definition of the state is all the more difficult since proponents of ontological individualism maintain that a state does not really exist: for them, “state” is an abstract construct of our mind, an imagined entity. For nominalists, corporate agency, such as the state, is just a useful fiction or metaphor to describe what are in fact the actions of individuals. On the contrary, realists claim that corporate agents, i.a., states, refer to real, emergent phenomena which cannot be reduced to individuals; for them, not only does a state exist, but it is a person, too (Wendt, 1999: 215).

As nebulous as the concept of the state in philosophy is, the content of “state” is delineated in international law for pragmatic reasons. An explicit definition of the term was formulated as early as 1933 in the Montevideo

Convention on the Rights and Duties of States². According to its Article 1, the state as a person of international law should possess the following attributes: (a) a permanent population; (b) a defined territory; (c) government; and (d) capacity to enter into relations with other states. Consequently, the concept of the state is used today in at least four basic meanings: (a) as a special kind of global organisation of society, an organization of citizens, as a human (civic) community; (b) as a certain area defined by borders, within which people are subject to a single state authority (the state as a country); (c) as a structure of public authorities, the state apparatus, a hierarchy of bodies and offices; and (d) as a subject of international law and international relations (Kuciński, 2019: 20).

Since 1933, all the elements of the state listed in the Convention have been subject to extensive debate. There have also been other characteristics of a state, not envisaged in the Convention, discussed in the literature. This resulted in the formulation of a myriad of different definitions of “state” as well as in the specification of characteristics that an entity needs to possess to be called a “state”.

In his entry in the *Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Law*, Crawford (2011: §§ 2-8) lists five “exclusive and general” principles constituting, in legal terms, the core of the concept of statehood, namely:

- i. being sovereign, which means that a state must be attributed with plenary competence to perform acts, make treaties, and so on, in the international sphere;
- ii. being exclusively competent with respect to the state’s own internal affairs, which means that the state’s jurisdiction over internal matters is *prima facie* both plenary and not subject to the control of other states;
- iii. not being subject to compulsory international process, jurisdiction, or settlement without the state’s consent, given either generally or in the specific case;

2. Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, adopted 26 December 1933, entered into force 26 December 1934, 165 LNTS 19.

- iv. having equal status and standing to other entities considered as states;
- v. that derogations from these principles cannot be presumed: in case of doubt an international court or tribunal will tend to decide in favour of the freedom of action of states.

Crawford perceives these attributes as characteristics that allow an entity to be called a “state” for purposes of international law. He generalises his view to claim that to be a state is to have a range of powers and responsibilities at the international level. He also tackles approaches taken towards the “state” in numerous sources of international law. He explains that it should not be considered a requirement of being a “state” to have rights and obligations under international law or to be responsible for conduct that is internationally wrongful; nor should it be the competence to develop or change since not only states – and not all states – possess such a capacity (Crawford, 2011: §§ 9-10).

Such discrepancies in the understanding of “state” illustrate the absence of an agreed-upon definition of what the state is in the field of international relations. Yale H. Ferguson and Richard W. Mansbach (1988: 112) argue that such opacity in a term so central to the discipline is an impediment to further study since, in the absence of consensus, each new project needs to start by defining the state anew. As they claim, an autonomous discipline requires a stable concept unique to it and over which there is substantial agreement.

My aim for the subsequent part of the paper is to examine how the prerequisites for “state”, as defined in the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, are approached – both in the field of international relations and outside it.

4. Core elements of state

The first attribute of a state according to the definition adopted in the Convention is “a permanent population”. This element is often mentioned by sociologists, who claim that, although the concept of state is very different in Eastern and Western cultural traditions, the state is a social construction and is based on society (Cipriani, 2017: 61-68). Some sociologists formulate definitions that treat the state simply as a human community – an organization, a social group. They view the state through the lens of social

roles and interactions and treat it as a large social target group, based on formalized membership – citizenship – with public authority institutions at its disposal (Kuciński, 2019: 19, 21).

The debate focusing on population as an element of a state is sometimes translated into the question of the relation between a state and a nation. A nation is often considered an abstract concept (Flint, 2022: 116), a human population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy, and common legal rights and duties for all members (Smith, 1999: 40).

In some theories, the concept of “nation” is completely separated from the concept of “state” (Flint, 2022: 108). Grotenhuis (2016), on the contrary, links the nation to the state and argues, first, that the state needs the nation to exist and, second, that having a national identity without a state is problematic in the modern world. He indicates that there are two approaches present in the literature as to whether the state presupposes the nation. Proponents of the first approach claim that nationhood is necessary for the state to build its authority over its people and its territory on solid ground. Nationhood is a prerequisite for the state to be able to create the sense of belonging needed for people to voluntarily accept the authority of the state. The contrary approach notices how emphasised people’s individual autonomy in the modern world is, and how increasingly individual and less collective culture and identity have become. In this view, a nation is rooted in communities and had existed long before the modern state was created; hence, a nation does not need a state and its institutions to exist (Crawford, 2011: § 9) (the examples might be Kurds in Iraq, Scots in Great Britain, or Catalans in Spain).

