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Book Review

Stephen E. Hanson and Jeffrey S. Kopstein, *The Assault on the State. How the Global Attack on Modern Government Endangers Our Future* (Cambridge: Polity, 2024), 182 pp. (hbk). ISBN 978-1-5095-6315-9. £20.

This book will be of profound interest for Weberian social theorists. It reverses two longstanding polarities. First, it upgrades Weber's theory of patrimonialism as the coming threat to the state built on legal-rational principles. Secondly, rationalism, as the theory and practice of rationality, is no longer the gift of the West to the rest of the 'uncivilised' world. Instead, there are a set of paleo-irrationalities blowing in from the East and finding significant and alarming uptake among western democratically elected governments.

This is a passionate book aimed at the complacent assumptions of 'liberal democracy'. If liberalism is to mean anything, and here Weber would agree, it means fighting for liberal political ends in the face of ever-present threats to democracy. And again with Weber, Hanson and Kopstein demonstrate that democracy is not a self-sufficient entity. It coexists with the legal-rational structuring of the state. The patrimonial state, which they epigram as the rule of men in place of the rule of law, is a deliberate project to undermine qualified state officials who are indispensable to the functioning of institutions embedded in civil society: health, education, science, and the courts.

Social scientists brought up on Parsonian modernization theory have ingested a built-in complacency, trained to believe that the social and political order is an evolutionary process, resulting in the best of all possible worlds. Weber himself never made this assumption because political developments are always open to contingency and chance. Rationalization processes are not the same as evolutionary laws. A rationalization process—think of AI—can accelerate you to some very strange places.

Mainstream sociology celebrates the normative basis of democracy, taking this to be its essence. For this reason Weber, in many a sociology syllabus, has been ostracised for appearing to downgrade democracy in

favour of the impersonal apparatus that sustains the modern state. Cue experts, separation of administrative jurisdictions, the impartiality of the civil servant, all of which are now under attack, but which form the substrate of legal-rational bureaucracy. This is not just a direct on the civil service, epitomised in DOGE's brutal assault on U.S. government agencies, but an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of state authority through crony, personalist household rule.

Hanson and Kopstein loudly complain that this threat has not been apprehended because of the predominating ideological opposition of democracy in the West vs. autocracy elsewhere. Social scientists need to dig deeper and examine the structuring of both these normative opposites.

Except for historical sociologists, the patrimonial state is rarely on the syllabus. It was Guenther Roth's translation—in his and Wittich's 1968 edition of *Economy and Society*—of two long chapters that gave the anglophone reader the full typology of political legitimacies. Chapter XII gave us Patriarchalism and Patrimonialism and their historical context of ancient Egypt, the Chinese Empire and Tsarist Russia. These were so evidently non-western cases. Chapter XIII gave us Feudalism, Stäendestaat and Patrimonialism. They provided the basis for a theoretical understanding of western political development in terms of the aristocratic sharing of power, the attempts of kings to centralize power through a patrimonial regime, and the emergence of the late medieval estates as a form of corporate authority. There was much to feast on here, as seen in the work of historical sociologist like Reinhard Bendix, Perry Anderson, Gianfranco Poggi, Theda Skocpol, Ernest Gellner, John Hall, Michael Mann and Ralph Schroeder. The roads to modernity were various, usually bloody, and characteristically western.

Western state-building as Hanson and Kopstein remind readers was not the normative emergence of democracy but instead was tied to warfare and global spheres of influence; or in Charles Tilly's aphorism, 'states do not make wars, wars make states'. The Scottish enlightenment philosophers of the eighteenth century saw the dangers, with David Hume and Adam Smith arguing that commerce and credit should serve a civilising function and should not be propelling colonisation and warfare, which they saw in England's parliamentary government. Weber in his *General Economic History* provides a candid exposition of credit fuelled wars and the development of state institutions. In the context of the Wilhelmine authoritarian empire, one wonders how he came up with such a robust ideal type of legal-rational legitimacy and the sub-types of free representation and the division of powers. As recent scholarship has revealed (see review in this issue by Hübinger), the

more congruent theory of bureaucracy was Otto Hintze's—hierarchal and rational in the service of a traditionalistic empire.

Hanson and Kopstein take this circumstance to point out that a rational bureaucracy can just as well support an undemocratic regime. They take another step, which would not occur to most Weberians. It is the two authors experience as comparative political scientists, experts in post 1989 Russia and Eastern European countries as well as Israel, that leads them to expose the 'virus of the patrimonial state' blowing in from the East to the West.

The inspiration for creating a personalist state is President Putin's Russia. The authors take the reader, expertly and brilliantly, through the twists and turns in the building of the patrimonial state in Russia and some eastern European countries, an operation that has taken more than two decades. Iván Szelényi in his essays on post-Communist capitalism has already given a variant account which summons up other features of Weber's patrimonial model, namely the development of neo-prebendalism.[1] Hanson and Kopstein rely on the looser term of crony capitalism to describe the division of state assets among state appointments. Prebendalism in the original model was a grant of the product of land, or a 'living', by which a minister of the church was sustained. Leaders like Putin, Lukashenka in Belarus, and Victor Orbán in Hungary ensure loyalty of their personal appointments by treating the income opportunities of previous state assets as prebends, in Szelényi's argument.