Notably, the second characteristic of a state listed in Article 1 of the Montevideo Convention, i.e., “a defined territory”, is mentioned in the vast majority of definitions of “state”. It is especially easy to find such definitions in the literature on geopolitics. For instance, Flint (2022: 103) argues that “state” is a more precise term for “country”, a unit defined by its possession of sovereignty over a territory and its people. Cox (2022: 250) claims that a state is a territorial organisation; that its borders geographically define its jurisdiction, i.e., a space within which a state enjoys the right to define what is legal and to enforce the law. Cox imagines a situation in which there exist states whose power is not territorial in the sense of being areal or bounded; in which people living in close proximity, such as neighbours or family

members, are subject to the laws of different, respective countries. As a downside of such a situation, Cox identifies a high level of geographic fragmentation of power, while what is required are states that respectively enjoy uninterrupted sovereign power over large, continuous areas that, in terms of their shape, are relatively compact: neither punctured, highly elongated, fragmented, nor indented.

Outside the area of geopolitics, Risse (2006: 672) accepts the condition of “territoriality” for a state, and simultaneously questions that the territory of a state needs to be “defined”. Among states he counts also such which “cannot effectively control their territory, whose boundaries are disputed, that are not widely recognised, or whose autonomy is compromised”.

In the light of these considerations, a question may arise: if a country loses its territory due to natural processes, will it cease to be a state? Examining this matter is, in fact, of great practical value. Nowadays, numerous atolls located within the Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean are soon to be submerged under the waters. This, in turn, threatens the existence of the states which lie on these atolls: e.g., Tuvalu, the Maldives, the Marshall Islands, and Kiribati.

Tuvalu, one of the smallest states in the world in terms of both its territory and population, consists of six atolls and three islands of coral origin, with some of its atolls comprising about thirty tiny islands. As NASA reports, according to the current best estimate of future warming, Tuvalu is expected to see around 72 cm of sea-level rise by 2100 (NASA, 2024). In recognition of the threat of losing its land territory, Tuvalu’s constitution³ explicitly declares that “the State of Tuvalu within its historical, cultural, and legal framework shall remain in perpetuity in the future, notwithstanding the impacts of climate change or other causes resulting in loss to the physical territory of Tuvalu”. What we may wonder is whether a state can remain in perpetuity if it loses its land territory, and whether a territory allowing an entity to be called a “state” might be maritime only.

3. Constitution of Tuvalu 1986, Article 2.

The answer to these questions is clear in light of the Convention on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone⁴. It declares that the sovereignty of a state extends to the territorial sea, which is a belt of sea adjacent to its coast (Article 1) and that the normal baseline for measuring the breadth of the territorial sea is the low-water line along the coast (Articles 3 and 10). Similarly, according to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea⁵, the sovereignty of a coastal state covers the territorial sea, which is a belt of sea adjacent to the state's land territory (Articles 2 and 121). If the way of determining the scope of the territorial sea remains unchanged, Tuvalu will lose its maritime area as soon as it becomes a rock that cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of its own (Article 121 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea).

If we accept that territory is not necessary for a state to exist, we could argue that Tuvalu will prevail solely with its population and government residing in another state. A solution to this problem could be a territory lease agreement concluded between Tuvalu and another state (Rayfuse, 2009), which would be similar to the situation of Malta leasing land and buildings that form part of Fort Saint Angelo to the Sovereign Military Order of Malta⁶. A practical problem, however, would be the probable reluctance of states to cede a portion of their territory to another state.

An alternative could be for Tuvalu to merge, possibly in a form of federation, with another state. This perspective also seems problematic, as states would probably not be willing to absorb the population of the disappearing Tuvalu. The ultimate solution appears to be the recognition of a deterritorialized state (Rayfuse, 2009).

4. Convention on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone, adopted 29 April 1958, entered into force 10 September 1964, 516 UNTS 205.

5. United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, adopted 10 December 1982, entered into force 16 November 1994, 1833 UNTS 397.

6. Agreement between the Government of Malta and the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta for the Restoration and Utilisation of Parts of Fort St Angelo, signed 5 December 1998, entered into force 1 November 2001.