This raises an issue that goes back to the medieval context of Weber's ideal type, which theorizes a number of instabilities. For instance, Norman and Angevin dynastic kings gave out prebends to patrimonial officials on the basis of the temporary nature of these grants. At the death or removal of the holder, they were taken back by the king and re-used. This was meant to be the procedure with feudal fiefs, given out on conditional terms by a feudal monarch; but over time these fiefs became the inheritance of warrior nobles. The difference between the prebend and the fief is reflected in the centralization of power, in the case of prebends, and the federalization of power in the case of feudal barons. Hanson and Kopstein rather skip over these dynamics, reaching the conclusion that crony capitalism results in stasis and decline. In Weber's terms the patriarchal ruler (another dynamic part in the model) draws his legitimacy as the provider of welfare to his subjects. This legitimacy is endangered by the form of neo-prebendalism where the holders of 'prebends' run them into

1. Iván Szelényi, *From State Socialism to Post-Communist Capitalism. Critical Perspectives* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2022), pp. 241-50.

the ground, which is all too clearly seen in the decrepitude of once public assets in Russia and Eastern Europe—and increasingly the fate of western democracies under the barrage of populist ideology.

This points up one of the key features of the legal-rational model. Not only is the bureaucracy impersonal, but it is permanently maintained by meritocratic salaries paid for by public taxation. In removing the secure fiscal base of public administration, the patrimonial ruler is constrained, over the longer term of a generation, by the assets that remain available for distribution to his patrimonial officials. This applies less to Victor Orbán, because the EU, until very recently, generously funds his treasury. Putin's largesse is constrained by the price of oil and the effectiveness of western economic sanctions on his regime. In the case of Ukraine—whose history is superbly summarized since the post-Soviet era (pp. 98-106)—the primitive logic of Russian conquest gives way to which side is more economically sustainable over the longer term. Putin's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which western leaders were barely able to cognize, should be seen as the imposition of Putin's personalistic regime on Russia's near neighbours.

Putin, to summarize, is the architect and builder of the contemporary patrimonial state. Its key features are the return to the Tsarist sacred patrimony of Russia and the idea that this patrimony belongs to the ruler. The old Soviet state economy initially was divided up between feuding oligarchs, until President Putin evicted them and replaced them with close friends, colleagues, and family members. The judiciary was subject to political appointees. The constitution was changed reducing and removing the Duma's legislative function. There is no separation of powers, only an all-powerful executive supported by a personalist bureaucracy. The populist basis for this regime is ethno-nationalism and the pieties of the Russian Orthodox church.

Exporting this regime model to the West seems implausible, but as the authors note Leninism and the Comintern were thought implausible yet went on to define the opposition of liberalism to communism for at least two decades. Hanson and Kopstein illustrate their case using Benjamin Netanyahu's Israel as a prime example. Israel's impressive state-building since its foundation in 1948 created an impartial civil service, independent courts, de-politicised education, a professional military, and an advanced public health system. After 2009 Netanyahu 'serially attacked the courts, the civil service, universities and the police'. He was displaying 'all the hallmarks of a narcissistic patrimonial strongman' (p. 116). Another wave of attacks on the judiciary, the Supreme Court, and civil service came in Netanyahu's coalition government of 2022, where ethno-nationalist, anti-

Arab parties and the ultra-Orthodox dominated and kept Netanyahu in power with even more executive power.

'The gravest challenge and most shocking development of all has been the personalization of state authority in the erstwhile heartlands of the rule of law itself—the United Kingdom and the United States' (p. 123). In the case of Prime Minister Johnson my view is that the alternative Weberian concept of Caesarism is more appropriate than the importing of the patrimonial state.[2] Johnson certainly had links to Russian oligarchs and he appointed the son of an ex-KGB officer to the House of Lords, (who took the title of Lord of Hampton and Siberia!!). In the Caesarist model, the leader elected through a general election claims this as a plebiscite and mandate for his own personal rule, one that would override the legislature and the courts. Johnson's most flagrant Caesarist ploys—proroguing (dissolving) Parliament and ignoring judicial challenges—were successfully countered by the Westminster Parliament and the Supreme Court. The electoral fortunes of the MPs of the governing party are tied to the popularity of their leader. There is certainly scope for British Prime Ministers to accrue presidential powers but only to the extent they remain successful in the eyes of the electorate. Johnson fell, as did his predecessors Thatcher and Blair, because of the actions of their own party's MPs.

However, it is undoubtedly true that Johnson employed the rhetoric of attacking the 'deep state'. Brexit, Johnson said, could only become a success when the judges, the civil servants, and dissenting MPs were removed and a compliant Parliament repealed laws restricting his executive authority. This was Johnson's plan, until he himself was removed.

The larger and far more consequential question is whether Donald Trump is constructing a patrimonial state with himself as the leader who appoints people with direct personal or family ties to himself or who are completely dependent on his patronage. Hanson and Kopstein assemble the evidence that this was underway in the first Trump presidency 2017–2021. Trump's lack of preparedness and inexperience slowed up his dismantling of the rational-legal state. But the intent was there, and certain functionality, as in the public health system in coping with the Covid pandemic, was damaged with lethal consequences. To date (May 2025) the second Trump presidency amply confirms the applicability of Hanson and Kopstein's analysis, not just through the 'unitary executive'

2. Sam Whimster, 'Caesarism and Democratic Agency in Max Weber', in *Max Weber at 100. Legacies and Prospects* (ed. Joshua Derman and Peter E. Gordon; New York: Oxford University Press, 2025).

and the arbitary actions of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) but also exploiting presidential power in pursuit of the flagrant aggrandizement of personal and familial wealth.

Assault on the State is a vociferous plea not to mistake the conspiratorial 'deep state' for the massive advantages of economic welfare, stable public institutions and security delivered by public administration over decades; and to mobilize and alert public opinion to the plague ship of the patrimonial state, with its plans to install rule through the leader's extended household, to attack the civil service, the judiciary and government agencies, and to eliminate professional expertise as a criterion for government positions. A new generation of recruits is required to run up the flag of the good ship public administration.

Sam Whimster