Article 1 of the Montevideo Convention also demands that a state possess a government. This element is commonly discussed and analysed in the literature, especially in political philosophy.

According to Cox (2002: 8), government is a precondition for a state to exist; as he claims, “there can be government without states; but states always entail government”. Interestingly, the relation between a state and its government seems to be perceived in a non-uniform way in the United States and in Europe. In the political tradition of the US, the concept of the state hardly appears at all; it is replaced by the concept of “government” as a collection of many bodies performing various specific functions (Pogłódek, *et al.*, 2022: 28). This goes so far that, in American English, “government” and “state” are often used as equivalents: the term “government” is employed instead of “state” and “the state” is often employed to refer to the central or federal government (Morris, 2011: 576). This approach is also typical for liberal-interdependence theorists, who use the terms “state” and “government” interchangeably (Thomson, 1995: 213-233, 220).

The European tradition is very different: the distinction between state and government is much more definite. The main reason for this is that, in parliamentary systems there is usually a clear separation between the heads of state and government. The state is a general whole, an abstract object, essentially irreducible to any of its parts. Also, states are considered to consist of much more than central governments; besides these, a state comprises such institutions as, i.a., the judiciary, state bureaucracies, standing armies and militias, the police, often the schools and universities, and agencies charged with controlling information and the mass media (Morris, 2011: 576; Pogłódek, *et al.*, 2022: 28).

Notably, in political philosophy, “state” has long been deemed “a form of political organisation”⁷. Morris (2011: 578) is one of the proponents of such a claim. First, he stresses that territory is one of the core elements of states; he indicates that the rule of a state is direct and territorial, and that states claim a monopoly on the use of legitimate force within their territory. Second, Morris seems to see a nation as an important part of a state; he argues that the state expects and receives the loyalty of its members and of the permanent inhabitants of its territory. He even goes as far as to claim

7. So was “state” called in, i.a., Marx and Engels (1978: 187); Raz (1986: 70).

that the loyalty which a state typically expects and receives assumes precedence over the loyalty formerly owed to family, clan, commune, lord, bishop, pope, or emperor; that members of a state are the primary subjects of its laws and have a general obligation to obey them by virtue of their membership. Morris also points to sovereignty as another important element of a state; by this, he means that a state tends to be the ultimate source of political authority in its territory.

Requiring a government as an element of statehood prevents a situation in which an entity, lacking its own government, even if it is a government in exile, would legitimately claim to be a separate state itself. There are, however, instances in which a land unit remains under the sovereignty of one state but is governed by another. An interesting case here is the status of Banaba, which belongs to Kiribati. After 1945, the British authorities deported most of the Banabans to Rabi Island, which belongs to Fiji. Nowadays, despite being part of Kiribati, Banaba's municipal administration is exercised by the Rabi Council of Leaders and Elders, based on Rabi Island, Fiji (Bugajski, 2010: 217-218).

Finally, the Montevideo Convention's emphasis on the "capacity to enter into relations with the other states" as a prerequisite of being a state falls naturally within the domain of public international law. Crawford argues that this should not be considered an element of statehood, since the capacity to enter into relations with states at the international level is no longer an exclusive prerogative of states. The reason for his claim is that possessing such a capacity is, in fact, a consequence of statehood, not a criterion for it – and it is not constant, but rather depends on the situation of particular states. Crawford concludes by indicating that the capacity to enter into relations with other states is a conflation of the requirements of government and independence (Crawford, 2011: § 25).

5. Conclusions

The understanding of "state" is not uniform. Even when two people refer to a "state" as "a country considered as an organised political community controlled by one government", they may, in fact, mean two different phenomena. Our intuitions about what constitutes a state can draw on our background knowledge, beliefs, political views, and other factors.

Above, I have discussed how the meaning of “state” may vary depending on one element of context: the research discipline within which the term is used. The situation is further complicated by the fact that even within the same discipline, multiple theories exist regarding how a “state” should be defined and which of its elements are essential. It is, however, reasonable to adopt the stance of authors who argue that it is impossible to develop a single definition of the state that could be universally accepted (Kuciński, 2019: 15).

These discrepancies may arise from the differing aims, methodologies, and normative assumptions of disciplines such as public international law, geopolitics, philosophy, sociology, and international relations. Each discipline emphasizes different core elements and characteristics of states according to its explanatory needs.

The ambiguity of the term “state” may, in fact, have greater practical value than it initially appears. A more consistent understanding of the prerequisites of statehood could prove crucial in light of contemporary challenges that strain traditional conceptions of states. The definition of a “state” should not be regarded as settled. Revisiting and refining the concept of statehood is a practical necessity in the face of unprecedented transformations, such as the potential disappearance of island states like Tuvalu.

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